

Learning to Ski

by Marta Wilson, PhD

Have you noticed how the topic of self improvement turns up everywhere these days? There are television and radio shows, books, magazine articles, and seminars---all about improving personal effectiveness. Proven philosophies for mastering self knowledge are now mainstream. The good news is that anyone can work toward self mastery. Age doesn't matter, neither does physical condition, nor does intelligence. All you need is you, the desire for a more fulfilling life, and a willingness to get outside of your comfort zone.

Self mastery is managing your preferences, your impulses, and your goals. It requires conscious living and knowing who you are. It demands exercising your mind, body, and spirit in order to live life to its fullest. Self mastery is a component of emotional intelligence, which determines at least 50% of our success at work. As part of conscious leadership, self mastery sets apart star leaders from average leaders. I

Personally, I have gotten out of my comfort zone many times in order to improve myself. I have failed. I have succeeded. Some of my stories are inspirational, some are pathetic, and some are downright hilarious. In most of them, I become measurably more effective. In all of them, I learn something about myself. One of my favorite memories is learning to ski.

To set the stage, I'll give you a little background about my upbringing. It starts in what were (and may still be) two of the poorest counties in the United States---Hancock County, TN and Lee County, VA. That is where my parents were born. Dad was the youngest of twelve, and Mom was the youngest of seven. They were raised as farmers. Mom finished high school. Dad did not.

When I was six, we moved from a very rural setting to a town with a population of about 40,000. My parents thought this would give us a better life, but they discovered that my dad's farming skills weren't very marketable. He ended up working as a minimum wage laborer in a furniture factory. My mom stayed home to care for my twin brothers and me. A few things I recall from growing up include:

- ❑ Mom had a severe long-term illness that required expensive medical treatments not covered by health insurance.
- ❑ We could not afford a phone until I was twelve yearsold. I was thrilled to no end the day we got one installed.

- ❑ My clothes were made out of fabric bought on sale. I always looked a bit unusual compared to my classmates.
- ❑ I mastered the art of frugality and became very creative at a young age in order to help make ends meet.
- ❑ We drove a 1964 Chevy Impala that Dad bought for \$95 and painted with a paint gun. I loved that car.
- ❑ We never ate out. We bought very little at the grocery store. We raised most of the food we ate.
- ❑ Dad's hands often were torn and bleeding from working with the splintery wood at the factory.
- ❑ We lived in cramped but cozy quarters in a government-subsidized housing project.

When I turned sixteen, I landed my first job at a local steakhouse. When I started, I did not know exactly how to act or what to do in a restaurant. I had only read about it in books. There, I learned a lot about how to behave in public. I also became very self conscious that I did not know much about the ways of the world. In 1981, I started college, putting myself through school by working two to three part-time jobs at a time.

Eleven years later, I completed my formal education as a doctor of industrial and organizational psychology. It was the winter of 1992. As a graduation present, my boyfriend (now my husband) Bob generously offered to take me skiing and treat me to lessons in California at Lake Tahoe. Lake Tahoe is over a mile high and surrounded by some of the best skiing in the country. I might have been thrilled and delighted. I suppose that would have been a normal reaction. But, deep down, I was uneasy.

As you may have guessed, I was not exposed to the world of skiing while growing up. When we arrived, I was a little nervous and definitely out of my element. As I had experienced so many times before, I felt like I did not know exactly how to act or what to do. But, here I was, and the thing to do was ski. So, the first morning, I took a lesson on the bunny slope. The instructor told us that over time, as our skiing improved, we would progress to the green, blue, then black levels. It sounded good to me.

And guess what? I learned really fast. So fast, in fact, that when Bob, who had been skiing the double black diamond slopes, came to check on me, he said, "Wow! You're good enough to go to the green level! Let's go!" So, off we went.

After about three runs on green, Bob said, “I don’t believe how fast you’ve learned. Let’s go to the blue level.” Foolishly, I agreed. I knew something was wrong, though, when we got in line for the lift and everyone’s skis were about two feet longer than mine. Short skis are more stable and the clear mark of a beginner. I thought, “Oh no.” But, I hopped onto the lift anyway.

We skied for a bit, and it was difficult. It was taking everything I had in me. Then, suddenly, I found myself coming to a screeching halt at the top of a 300-foot vertical drop. Bob had skied to the bottom. He stopped. He looked up and motioned for me to come on down. About that time, three skiers came flying off the hill above me screaming, “Get out of the way!” Terrified, I screeched at Bob, “DO SOMETHING! HELP ME! THIS IS YOUR FAULT!” Bob later told me that one skier who had passed me yelled to him, “I feel for you dude! She’s mad!”

I started crying. I didn’t know what to do. My heart was racing, and I felt like I was going to pass out. Bob was shouting and making hand motions. But I couldn’t understand him. Finally, one skier stopped and said, “I think the guy below is telling you to take off your skis and climb down the bank.”

I was humiliated! But what else could I do? I took off my skis, slid them down to Bob and proceeded to climb backwards down the 300-foot drop. People were skiing past me the whole time. When I reached Bob, I declared that I would NEVER do anything like this again, and certainly not with him. To my horror, there were still several less dramatic hills remaining on the run, so I had to put my skis back on and pull myself together enough to fumble the rest of the way down.

When we arrived at the bottom, I told Bob that I needed to be alone. I headed to the coffee shop and sat by myself. I felt really embarrassed and foolish. I felt out of place, unsophisticated, and self conscious. I was in mystery. I started telling myself that skiing was just too dangerous. It started to sound like a tape in my head, “...too dangerous, too dangerous for a hick from the boonies who doesn’t fit in here.”

At this point, Bob and Jeff (our friend) showed up to check on me. They asked me to go back out and ski with them. I said “No way. This is too dangerous.” They offered support and encouragement. They told me it took them much longer to learn what I had learned in one morning. They gave me helpful feedback on how I needed to correct my form. But, on the inside I was simply analyzing the whole situation using my tape...”skiing is too dangerous for me...they just don’t understand.”

Finally, after a lengthy discussion, Bob said, “Marta, just take a risk and try it one more time.” Then, Jeff handed me a coin. It was engraved with the figure of a skier racing downhill. He said, “Look at this. All you have to remember is keep your center of gravity low.” I visualized it...me out

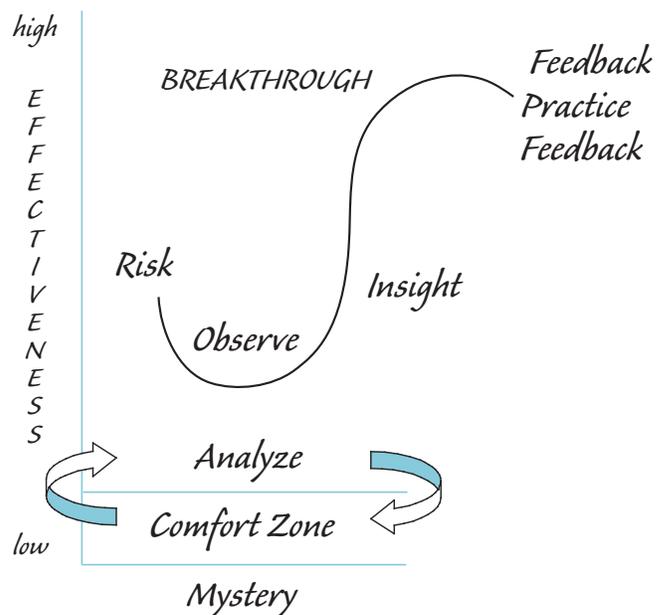
on the slopes...having a blast. I knew I wanted it, so I decided to go for it. I was scared, and I was determined to get out of my comfort zone and learn how to ski. So off we went.

Sure enough, after an hour or so of skiing and incorporating the feedback they had given me, I started to improve. I did fall down a lot, though. Throughout the week, I gained more insight and skill. By the end of the week, I had actually become pretty good. What a delightful breakthrough! Afterwards, I continued practicing and using feedback to help me move to the next level of effectiveness as a skier.

I often laugh as I look back on times like these---when I’ve really gone for it and actually become more effective. It’s fun for me to relive the excitement of learning and growing. One thing these experiences have in common is a feeling of aliveness, awakeness, and alertness. That feeling characterizes a heightened state of consciousness. That is when growth occurs.

For most things that you want to accomplish, you can gain expertise quickly if you consciously believe and act as though you have already achieved it. ² Once you visualize that you can be, do, or have something, the means will become obvious. Imagine it is already your reality. This mindset will help you to remove self doubt, find the courage to get out of your comfort zone, and ultimately plant a flag on your mountain top.

The figure below represents a framework for the self mastery journey. It shows the levels of effectiveness that we move through on the way to learning new things. Starting at the bottom of the figure, when we first experience something new, we feel a sense of mystery. So, we create a comfort zone. Staying in our comfort zone is safe and cozy. It is easy to subjectively analyze our comfort zone. This kind of circular self analysis results in little or no forward movement. Breaking free requires taking a risk.



When we take the risk, our performance often gets worse at first. But, by sticking with it and making careful observations, we can gain insight and have life-changing breakthroughs. Afterwards, with repeated practice and feedback, we can sustain our newfound knowledge. Then, the process starts all over again when we choose to master a new level of skill or grow in a new area. 3

In my story about learning to ski, I went through all of these levels of effectiveness in one week. And the funny thing is that every time I want to learn anything new, I have to work through these levels again. Even with skiing, if I wanted to master the double black diamond slopes, I would have to get out of my comfort zone, take a risk, and...well, you know the rest. Our potential is phenomenal if we keep an open mind and continue taking on new challenges. It is all part of living life to its fullest.

Self mastery is not about the destination; it is about being conscious on the journey. When we get out of our comfort zones, we become highly creative. We become a healing presence in the world. We become a role model for others. When we take charge of our lives, we tap into our inner potential for happiness. This joy infuses us with energy. We stand on our own ground, discover our own voice, and make our own choices, regardless of the level of power and privilege we hold. 4 And, when others see us following our dreams, they feel free to follow theirs as well. 5

Now, I would like for you to take a moment and think about where you have an opportunity to take some risks that would move you toward becoming who you want to be. Think about your mental, physical, and spiritual comfort zones. Where do you need to have a breakthrough? What would the result look like? Visualize it. Write about it in the space provided below.

RISKS I NEED TO TAKE AND THE RESULTS IT WOULD CREATE

Mental _____

Spiritual _____

Physical _____

SUMMARY

- Anyone can work toward self mastery.
- Self mastery is managing your preferences, your impulses, and your goals.
- When others see us following our dreams, they feel free to follow theirs as well.
- Once you visualize that you can be, do, or have something, the means will become obvious.
- During growth experiences, we feel alive, awake, and alert; our consciousness is heightened.
- Self mastery is not about a destination; it is about being choiceful and conscious on the journey.
- Levels of effectiveness are mystery, comfort zone, analysis, risk, insight, breakthrough, practice, and feedback.

TOOLS YOU CAN USE

On pages 5 and 6 you will find two tools that can help you assess your level of self mastery. These tools are Questions and Reflections on Self Mastery and the Self Mastery Profile. The purpose of both tools is to heighten your consciousness about areas that you might want to improve. After conducting a self-assessment using these instruments, I urge you to seize all opportunities that come your way to learn, grow, and expand your tremendous potential.

REFERENCES

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- 3 Hacker, S. & Wilson, M. (1999). *Work Miracles: Transform Yourself and Your Organization*. Insight Press.
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QUESTIONS and REFLECTIONS on SELF MASTERY™

The following items are designed to heighten consciousness about your self mastery potential.

- How am I playing a conscious role in my personal and professional evolution?
- Where am I most and least evolved as a leader?

- What is the fear I refuse to release?
- Which dimensions of my life are not fun?
- Is it difficult for me to see good in everyone I meet?
- How often do I exercise the principle that "attitude is a choice?"
- When and why do I not exercise my power of choice?
- What is my self-awareness process? What steps am I taking?
- What is my purpose in life? my personal vision?
- What will I "Be" in 20 years? "Do" in 20 years? "Have" in 20 years?
- What tools do I need in order to meet my personal and professional goals?
- What help do I need in acquiring these tools?
- How often do I blame others for things that go wrong?
- Am I willing to "look in the mirror" regularly? If not, why not?
- What are the roadblocks to my success?
- Where is my primary focus, on being, doing or having? What are the payoffs of my focus?
- In which areas of my life do I have clear intention? Where am I not clear?
- What is the difference in results I create when I have clear intention versus when I do not?
- Where am I blocking my creative energy?
- How well do I recognize my emotions and their effects on others?
- How familiar am I with my strengths and limits?
- How strong is my sense of my self-worth and capabilities?
- What is my ability to keep my disruptive emotions and impulses in check?
- Do I consistently maintain standards of honesty and integrity?
- Do I always take responsibility for my personal performance?
- How flexible am I in handling change?
- How comfortable am I with novel ideas, approaches, and new information?
- Do I continuously strive to improve to meet a standard of excellence?
- How aligned am I with the goals of my organization?
- How ready am I to act on opportunities that come my way?
- How persistent am I in pursuing goals despite obstacles and setbacks?

SELF MASTERY PROFILE™

On a scale of 0-10, with 10 being superior and 0 being extremely challenged, please score yourself on each of the following self mastery qualities.

- ___ my emotional awareness
- ___ my self confidence
- ___ my self control
- ___ my trustworthiness
- ___ my conscientiousness
- ___ my adaptability
- ___ my innovative ability
- ___ my achievement drive
- ___ my judgment
- ___ my initiative
- ___ my optimism
- ___ my knowledge of my strengths

In order to calculate your Self Mastery Score, add together your scores on the above items.

My Self Mastery Score _____

108 – 120	Superior
96 – 107	Excellent
84 – 95	Good
72 – 83	Fair
71 – below	Challenged

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Marta Wilson is chief executive officer of Transformation Systems Incorporated (www.transformationsystems.com). Marta promotes integration of self, people, and enterprise mastery around the world. In her work, she plays many roles including coach, facilitator, speaker, and trainer. Marta's books include *Work Miracles: Transform Yourself and Your Organization*; *Balanced Leadership: Stretch for Self, People, and Enterprise Mastery*; and *Live a Difference*. Her credentials include a Ph.D. in organizational psychology from Virginia Tech, a graduate internship in human resources research with BellSouth Corporation, and a post-doctoral apprenticeship in industrial engineering with Dr. D. Scott Sink, president, World Confederation of Productivity Science.

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