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The Meta-Skilled Organization

From Execution to Evolution

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The other night, I went out for dinner with an old colleague of mine who works at Uber. I asked him, as I suspect most people do when they have the chance to corner someone working at the world's fastest growing company, "what's it like?"

"Well," he said "the rate of change is remarkable. Every single aspect of my job from a year ago has been automated. There is no overlap between what I do now and what I did twelve months ago."

We got deeper into discussion, and he elaborated by saying "you know, the biggest challenge we have is finding people who can grow as fast as the company is growing – who can evolve."

Uber is an extreme example – but this sentiment is something that we see echoed in all quarters: private sector, public sector, and not-for-profit. In all cases, the most highly prized abilities are shifting from skills, which help people execute, to meta-skills, which help people *evolve*.

In his 2009 book *The Design of Business*, Roger Martin articulated the 'knowledge funnel' – a model for thinking about how things move from being beyond our understanding to the point that they are so well understood they can be coded as software. In his work he traced the path of numerous activities from 'mystery' (beyond understanding) to 'heuristic' (requires knowledgeable interpreters to apply rules of thumb), to 'algorithm' (standardization) to 'code' (is automated).

We can see the recent completion of this journey in fields such as health care – where computers are in many cases more effective than even the most experienced physicians at providing accurate diagnoses based on sets of symptoms, or at reading MRIs and X-Rays.

Driven by the relentlessness of Moore’s law, the rate at which corporations and Governments are pushing tasks to code continues to increase. In his fantastic book *Humans are Underrated*, Geoff Colvin provides a laundry list of activities that were once thought uniquely human that have now successfully made the journey to the bottom of the funnel and are completely automated. This acceleration is perhaps the defining challenge of the modern work world: how do we stay ahead of the funnel?

Much has been written about the end game. Very smart people have done exceptional work to try and identify what will and won’t be eventually pushed to the bottom of the funnel; what unique qualities human beings possess that will differentiate us from the machines when all is said and done.

But what about right now?

As reflected in the Uber story above, thinking about the end game is necessary - but not sufficient. We need people who are equipped to handle the journey. Yes, it is important for a doctor to understand that their future success is likely to centre not on medical expertise but rather their ability to be an empathetic ally for their patients – but for the foreseeable future, their success will hinge on the ability to let go of old skills that were a huge source of pride, and master new and unfamiliar ones rapidly. This is a much different challenge.

In short, being equipped for the destination is not the same as being equipped for the journey itself.

META-SKILLS FOR THE JOURNEY

So, what determines how quickly someone can evolve? Of course, a big part of it is their *desire* to evolve. This is the fuel for the journey. We call this Third Factor – the role that individuals play in their own growth and development above and beyond the two classic factors: nature and nurture. Performance Coaching founder Peter Jensen has written extensively on this topic – principally in the book [Ignite the Third Factor](#), where he examines what leaders can do to trigger the desire to evolve.

Third Factor is the starting point; it’s the foundation upon which meta-skills rest. But desire is not enough – desire needs to be effectively channeled through ability. On this foundation, there are six major meta-skills that determine the speed of evolution, which can be grouped into three categories:

SEE CLEARLY Evolution starts with an understanding that current performance is no longer enough, or that another level is possible. Two major meta-skills in this category are *self-awareness* and *empathy*.

MOVE QUICKLY Armed with an understanding of where to target, meta-skilled people can then move toward a higher version of themselves. Three major meta-skills in this category are *flexibility*, *creativity*, and *learning capacity*.

STAY THE COURSE The journey from here to there is always messy. Meta-skilled people have the skills to manage set-backs and use stress to fuel further growth. The major meta-skill in this area is *resilience*.

SEE CLEARLY	MOVE QUICKLY	STAY THE COURSE
 <p><i>Build an accurate picture of current abilities, limitations and performance.</i></p> <p>KEY META-SKILLS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Self Awareness › Empathy 	 <p><i>Translate awareness into improved performance and new abilities.</i></p> <p>KEY META-SKILLS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Flexibility › Creativity › Learning Capacity 	 <p><i>Persevere in the face of set-backs, harness pressure to fuel growth, and perform when it matters most.</i></p> <p>KEY META-SKILLS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Resilience

SEE CLEARLY

The first set of meta-skills concerns the degree to which an individual is able to build an accurate picture of their current abilities, limitations, and performance. This picture can be built from two sources: introspection and feedback. The 'ROI' from introspection is largely determined by an individual's capacity for *self-awareness*, and the value derived from feedback is largely a function of an individual's capacity for empathy.

1. SELF-AWARENESS

In many ways, self-awareness is *the* meta-skill. Those lacking an ability to honestly reflect on their current level of development or lacking belief in their ability to grow will inevitably be slow to evolve because change is an inside job. Adults don't get committed to change because someone tells them to – but rather because they realize the necessity for change themselves.

Cultivating self-awareness as a skill is about embracing a disciplined approach to shrinking our blind-spots. Self-awareness can be built through:

- › *Journaling* – scheduling daily time to reflect on what went well for you, what didn't, and what you observed about yourself throughout the day can pay huge dividends.
- › *Mindfulness meditation* – a daily meditation practice is a great way to train capacity for self-reflection. This can be tough, but apps like [Headspace](#) can help.
- › *Feedback seeking* – make a point of getting feedback frequently from a variety of sources. People will be more likely to give you feedback if you let them know that it's something you value. Empathy can help here (see 2. Empathy).

2. EMPATHY

Empathy has value for many reasons. Innovation, for example, is almost entirely predicated on the ability to empathize with users - to understand them well enough to solve problems they haven't been able to articulate.

Empathy in the context of evolution, however, is useful predominantly because 'seeing clearly' requires an ability to process tough feedback. In the same way that empathy allows a sales person to listen to a customer's laundry list of complaints and become curious rather than agitated, empathy is what makes it possible to accept tough feedback without becoming defensive or resentful; it allows a recognition that the feedback feels true for the person delivering it, and to get curious as why they feel that way.

Some individuals are more naturally empathetic than others – but empathy is a trainable skill. Empathy can be built through:

- › *Practicing curiosity* – for me, this has taken the form of holding the question "What if they're right?" front and centre when speaking to someone with whom I disagree.
- › *Reframing* – in every interaction, we get to choose the story we are telling ourselves about the other person. Practicing telling ourselves positive stories can pay dividends.
- › *Active listening* – in order to truly understand someone, to empathize, you must listen. Practicing the discipline of asking extra questions to keep the other person talking is a great way to engender understanding.

THE LEADER'S ROLE

As a leader of others, you play a vital role in creating an environment where evolution will flourish. Here are three ways that you can foster the development of meta-skills:

See yourself as a developer of people – seeing people as developmental projects, and seeing yourself as a force for spurring evolution, is at the heart of creating an environment of growth. When you look at people, do you see what is possible for them and align yourselves with that growth?

Bring discipline to building relationships – people are more likely to be open about their limitations and take on new challenges when they have a high trust relationship built on mutual respect with their manager. Do you approach building relationships as a skill that can and should be honed?

Communicate high expectations – being told that a higher standard is both possible and necessary by someone you respect injects energy and urgency into personal development. Do you hold your people to a higher standard than they believe is possible for themselves?

MOVE QUICKLY

The second category of meta-skills focuses on the speed with which awareness can be translated into improved performance. Rate of change is vital here – it's not about whether you can improve, but rather *how fast* you can improve. Three elements which greatly impact the rate of change are flexibility, creativity and learning capacity.

3. FLEXIBILITY

Marshall Goldsmith, one of the world's foremost executive coaches, tells a story about a client who, in response to every suggestion for improvement, would say, "I hear you – but that's just not me." Finally, Coach Goldsmith said: "Well, how about we make it you?" Being flexible in who "you" are is essential when it comes to evolution.

Flexibility can be lacking in one of two ways: first, through an inability or unwillingness to operate outside of your comfort zone, and, second, through an attachment to the abilities, roles, and behaviours that have defined 'you' to this point. Letting go of what has driven your success to this point is never easy.

Flexibility can be built through:

- › *Getting uncomfortable* – a big part of flexibility is starting to 'get comfortable with discomfort' – so consider regularly doing something at work or at home that makes you uncomfortable
- › *Reframing discomfort* – being flexible can be very stressful. I have found Stanford researcher Kelly McGonigal's [questions about re-thinking stress](#) very helpful when I feel my apprehensiveness begin to limit my flexibility.
- › *Practicing letting go* – identifying the things that you can't control and consciously choosing to let go is both great for your flexibility and your resilience

4. CREATIVITY

When CEOs are surveyed on the capabilities they seek in employees, creativity is the perennial chart-topper. There is good reason: creativity is the raw material of evolution. Whether it is evolving a product, an industry, or just your own capabilities – creativity is central. Those who lack the creativity to envision a different version of themselves will inevitably fail to evolve.

Creativity is often thought to be innate. The reality is that while some are indeed more naturally creative than others, it is a skill that improves with discipline and practice.

Creativity can be built through:

- › *Doing drills* – repetitions are important, so here are [three simple creativity drills](#) from the gurus at IDEO
- › *Setting goals for creativity* – setting out to become more creative is a great way to start. Do you want to generate more ideas? Become more comfortable with putting your ideas out for others' judgment? Start with one thing and work towards it.
- › *Blocking time for creativity* – people tend to be creative in quiet moments when their brains are allowed to wander (e.g., in the shower). Setting time aside to simply give your mind the space to be creative can pay big dividends.

5. LEARNING CAPACITY

Being creative enough to envision the 'new you' and flexible enough to let go of the 'old you' is necessary but not sufficient. The final meta-skill in this category is learning capacity – the ability to rapidly become competent in new areas.

Moving to mastery is not simply a matter of getting in your "10,000 hours." As Anders Ericsson has shown repeatedly over years of research into deliberate practice, how you approach learning is as important as the time you put into it.

Learning capacity can be improved through:

- › *Single-tasking* – the brain is built to pay attention to one thing at a time. Working to reduce your distractibility will improve your learning capacity.
- › *Involving others* – learning rapidly is easier with varied and frequent feedback. Find a true master in the skill you are looking to improve and learn what they did.
- › *Breaking up learning* – we are sprinters, not marathoners. Focusing on one area for more than 90-120 minutes will diminish your capacity to retain what you are learning.

STAY THE COURSE

The final meta-skill is resilience – the ability to ‘stay the course’ through adversity, recover quickly from set-backs, and harness the energy inherent in pressure rather than letting it overwhelm you.

6. RESILIENCE

Many people, including myself and others in our organization, have worked to understand and codify what determines whether an individual will grow or shrink in the face of pressure and will recover quickly or slowly from a setback.

Research indicates that resilience is built from an integrated foundation of internal skills (the ability to make meaning out of challenging circumstances, for example), physical well-being (sleep, nutrition, and exercise), and the cultivation of a strong network of relationships. And, all three of these areas can be improved with attention.

Resilience can be built through:

- › *Increasing your sleep* – it is almost impossible to stay the course if you are exhausted. If you don't consistently get 7-8 hours of sleep a night, here is where to start to enhance your resilience.
- › *Developing internal skills* – we've previously written at length about [the internal skills to foster resilience](#) – active awareness, perspective, energy management, imagery, and focus.
- › *Sustaining relationships* – often during times of stress, we neglect our relationships. Establishing a positive correlation between the pressure in our lives and the degree to which we tend to our most important relationships can pay huge dividends.

A RANDOM WALK WITH PURPOSE

Evolution in nature is a random process – a function of a limitless number of mutations filtered through the ultimate test of fitness: survival over time.

Armed with the meta-skills above, individuals and organizations can make their own evolution less random – focused by the clarity that comes from introspection and empathy, pursued with flexibility, creativity, and a capacity to learn, and realized through resilience in the face of adversity and set-backs.

If we want our people to enjoy the journey, to find meaning and challenge in their work rather than the pressure of constant change and spectre of eventual obsolescence, it is important that every leader help those around them build these skills. As we see above, these are not simply innate abilities, but rather skills that can be developed over time and with discipline.

Organizations who embrace these meta-skills as learning priorities can reap big dividends: they will be better positioned to respond with agility in an environment of rapid change, more able to attract hungry, growth-oriented talent, and – very pragmatically – can expect to see an overall reduction in costs as their existing people flex to take on new responsibilities rather than needing to invest in the high costs associated with bringing in new people with new skills.

And that is a journey we can all cheer.

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