

Personal Mastery - Podcast Transcript

Patrick Mayfield and Adrian Boorman



Adrian Boorman (Customer Relationship Manager):

Most of us know all too well that our lives become more pressured as every day passes. We all face a tsunami of information from an ever-increasing number of sources, with the result that it becomes increasingly hard to focus, to prioritise, and to do our best work. However, help is at hand! And to explain more, I am delighted to welcome back to the studio the CEO of pearcemayfield, the professional development and consultancy company, Patrick Mayfield. Patrick, hello and thank you for joining us again!

Patrick Mayfield (CEO of pearcemayfield): Hi Adrian, how are you?

AB: Good thanks. Look, I know you have developed a very practical, hands-on one-day workshop event for delegates to address some of the challenges that I mentioned just now. But before we are looking at this in detail, can you explain what was the motivation and the driving

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force behind your development of a support package to help individuals with their personal organisational challenges? There's a back-story here; perhaps you can share it with us.

PM: In one sense it is very simple. We responded to one of our corporate clients, who saw what we were doing and the way we behaved, and said: Could you help us with this? But the real back-story is that it's been a lifelong passion of mine. My personal organisation has been first a matter of survival, and then a matter of performance, so I am always attending to it. I'm a bit of personal organisation geek I suppose, so the client didn't need to persuade us very hard.

AB: So, client driven then?

PM: Yes.

AB: You mentioned your passion for things organisational, and I'm sure many of our listeners would be familiar with work that you have done around stakeholder engagement. So does this particular product, if I can call it that, workshop event, links back to your research into the characteristics of high performers?

PM: Yes, it does. I suppose everything is linked, but very quickly the four top research conclusions we came to defining the distinctives around high performers were that they had a leaning the people, that they had a leaning to action, that they were self aware and that they guarded personal margins. All four are relevant to personal organisation, how we order our private lives, but the last one in particular was very revealing - around personal margins, around these people who were performing highly, guarded their personal boundaries very closely, they kept in slack in their diaries, so it made me curious about this whole issue of how you guard first of all time, but then it lead onto other the areas of our lives.

AB: So, good personal organisation, personal mastery underpins, it facilitates those personal margins, and in those personal margins, one can go off and engage with stakeholders, and use one's time more productively.

PM: Yes, yes.

AB: Do other sources converge on this thinking? Have you, for instance, been able to draw experiences of some of your own company's major clients, or existing management techniques, and if so, how these informed your own approach and the development of the unique Personal Mastery offering.

PM: Well it is very interesting really, because the more we looked, the more we found connections with a number of things. You know, we have long involvement with PRINCE2®. One of the concepts in PRINCE2® is this idea of tolerance margins. I have to say that in practice, most people plan in margins on PRINCE2® projects in a very predictable and unimaginative way. And often there's pushback for the wrong reasons, by senior management,

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they sort of take away those margins. But discussing those and looking at those and related areas of management theory around Lean and so on, we begin to see that actually, you always need slack somewhere in the system, you always need somewhere to provide a buffer and if you don't provide that you have got no reserves for resilience, no reserves for when something unexpected comes along that you need to attend to. What we looked at when we were doing the crib sheet research into high performers, was that the vast majority of people when something unexpected happened, would basically have a very limited number of options: they work longer hours, they gave up their weekends, or things just dropped off the end of the world, of the end of their "to do list" and never got done. Not so with the high performers.

AB: So to use an analogy: it is like the area at end of a runway, which isn't generally used, until the day when you need it and is better to use that than to run off the end across the motorway.

PM: Yes, yes. The error most of us make is when we see these margins, when we say this slack, we think "oh, that's waste, I could be using that". Well, when you use it up, there is nothing left for emergencies.

AB: Yes, absolutely. So, this is more than just time management then?

PM: Yes, absolutely.

AB: What makes it so different?

PM: What we have done is also had to key into research we came across from other sources around energy management. What people have learned in coaching top-flight athletes like Andy Murray and so on. Where actually the way we order our business lives is very alien to the way we naturally work in our human bodies. There is a stress recovery cycle; stress is not the enemy per se, but chronic stress, you know, always being twenty-four seven on, is very harmful. If you look at this like a stress recovery curve, like on a cardiograph. What we try and do in the workplace is organise lives where we are flat lining, we are always on. Well, in the natural world you are only flat line when you're dead. So when you look at distress recovery cycle and perhaps begin to introduce more natural rhythms in the workplace. Not being slackers, but using slack in a sense, or recovery time, in a sense, to make, to exercise ourselves, so that we've got faster recovery rates.

AB: Right, I was going to ask you about stress. So you are not in your businesses of eliminating stress, cause stress exists when you get out of bed in the morning, but in terms of managing it.

PM: Yes your stress is a natural phenomenon and it can actually be very functional. Acute stress, over-stressing, is probably a bad idea, and chronic stress is definitely a bad idea...

AB: Is this is just about method or does this include some practical tools as well, could you give us some examples?

PM: Well, from work with Agile we came across some writing on personal Kanban, Jim Benson and others have written about this. Also, we came across the idea of using lists in a more proactive way, as David Allen has done in his "Getting Things Done". We have also looked at the work of Francesco Cirillo, I think his name in Italian, who's got the The Pomodoro Technique®. What we've done is to spread out the whole mélange of techniques, that more or less interact with each other. We offer this kind of smorgasbord of techniques in our workshop; and don't presume that they all fit anybody's personal style or circumstances, and at the end we get the people to sort of say what are they going to go away and use. Everybody tends to select something.

AB: Right, so it is not a one size fits all solution?

PM: Definitely not, because we're all different sizes aren't we?

AB: OK, so how flexible is Personal Mastery? Who is it more suitable for?

PM: I think this really comes back to some disciplines of self-management, self-reflection, self-awareness, and again that's an emotional intelligence dimension. This is relevant to anybody who is a knowledge worker, whose main tool is between their ears, it's their brains and it also begins to get you quite deep in terms of what your self-identity is. A lot of people are driven, they basically take the position that they are victims of their boss, or their environment and have to do this, that and the other. We gently challenge that and encourage people to say well, actually you can be quite radical about this and you should for the good of your organisation take ownership of your own boundaries and begin to say no, and that can be quite difficult for some people, but you have to be very clear and confident about the areas you say no to, and that clarity is ultimately about reconnecting with meaning in your workplace.

AB: Right. You have published a [whitepaper](#), I know, which is going to be available as a companion to this podcast, I'll explain later how listeners can get hold of it at the end. In it you refer to 'breaking the tyranny of busyness', I love that phrase I have to say, but can you just put some flesh on the bones?

PM: Yes, yes I can. One of the great seductions of all the tools - the communication tools that we have now, and the internet as a backbone for this all happening, is that they have turned on us and they are all vying for our attention now. And if we are not self-aware enough, we can end up just servicing our inbox. Somebody, for example, described the e-mail inboxes, as somebody else's 'to do list' for you. This is about getting our clients on the front foot in life. Begin to say 'actually I am going to consciously choose when I look at my e-mail inbox'. And I am going to be very conscious about the heuristics, the filters I will apply to what comes through my inbox, to filter out rather more than just spam, but to begin to say 'actually, I cannot and should not deal

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with that. This is really for people whose main tool is their brains and how they work. We talk about things like focus; how if we are knowledge workers, we really do need to reserve time for focus on one thing at a time and there is emerging research around multi-tasking. Some of our listeners will not like to hear this, but the research shows conclusively, male or female, we cannot multi-task and be as productive as we thought.

AB: Patrick, I have known it ever since I was a very small boy, I am delighted for you to say that! I guess a lot of this has a relevance and a usefulness beyond the work environment, beyond the office.

PM: Absolutely, we get clients saying 'I have tried this with my partner and we are using this to jointly plan our holiday' and so on. And that's encouraging because often people apply work disciplines because they have to. This is an indicator that they are actually finding this valuable in its own right and transporting it back to home. Let me say another thing: there is a lot of guff talked about work-life balance. Since when was work not part of our lives? I am not trying to blur the boundaries of work time, but that's a false dichotomy right there.

AB: Yes, absolutely. And why should the tools not be universally used?

PM: Yes.

AB: I believe the development working title for what we have been discussing today, [Personal Mastery](#), was Organising Yourself More Effectively, which seems to do what it says on the tin to me, but there you go. Why did you ultimately decide to call it Personal Mastery?

PM: Because we wanted to make this move generically relevant to a wider audience of clients. Organising Yourself More Effectively - this is beyond time management, we have all been on time management courses. This is really more about how we look at ourselves, what is our true identity, what is the meaning in our work, what is my energy level and how do I observe it and regulate it and work with it, and so on. So this is really an area that leaders are beginning to attend to, much more often, Personal Mastery, and I think our productivity begins here.

AB: That's a statement to think about! I must come back to something you mentioned earlier: Pomodoro?

PM: Yes.

AB: Italian for tomato and there my knowledge ends, so you must explain that, I can't let you go...

PM: Very quickly, you can check this on Francesco Cirillo's excellent blog site. But it all started when he was a student trying to revise for his exams. He had a kitchen timer in the shape of a tomato and called it The Pomodoro Technique®. Check it out.

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AB: And one uses that to time blocks of workload.

PM: Yes, it is just consciously chunking large pieces of work using that aid, and now of course we have Pomodoro apps on every kind of electronic device.

AB: Could be one of my five portions a day?

PM: Well, maybe I need to talk to you about that!

AB: Another conversation for another day. Patrick, thank you. Another most interesting discussion and one which surely has relevance for us all certainly. One very last question: do you or your own team use any of the tools and techniques in your organisation?

PM: It would be hypocritical if I didn't and our team do, yes. For example, we use Kanban boards for sharing our work and that's a life saver for me.

AB: Well, that's a testimonial for those listening, I am sure. Patrick, thank you again.

To access the white paper, mentioned in this podcast, please click the [link](#) that you'll find on the podcast page and if you'd like to follow up on any of the issues raised in the discussion, or find out more about what pearceamayfield can do to support you or your organisations' learning and development challenges, then Patrick and his team would, of course, be delighted to hear from you. Contact him direct at patrick.mayfield@pearceamayfield.com.

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Thank you for listening.