

Getting over those hurdles: Eleven Necessary Steps to Truly Develop Skills

We often refer to “getting over hurdles” in the business world. If we can just get over that first hurdle, the rest will be much easier.

Running hurdles is an event in Track and Field, and it’s a great sport for demonstrating the steps required in skill development and accomplishment. Many people mistakenly describe it as jumping hurdles. But for those of us who know the sport, we do not jump hurdles, we *run* hurdles. This is an important distinction, as the speed with which you can finish the race is greatly dependent on how you get over them; jumping is slow and cumbersome, while running is fast and graceful. But we all started out learning how to run the hurdles by jumping over them first. It wasn’t until we had the skill to get over, and the cadence in between, that we were truly running them.

Here then are the steps in developing your skills, using the techniques for mastering the hurdles:

1. Stretching. I liken this to opening up your mind and allowing yourself to be ready to take on new skills. It means extending yourself outside of your comfort zone. So, for example, if you’re afraid of standing up in front of an audience to present your proposal, this would mean taking that first step to allow yourself the opportunity to get on the proverbial stage.

A great illustration of stepping out of your comfort zone is Bill Gates and his move from business to philanthropy. Imagine moving from creating and managing a business whose purpose is to dominate the industry to moving into business whose purpose is to help people. Stretching outside of your comfort zone can be tough, but in Gates’ example, the results are worth it.

2. Developing skills. First you have to understand the skills required and then repeat them over and over again as you learn them. Using the public speaking example: now that you’ve agreed you need to learn how to present in front an audience, you’ve got to understand the basics. And you have to do them repeatedly, until you become comfortable.

In the medical profession, many of the techniques required for working with patients are practiced first using non-human prototypes—CPR, drawing blood, and stitches, to name a few. This practice is crucial to the quality of patient care. Just as medical professionals know that practice is a requirement for their work, it is equally important in business skills development.

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3. Mastering current skills. Improving and mastering skills requires repeating, honing, failing, and repeating. To truly master the technique of public speaking, you've got to take advantage of every opportunity—be it in front of your child's classroom (tough crowd by the way), a civic or church group, or with your own team and organization.

Colin Powell has developed his public speaking skills over the years, to now look as if it's as effortless as breathing. Admittedly a man who could lead large armed forces would have to have a talent for speaking; but he has mastered that skill to present flawlessly in front of business audiences, civic audiences, and others.

4. Developing new skills. Great athletes don't stop at mastering one skill, they move on to develop new skills that will continue to improve their performance. In the public speaking example, the great leader relies heavily on written word. Your new skill could be developing your writing techniques.

Jack Welch, former CEO of GE, provides a model of someone developing a new skill. For years, while he was running GE, he was known as Neutron Jack, or the man for execution. When the work of downsizing was complete, however, Welch recognized that new skills were required to run GE. Now, his people leadership skills have become the benchmark for many companies, nearly eliminating his reputation as a "results at all costs" leader.

5. Pushing the limit on the skills where they exhibit the most talent. Now that you've mastered speaking in front a group, you're ready to move on to speaking on camera or publishing a book. If you have the talent to capture an audience on stage then why not push it up a notch? Get it captured on tape or in the written word through a book.

President Ronald Reagan was known as the great orator. Recognizing this exceptional talent, his team wisely put him in front of audiences as frequently as possible. Even during the Iran-Contra crisis, he chose to use his public speaking talent, and the trust he had gained from that, to try and reconcile with his constituents.

6. Ensuring they "meet min" on the areas where they are weakest. Even athletes have weak points in their abilities but these cannot be ignored if they want to maximize their performance. Returning to the example of public speaking: despite your brilliance in front of audiences you may find you have difficulty meeting new people. Although this may never become a differentiating strength for you, you'll need to be competent at the basics.

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Dave Thomas, founder of Wendy's, ensured his weakness didn't undermine his strengths. Here was a CEO who really had very little TV presence or personality, but he turned this weakness into an asset by using his Wendy's commercials to show "the human side" of a great leader.

7. Performing! All of your hard work can now be demonstrated. It's not over, however; even performances are a chance to hone your skills. Encouraging feedback from others is a great way to understand how you can improve the next time.

TV 's "American Idol" is the quintessential example. Each week the contestants come back to perform and get feedback; it's public and it's personal. (After all, the tv show is ensuring it keeps the ratings.) You'll hear repeatedly from the contestants that it was the feedback that enabled them to improve dramatically.

8. Your results. Sometimes, your results are not enough to get the gold. It could be the interpretation of the audience, or it could be just one of those days. The first thing, however, is to evaluate progress. Did you do better than the last time? Track and field is one sport that gives us a great metaphor for progress in business: here athletes are interested not only in how they performed against the competition but also if they performed better than their last "best time," their Personal Best. In track and field, setting a new Personal Best is just as much an accomplishment as winning.

Interestingly, the quarterly results posted to the street are a model of using progress to demonstrate performance. All of the measurements are described in terms that relate to prior quarters, or prior years; it is these *relative* measures that often determine the success as perceived by Wall Street and investors.

9. Going back and doing it again. Sometimes the hardest part of developing a skill is the repetition — especially if repeating it means demonstrating your incompetence and exposing your vulnerability. (See step 10!)

In the example of public speaking, your first attempts can sometimes generate physical reactions. Steve Martin, comedian and actor, describes it vividly in this quip: "I've got to keep breathing. It'll be my worst business mistake if I don't."

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10. Enduring frustration. Oh, the pain. This is worse than stretching; we're now in the phase where we don't know if the effort will really generate the reward. Here is where patience, and maybe even a little faith, is most required. Having a support network can be critical to not giving up.

Golf phenom Tiger Woods illustrates this process best. He is someone who never stops raising the bar on his performance. He describes his approach in playing the game: "I was lucky that my dad always stressed to me that golf is not about how far you hit it, but where you want the ball to go. How are you going to get it there? If you don't get it there, what went wrong, so you can apply it to the next one."

11. Finally, practice, refine, and practice some more. Skills development does not end. It is a process that requires patience, practice, and a willingness to practice again.

With these steps, you can get over that first hurdle. It's true in business, just as it is on the track. You may have to start by jumping, and you may even fall in between. But with persistence and practice, you too will be running fast and gracefully. •