

# Soft Skills, Hard Profits

By Matt Sinclair

How Personal Mastery is unlocking A/E firms' human potential.

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'Growing your own' leadership strength makes extra sense in this age of personnel shortages, but invites the question: How? An effective leader's impact is clear, yet what lies beneath the surface is often intuitive and difficult to explain, let alone teach. At ACEC's Senior Executive Institute, students are equipped with the practices of Personal Mastery, a leadership discipline that is transforming individuals and organizations across the country.

"I noticed a profound change in our CEO, Bruce Beverly," says Larry Smith of Haley & Aldrich, headquartered in Boston and recently profiled in *Fast Company*, after Beverly completed SEI's Personal Mastery session. Attending it himself, Smith found he left "looking and thinking completely differently about why there were issues and why there were problems" at H & A.

"Personal Mastery asks you to look deeply at yourself and your abilities and find your best application in your organization," continues Smith, "rather than the question 'what's wrong with these people?' It's, 'what is it about us?' What is it about the way that I am doing my job that results in the outcome we're getting?"

Learning how to see your current situation with clarity is a central element of Personal Mastery. First introduced conceptually by pioneering systems theorist Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline* as one of the cornerstones of the 'learning organization,' Personal Mastery has gathered great momentum, inspiring many to apply its principles and innovate on its roots.

At SEI, Personal Mastery is the foundation of any larger systems work, according to Kyle Davy, the program's coordinator. For Davy, it is impossible to "look at issues of organizational leadership without examining and building capacity with regards to the Personal Mastery side."

This foundation was something Haley & Aldrich wanted to build throughout their firm, working with SEI faculty Susan Harris and David Aitken to create their own program. The result: "a huge cultural shift," says Smith, "the strategic focus of the company has increased dramatically. Instead of everyone trying to do what they think the company wants, we have open, active and honest communication on what the company should be focusing on. So it's much more of a collaboration, which in turn helps motivate people."

SEI's Personal Mastery session emphasizes communication as a critical tool for building stronger relationships, introducing road-tested strategies for effective dialogue. These help create relationships with an increased range of motion, able

to operate with impressive durability even at great distance. With twenty-one offices from Boston to Los Angeles, H & A are familiar with this scenario, long having tried to practice the hallowed 'one firm concept.' Their leadership training "has done more to knit the company together as a collective than anything we could have possibly imagined."

If Personal Mastery is proving itself an antidote to anything, it is to what several refer to as engineering's culture of 'terminal politeness.' "We were labeled a polite peaceful village," says Randy Roeseler of Amherst, New York-based Wendel Duchscherer. "Personal Mastery has added the frankness, the benefits of productive conflict. Get out of the conflict avoidance routines that are just so easy to get into." Agreeing, Roeseler's colleague, Scott Smith remarks, "we are able to get to a decision point far faster."

Larry White, CEOE of Kansas-based Bucher, Willis & Ratcliff, experienced a very similar phenomenon. "We say the things we need to say. It's not adversarial, it's constructive," he explains, describing the increased trust that arises from the team application of Personal Mastery concepts. "We're getting options on the table, getting the real facts of what may work and what may not. And so better solutions are coming out of it."

For White individually, Personal Mastery gave great insight into his past approach to leadership, and revealed new possibilities. "You think you have this stuff well in hand, and then you realize, you see the restrictions that you were living with," he says, "you just see so many ways to communicate and get down to the connection you need with the people around you."

This sense of connection can have significant impact on the productivity of an organization. At Langan, a New Jersey-based firm of more than six hundred employees, President David Gockel engaged SEI faculty to deliver Personal Mastery intensives to the firm's senior leaders. "I had a lot of silos who didn't talk to each other. I had a lot of silos that didn't share knowledge and experience. I had some silos that had barbed-wire fences around them," he recounts. Personal Mastery has helped change all that, bringing an "an incredibly high level of trust between and amongst the leadership team which reverberates down through the organization."

"I used to make the analogy that the knowledge sharing pipeline that we had ten years ago was the size of a drinking straw," illustrates Gockel. "What we've been able to do is make it the size of a 60" diameter RCP."

Gockel stresses the advantages of a leadership program such as SEI or Langan's tailor-made initiative. "I've read Senge's book, *The Fifth Discipline*, and he's got a whole chapter in there about Personal Mastery, and it's really, really good stuff, but I think until you really invest a lot of time in these workshops it's hard to really get anywhere."

Ben Watts is the President of Fort Worth-based Carter & Burgess. The large scope of their operations makes permeated leadership practice a necessity. "You can't run our company at over three thousand the way we ran a company of three hundred and simply do it ten times over," says Watts. "Nobody can make all the decisions. You have to depend on people."

For Watts, also, a workshop-based leadership program was the way forward, and it has paid off dramatically. "We've really seen people make fundamental changes in how they interact and do business within the company and with clients as a result," he says, "It's been an outstanding program for us."

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"The workshop format can have particular impact because people are learning alongside their colleagues," says David Aitken of Aitken Leadership Group, who has delivered the Personal Mastery component of SEI for the last six classes, and devised and implemented the Carter & Burgess program. "The leverage created by deepening professional relationships can be quite amazing," adds Geordie Aitken, his son and partner. "This can be particularly true for younger leaders, who typically leave firms when they do not have a sufficiently fulfilling relationship with their immediate supervisor. The tools to relate more effectively are invaluable."

Michael Baker is a Senior Transportation Engineer and Project Manager at David Evans Associates in Portland, and one of his firm's emerging leaders. For him, Personal Mastery came at critical time. "I personally felt I was at a point where I needed to understand myself better to be able to gain perspective on how I influence others, to grow, and to prepare for my next level of personal and professional development."

Baker's experience opened him up to "powerful insights, tools, context, and vocabulary," as well as a deeper understanding of his relationship to, and alignment with DEA as a whole, applying his learning to a significant career decision. "The results have been very fulfilling and successful," he reports. Looking back on the impact that it's had, Baker feels that "Personal Mastery is a must for those seeking to identify and develop their full potential."

Cindi Polychronis, Senior Vice President and Director of Human Resources at DEA is noticing the impact of Personal Mastery throughout the firm. A past graduate of SEI herself, Polychronis was another executive who felt the importance of bringing these practices into the company on a large scale. For her, the outcome is clear. "The culture has become far more open and honest," she says, pointing proudly to the results of the latest employee satisfaction survey: "Our #3 answer, meaning that it was the third highest score, was 'social and intellectual diversity is valued in my office,' and for an engineering firm I consider that to be an absolute beacon of success."

Al Barkouli manages DEA's head office, and Personal Mastery redefined his understanding of what it means to lead. "I approached leadership more from a managerial perspective, a technical perspective," he relates. "Really at a sort of mind level, at an intellectual level. And I have come to realize that there is a place, and a role, a huge role, for the heart as well as the mind in the work that we do."

For Barkouli, Personal Mastery addresses a deeper malaise he perceives in engineering. "For us as a company and maybe I'd even go a little upstream to say for us as an industry," he says, "I think there was this felt sense of 'God, I don't know if society really cares about us as much as we think they should care about us.'" He felt a widespread question of self-worth, "and all of a sudden I think that question turned the finger back to us to say 'what are we doing about it?'"

Personal Mastery places primary emphasis on assessing your priorities and values on an ongoing basis. Barkouli found that asking these questions, which can so easily fall to more apparent urgencies, was critical, though not without its challenges. "It had lot of resonance with me like 'Wow, holy cow.' Liberating in some ways and scary in other ways, but at the end of the day I look back at that class and say it was really a catalyst of my life."

This striking individual impact resonates powerfully on the organizational scale. It has "advanced our firm to places that we wouldn't have been otherwise. Both financially and emotionally." Says Roeseler of WD. While these skills may be 'soft', the impact is anything but: "There's really a strong tie between the emotional intelligence and a positive financial impact."

David Gockel at Langan also sees it on the bottom line. "The financial performance of this firm over the last three years has been dramatically better than it's been in its history," he says. "I think that that has to do with the a lot of things, but one of those things has been the trust building between and amongst the senior leadership team here."

"We're reaching our people better," says Larry White of BWR. For him, Personal Mastery enhances a broad spectrum of key organizational necessities, offering "help with retention which is very critical, and also help connecting with people when you're trying to recruit them. It can affect everything from recruiting to retention to business results and long term growth."