

How to Become a Master Instructor

• BY CODY MALLORY •

Let's kick this off with a little exercise. Take a second and envision a teacher or mentor who had a positive impact on you. What characteristics about this person stand out most to you? What made him or her a great teacher?

When I ask this question during clinics, most people mention how that person was able to relate to students, connect with them, or impart the sense that the teacher truly cared about their students' success. Interestingly, when people list their master teacher's strengths, it is typically not until after they have listed relationship-building skills that they mention anything about that person's grasp for the technical aspects of the subject.

EXAMPLES OF MASTER INSTRUCTION

Mastery comprises a set of behaviors, attitudes, practices, and processes that increase our ability to be effective and efficient (see Figure 1). And as shown by the opening exercise, the first step to becoming a master teacher is to be relationship driven. In his book, *The Talent Code*, Daniel Coyle interviews renowned quarterbacks coach Tom Martinez, who is likened to Yoda. Martinez describes how he approaches meeting a student for the first time.



The true Master Instructor focuses on building a connection with students before even mentioning anything about technique.

CHALLENGE

To build deeper connections and better relate to students to facilitate greater success in learning to ski or snowboard.

SOLUTION

Develop an approach that is relationship driven, provide constructive feedback and be inspirational both visually and vocally.

RESULTS

In the pursuit for perfection, or mastery, we continually refine our overall teaching skills and in turn provide students with an ever-improving learning experience.

"With a new kid, it's no different from meeting a girl you might want to go on a date with. You make eye contact, and there's something there, underneath. Something hits a nerve, something is transmitted through eye contact that tells you to say hello. That's what I look for first in a kid, something to take our connection to a different spot."

That last sentence is very important to the concept of being relationship driven. The ability to find and build upon a connection within the first moments of meeting a student will strengthen the relationship and take learning to the next level. As snowsports instructors, we need to learn to observe and listen more than we speak. It's all about peeling back the cover and picking up on students' body language and the subtext of what they say. It is crucial to the success of the lesson to discover your student's motivations and goals early on in the lesson and structure the learning experience around those clues.

Reading people's eyes and making note of their posture are a couple of ways instructors can observe body language to pick up on the underlying subtext. Many emotions can be expressed through our eyes. Snowsports instructors, in particular, are well

served by being able to recognize fear, anxiety, boredom, and confusion. Posture is another subtle key to understanding the mindset of students. Rigidity and a lack of flexion and extension can hint toward a moderate level of fear or anxiety. An instructor's ability to recognize and adjust his or her approach to these subliminal emotions can go a long way toward making lessons highly effective.

Another foundation of becoming a master teacher is the way in which we deliver feedback. Simply put, it is the ability to exhibit the *knowledge of process rather than knowledge of result*. A study conducted in 1974 by two UCLA educational psychologists, Ron Gallimore and Roland Tharp, provides us with a model for delivering highly effective feedback. For the study, Gallimore and Tharp performed an up-close case study of the university's legendary basketball coach, John Wooden. At the time of the study, Wooden had led the Bruins to a national championship nine out of the previous 10 years. Of the 2,326 discrete acts of Wooden's coaching observed by the researchers, only 6.9 percent were compliments and 6.6 percent were expressions of displeasure. The vast majority (roughly 75 percent) of all of Wooden's coaching acts were categorized as pure information, such as the

timing, intensity, rate, or duration at which to perform a task or movement. It all comes back to the knowledge of process over knowledge of result. Another striking feature of Wooden's method of coaching, Gallimore and Tharp found, was an absence of long-winded explanations or lectures.

Skiing and snowboarding, just like basketball, are continuous-action sports that rely heavily on spontaneity, reaction, and improvisation. To interrupt this continuous action with harangues about skiing or snowboarding technique is a detriment to the learning process. Capitalizing on natural breaks in the action to provide feedback or explain the next task in a concise and informative manner will pave the way to providing our students with a valuable lesson.

The last component for becoming a master instructor is to be inspirational, both visually and vocally. Master instructors give their students a vision of greatness. They are able to notice their students' strengths and bring these strengths to their students' attention.

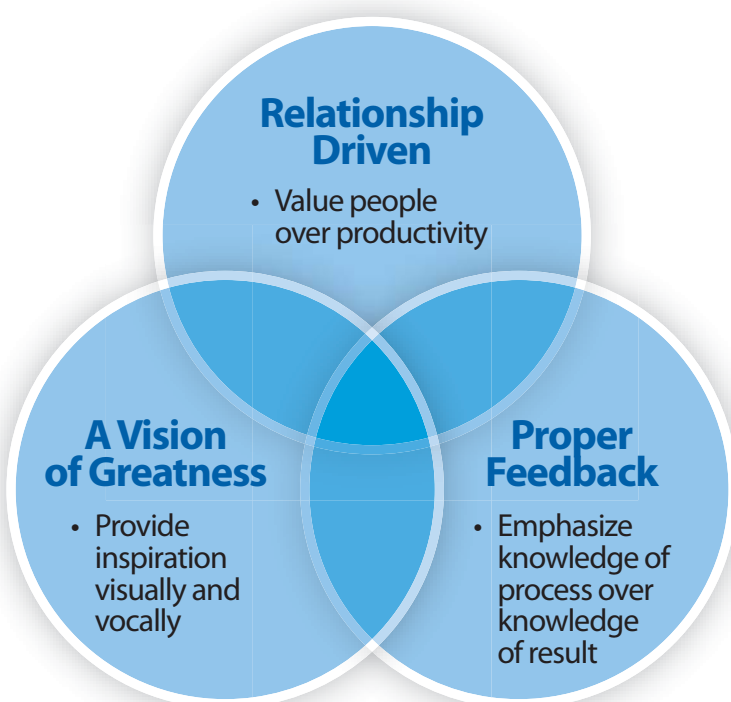
This vision of greatness, or impending greatness, is important to the development of skill because psychology and self-talk play a large role in a person's ability to strive toward higher levels of performance.

Gary Mack, a leading sports psychology consultant and author of *Mind Gym: An Athlete's Guide to Inner Excellence*, describes the critical need for athletes to believe that they are capable of higher performance.

"Beliefs drive behaviors and self-limiting beliefs lead to self-defeating behaviors," he writes. "Believe in yourself and abilities." (For more on this topic, see "Self-Efficacy: Do You Believe You Can Be Successful?" on page 72 of the Winter 2012 issue of PSIA/AASI's 32 *Degrees* magazine.)

It's our role as instructors to facilitate the formation and strengthening of these beliefs in our students. The ability for instructors to inspire their students and give them a vision of their own impending greatness is a highly valued and deeply rewarding skill. Like a "hook-filled" reality TV show that convinces you to stick around after the commercial break, we must be able to pick out and focus on our students' strengths, rather than their weaknesses, and build upon them; all the while hinting at the greatness they will achieve.

FIGURE 1: FOUNDATIONS OF A MASTER INSTRUCTOR



FACILITATING THE OPTIMAL EXPERIENCE

Think back to a perfect park lap or bluebird powder day filled with face shots. What were you feeling? If the hair on the back of your neck is standing up right now while you think about it, then you experienced what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a noted psychologist at California's Claremont Graduate University, defines as flow, or the optimal experience. According to Csikszentmihalyi, "The best moments occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limit in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. Optimal experience is thus something that we make happen."

For skiers and snowboarders, being in flow is what brings us back every winter and it's the key to the retention of our clients. So the question is: How do we provide our students with a flow experience? Says Csikszentmihalyi, "Flow tends to occur when goals are clear, feedback relevant, challenges and skills are in balance, and attention becomes ordered and fully invested." Sounds a lot like an ideal ski or snowboard lesson, right? Instructors develop clear student-directed goals; provide timely, constructive feedback; and have students perform a task that flirts with the edge of their ability. The concept of flow and its components provide us with a great model for teaching and inspiring lifelong snowboarders and skiers.

Flow is the Holy Grail of snowsports. Flow (technically speaking) is the state of optimal arousal where a person is fully immersed in a task. Oftentimes, the flow that represents a zone of optimal engagement and learning gives rise to athletic flow achieved through a series of fluid movements. These types of flow aren't synonymous, but they can complement each other.



It is essential to help students find flow, the optimal skiing/riding experience. It's the key to the retention of our clients.

MASTER INSTRUCTORS GIVE THEIR STUDENTS A VISION OF GREATNESS. THEY ARE ABLE TO NOTICE THEIR STUDENTS' STRENGTHS AND BRING THESE STRENGTHS TO THEIR STUDENTS' ATTENTION.

Think back to your perfect turn, run, or day. You were in flow. Helping our students attain flow in their skiing or riding can be a very rewarding experience; however it cannot be the goal of the lesson. When you were experiencing your own flow moment were probably weren't thinking "I am going to be in flow." The reason for this is because flow is not a destination, but rather a by-product of the process. Csikszentmihalyi describes this further:

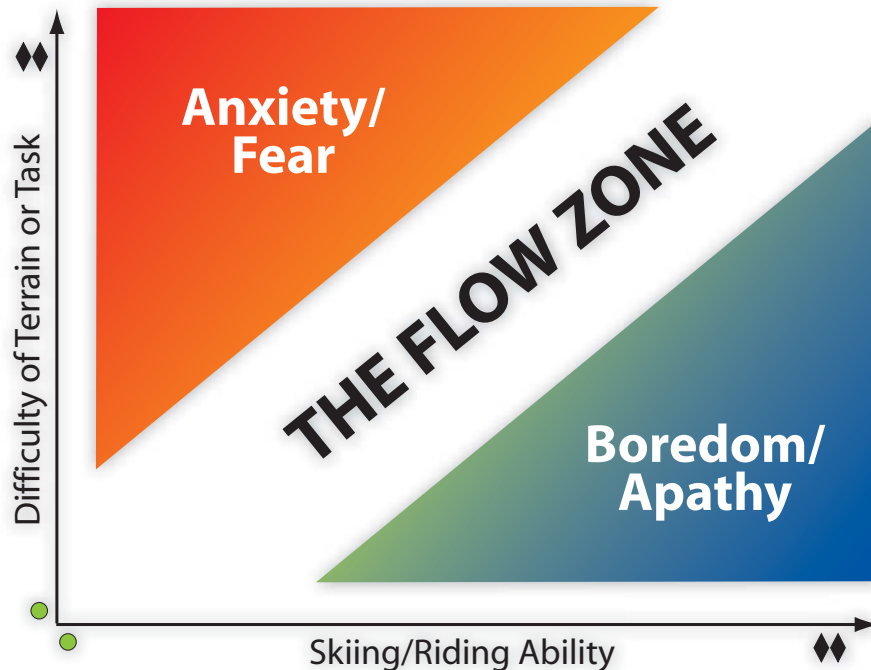
"It should be stressed that the body does not produce flow merely by its movements. The mind is always involved as well ... Without the relevant thoughts, motives, and feelings it would be impossible to achieve the discipline necessary to learn to swim [or ski/ride] well enough to enjoy it. Moreover, because enjoyment takes place in the mind of the swimmer [or skier/rider], flow cannot be a purely physical process: muscles and brain must be equally involved."

While flow cannot be the goal of a lesson, it's possible to set the students up to experience it. This can be accomplished when the students are pushed to the edges of their skill sets in an effort to accomplish a goal that they view as difficult and worthwhile. It's necessary to note that the phrase "difficult and worthwhile" will apply differently to each of your students, and your ability to find what the student views as worthwhile will make your lessons that much more effective.

Aside from giving immediate feedback and using student-centered goals, it's important that there is a balance between our student's skill level and the difficulty of the task we are asking him or her to perform. As you can see in Figure 2, if this balance does not exist, students will drift into either a feeling of boredom or anxiety – both of which are detrimental to the learning environment. By keeping them near the edge of their skill set, our students will stay engaged in the lesson and achieve a high level of learning and skill development. ▶

FIGURE 2: DIFFICULTY VS. ABILITY

The balance between challenge and skill is essential to ensuring students get the most out of their learning experience.



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A good rule of thumb is to perform a new (or slightly more difficult) task on old terrain and an old task on new (or slightly more difficult) terrain. Referring to Figure 2, combining new tasks on new terrain is a sure-fire recipe to incite fear and anxiety, while old tasks on old (familiar) terrain will probably result in boredom or apathy.

A WORTHWHILE QUEST

The pursuit of mastery is a very rewarding and lifelong process. In his best-selling book *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, Daniel Pink describes the process of pursuing mastery in any field. "Mastery is an asymptote. You can approach it. You can hone in on it. You can get really, really close to it. But ... you can never touch it. Mastery is impossible to realize fully. The joy is in the pursuit more than the realization. In the end, mastery attracts precisely because mastery eludes."

It is in the pursuit for perfection, or mastery, that we will refine our skills and provide our students with an excellent learning experience. As John Wooden says, "It's what you learn after you know it all that separates the great coaches from the average ones."

“
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FROM THE AVERAGE ONES.
”

— John Wooden, head basketball coach
at UCLA from 1948-1975

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PSIA-AASI Releases E-Learning Module for Entry Level Instructors

In an effort to expand resources for those looking to become snowsports instructors, the Professional Ski Instructors of America (PSIA) and American Association of Snowboard Instructors (AASI) has launched the *Entry Level Instructor's Guide*. This new e-learning tool details in easy-to-understand language what to expect in becoming a professional snowsports instructor.

The *Entry Level Instructor's Guide* is the first in a series of online e-courses produced by PSIA-AASI that introduces the basics of teaching snowsports, PSIA-AASI as an organization, and PSIA-AASI models and concepts to prospective instructors or newly hired instructors. Each course integrates on-snow video content of snowsports classes in action, as well as downloadable attachments and links for additional research and learning.

"We're always excited when we launch a new education product, and this one is at the start of a whole new range," says Earl Saline, PSIA-AASI professional development manager. "As technology has evolved, we are looking at how PSIA-AASI can evolve its delivery of education content and

we're excited to improve our online resources with the addition of these e-courses."

The *Entry Level Instructor's Guide* is a 14-minute online course that guides the viewer through a slide show providing an overview of what to expect as a new instructor. With voice-over and video content included, the course is an interactive experience that extends well beyond simply reading text on a screen. This free resource is available to anyone interested in learning more about snowsports instruction through the PSIA-AASI website, TheSnowPros.org.

"Our extension into e-learning came from a desire to provide valuable information for new instructors in a whole new way," says Saline. "Rather than replace instructor training that a school might provide, the *Entry Level Instructor's Guide* is meant to compliment that training for new staff. This piece was developed with members, trainers, and school director input, whose combination of knowledge and experience allowed us to create a great introduction to teaching snowsports that will translate regardless of where an instructor might be working or volunteering." ■