

Illustration by Svilen Milev.



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# THE COMPETENT AND THE MASTER

Competency isn't a destination, it is really just the bare minimum standard for every employee - including ourselves. Mastery is so much more.

### The problem

Organisations make a link between the competency of their employees and organisational performance. There are hundreds of millions (probably more) spent every year on training to develop competency. In many organisations, the achievement of 'competency' according to some prescribed set of standards is linked to employee pay.

We are willing to pay more to have people who are competent. We do pay even more to see people who are well beyond 'competency' in their skills.

We will pay a lot more to see a U2 concert, or a game of Test Cricket the we will to see people who are just competent in singing or cricket.

What makes these people different? Look, let's be straight, genetics do make a difference, they had some talent. But that isn't the biggest contributor in my experience.

High-achieving people in any field show a commitment to go beyond

Table 1. Levels of competency and their associated behaviours.

	behaviour	title
level 7	I deeply know the subject matter and apply it continuously. My skills are so developed I can innovate and create new methods.	mastery
level 6	I understand this and can make it work in most situations.	professional
level 5	I can do it!	competent
level 4	I am trying to put it into use.	practice
level 3	I have read what to do.	intellectual
level 2	Something's just not right.	disturbed
level 1	We don't know what we don't know.	unknowing

basic competency. These people show a commitment to working on lifting their skills to the level of a master.

Our organisations already have people who are masters, somewhere in the business. Most of the time we focus on spreading competency across a wide base.

My premise is that within our organisations it is critical that competency is the most basic platform for the skill-base of our people. Helping a few people lift their skills to mastery will have a massive impact on the business performance. The leverage you gain as your skills improve beyond competency is massive. The master always outperforms many of the 'competent'.

How do we do this?

Looking at this from the base level up in a practical sense, our competency evolves with experience, expertise, and sometimes time.

## 1. Unknowing

We begin by being unknowing about a skill, issue, or subject. Think of a newborn baby. They are not ignorant, they just don't know. It's not just newborns that can be unknowing, we are all unknowing about many skills. How many of us can walk a trapeze, fly a plane, or cook a soufflé? The trap with unknowing is thinking you already know, or do not need to know a particular skill. Being unknowing can be very comfortable, unless we are unknowing about a mission-critical issue - then it becomes disastrous.

## 2. Disturbed

Then something happens that causes us to feel disturbed enough about our knowledge or lack thereof on a subject. We experience bad results, we read an article, we hear someone speak or we start a new job. Possibly we become disturbed in the positive sense, we are curious or intrigued by something. Being disturbed is good, for a while, we need to be disturbed in order to become dissatisfied enough with the current situation so that we are willing to do something about it. If we are not sufficiently disturbed to take action then we will remain here, and either our disruption will fade (the urge passes) or we will become increasingly driven to learn something!

## 3. Intellectual

Taking action to move from being disturbed is the next step. Often we will begin by doing some research. 'Intellectual competence' is when we have read a book, maybe we have been to a course. We know the subject matter on the surface and may have applied it in some fashion.

This is a dangerous phase where it is easy for us to say "I know that, we do it already, there is nothing more for us to learn". Think of a golfer who has read a book on golf and then declares they know how to play, or a person who went to a one-day course four years ago and says they don't need to do more training as they know this stuff.

Sadly, many courses only help people reach this level of competency evolution. People receive a certificate, maybe even a pay rise, but really, they have only just got their 'L' plates.

The world is full of golfers who have read just about every book on golf, but none of them have played at the Masters!

The world is also full of people who believe they understand Lean Manufacturing also, despite having never spent years applying the knowledge in different situations.

At this level we have a choice, the choice to deepen our understanding of the subject by moving further up the competency evolution or the choice to say 'No thanks, that's not for me'. Both answers are OK.

I choose NOT to go past an intellectual level of cooking. I do not understand what the judges on Master Chef are talking about when they judge the competitors' dishes. It's not for me.

Consciously choose your decision when you have reached this intellectual level of competency.

Do not stay at this level on any issue that can impact your business.

## 4. Practice

Having chosen to deepen your competency, here is the hard part. This is where we take the golf clubs out and practice, practice, practice and then practice some more as we have chosen to commit to developing our skills. This is the runner who runs in the rain, the golfer who hits bucket after bucket of balls. Hard work separates the Olympians from the rest of us - talent is not enough.

Practice is not enough either. Geoff Colvin in his book *Talent is Overrated* explains the concept of 'deliberate practice' where people don't just hit buckets of golf balls, but that each golf ball hit is part of a plan to develop a certain skill, or explore a different aspect of the game.

Expertise and experience are developed through deliberate practice. A person who practices deliberately will progress up the ladder of competency faster than a person who just practices without purpose.


## 5. Competent

Having practiced consistently and deeply in a structured fashion, we have now gained competency. We can apply the skills in most situations consistently and with understanding. We have taken the theoretical knowledge from a book or course and experienced it in our environment.


I remember people I worked with many years ago who assembled the tail lights for the Commodore. We showed them how to do it using the drawings and prototype parts. It was all new for us and them, we all knew it intellectually. They practiced and practiced every time they assembled the lights. They worked out the subtle hand movements to make it easier to assemble 300 sets a day without hurting your wrists. They learnt how to look at the lenses from a certain angle to spot a minute crack that could not be seen. They developed their skills on assembling the light to a high level for this specific set of products. They worked out how to assemble them faster and

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faster with less scrap and fewer resources.

For people within our business, this is the minimum level of skill we can find acceptable.

Too often, however, we tolerate a level of skill where people are allowed to meander around or just plod through the day. These people are not competent, they are often unknowing, unknowing of the need to use their brains and contribute to the viability of the business. This is our challenge as leaders to inspire them to at least reach this definition of competency.

## 6. Professional

At the level of professional we have been applying and deepening our skills across a variety of situations. We can adapt and alter our approach to fit most situations and scenarios we face. We have a deep understanding and appreciation of the content.

For me, a pilot who can fly a variety of aircraft in all different weather situations, high winds, thunderstorms, instrument flying, etc. is a professional. They still train, they still read and develop their skills, they prepare meticulously, they take nothing for granted and they remain humble about the need to respect their aircraft and the conditions.

The leveraged benefit of some true professionals in your business is massive. Develop people to this level and they are well worth a major investment in training and salary.

## 7. Mastery

The Master is someone who can not only adapt to all situations, but is also

**“At the level of professional we have been applying and deepening our skills across a variety of situations.”**

on the cutting edge of creating new content and applications for the core skills. The Master is inventing new techniques, building upon and extending existing knowledge.

Businesses as a whole who work towards mastery of their field find it easier to align employees to the goal. The workforce is more cohesive and the customers are served. This links our

people directly to our profits.

The paradox is that the true masters of any field know that there is even more for them to learn, they accept that they do not know everything.

We spend so much money providing people with training to have them only reach the stage of an 'intellectual' level of competency by attending courses and studying.

The massive payoff occurs when people move beyond the intellectual level and perform the hard work to become truly competent at a deep level, and even more powerful is when they continue to develop and become truly professional, or even masters.

People will look to us for support as they evolve their level of competency. Some will want to develop out of their own desire for growth. Others will need us to help them get started and to persist through the tough phase of moving from intellectual competency through to being truly competent.

We shouldn't aspire to mastery as a theoretical ideal, instead inspire and perspire for mastery!

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