



7 QUALITIES OF THE EXCEPTIONAL PERFORMER

Patrick
Mayfield

Greetings

What do you *really* want from work?

We all want to feel we do a good job.

No, wait, most of us want to do an *excellent* job. Like me, you might have moved into your area of work because you wanted to make a difference there. You want others to see your excellence and to become valued and successful. You want others to recognise that you do good work.

In the conversations I have with clients, the emotions I hear expressed all too frequently are:

STRUGGLE with the systems and people

FRUSTRATED with putting in so much effort for such little result.

CONCERN with always seeming to be behind.

CONFUSION over multiple competing priorities.

TIRED of trying different strategies that don't work.

AFRAID to let go of what is no longer working.

LACK of time, money or both.

UNDERVALUED and underpaid.

OVERWHELMED by it all.

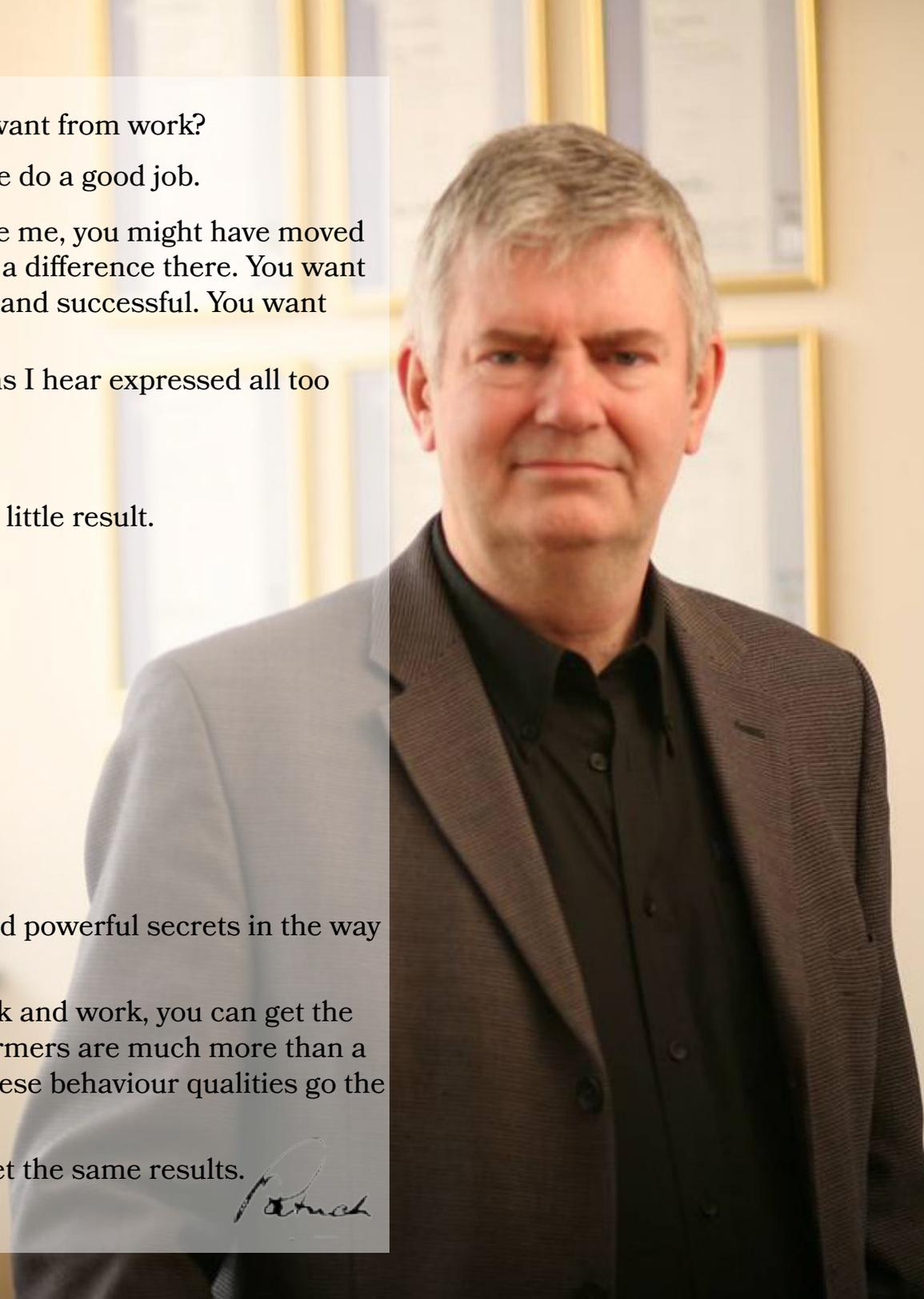
There *are* exceptional performers. They have learned powerful secrets in the way they work.

The good news is that once you know how they think and work, you can get the same results. However, the traits of these high performers are much more than a matter of using a few simple techniques or apps. These behaviour qualities go the very core of who they are.

Let's look at how you might work differently... and get the same results.



Patrick



Quality #1: Positive Self-Regard

The first quality is the absence of something: exceptional people do not think of themselves as victims, as products of what life has done to them. As they progress, these people increasingly take responsibility for their own lives and see where they are as mostly a product of their own past choices.

They do not use the language of “have to”, “can’t” and “should.” If they did, it would indicate that they see themselves as victims of a system, as confined by external forces, and they can do nothing about it. This is the victim mindset.

Instead, exceptional people see themselves as free and the world as a series of choices. They make choices powerfully, free to do this or that. Exceptional people are not immune from making mistakes, but ultimately they will not see themselves constrained by the fear of getting something wrong. They are rather more inclined to see life as a purposeful adventure.

This first quality is essentially an issue of identity, how they see ourselves. All the other qualities flow from this one. Exceptional performers express this in everything they do. They see themselves as having and exercising powerful choices.





Practical Tip:

Think about where you might be dissatisfied with your present situation, with your job, where you live, relationships you have with key people around you.,..

Do you have a dream of changing that, doing something you've always wanted to do, perhaps? Now ask yourself the question: "What's stopping me?"

Now write down all your "can'ts", "should's", and "have to's" in the following formats:

I can't move because ...

I should do this work because ...

I have to ... because....

You might want to write several reasons against each statement.

Now ask yourself: "What if the opposite is true?" Take a moment to imagine that before you choose to censor the thought. Indulge that revolutionary thought for a moment.

It is likely that you will find that many of the reasons stopping you pursuing your dream are not as strong as you thought. You are on the journey to becoming a powerful and free person.

Quality #2: They Build and Protect their Personal Margins

Many organisations are running flat-out, with **nothing** to spare. I know this as I consult to many of them. Everybody is fully utilised. There is no time for anything else. They are running on empty. There is no spare capacity to deal with any new thing - good or bad - that might come along.

What holds true for organisations also holds true for us as individuals. In our research we discovered a small subset of high-performing programme managers and project managers who all kept back a margin of their time each working week. Nobody else could book that time. When we asked them why, they explained that they needed that time in reserve in case the unexpected happened... and it usually did. Whereas we found that the majority of others in our research would simply work longer hours - into the evening or at weekends - to catch up, or else they just let other work drop off the end of their list, never to be done, perhaps still leaving a sense of guilt and failure.

The exceptional performers, however, always had something in reserve.

Margin, or “slack” as some people call it, is essential in any dynamic system. Margin in our lives provides us with resilience, we have something to spare when we are surprised and a big demand is suddenly placed on us.

Margin is not just confined to our time. It can be built into other areas of our life: our physical space (e.g. our desk and PC hard disk), our conscious thinking space, our physical energy, our key relationships, and our finances.



Practical Tip:

Consider the following areas and ask yourself what is your current margin and what do you need:

Time: Hours in your working week that are yours. Do you have sufficient discretionary time?

Physical Space: Is your physical working and living space too cluttered? Do you waste time looking for things? Is your physical space distracting and frustrating you?

Electronic Space: Do you have duplicate files? Do you have a system for storing certain files in the same place? Are you running out of space?

Mental Space: Do you have more than two or three concerns in your conscious thinking at any one time? If so, think about systems of capturing these commitments onto some working record.

Energy: Are you getting enough appropriate exercise? Are you eating and sleeping well?

Finances: Do you have savings sufficient to cope with a sudden loss of income? Are you over-leveraged? Do you have a strategy for reducing your debts? Debt is a subtle form of slavery. Do all you can to become free of it.

Emotional: Are you regularly putting yourself in places of joy?

Spiritual: Are you replenishing yourself regularly with the most important things in life, with the Eternal?

Note: practical solutions for all of these areas are discussed in my book, *Soul of Personal Mastery*.

Quality #3: They have a Leaning to Action

Imagine you are Indiana Jones, and you have fallen down into a pitch-dark pit. You can see nothing. What dangers are there in that pit? You don't know. There could be snakes! If you were Jones, what would you do?

Well, for one thing, you wouldn't remain paralysed by fear. Very likely our hero would take a cautious step forward. Depending on what happened, Jones would then take his next action, and so on...

Former Harvard Business School Professor, John Schlesinger, uses this story to illustrate a behaviour pattern he has found common to all entrepreneurs. They all have a proclivity to do something. Their actions may often be small steps, but they are always considering what they do next; they are always seeking to move their venture forward.

We noticed this behaviour in our high-performing managers. Most of them engage with some fairly complex business problems. Mistakes can be very costly. However, rather than be paralysed by fear or staying in lengthy analysis, these exceptional performers would develop ways of testing their approaches. We call this, "poking the system". They would observe the results and adjust their approach accordingly. Rather than being reckless, there was something empirically humble about their strategies. It was considered risk-taking.

We also found that a lot of planning and preparation work can be a subtle source of procrastination. Many project managers are comfortable with planning, less so with executing them.



What we observed among the exceptional performers, on the other hand, was a dynamic, a way of working that was always pressing forward in a considered way.

Practical Tip:

David Allen suggests asking oneself, "What is the next step I can take that is 20 minutes or less, that will move me towards my goal?"

Why 20 minutes? Allen believes that this a feasible length of time - it is do-able - for most people's busy working day.

How would you "test" the biggest challenge you have right now, in a way that wouldn't ruin you, and yet give you valuable insight?

Quality #4: They Lean into Relationships

In the urgent, we attend to the urgent task. Urgency does not place a value on relationships. In an urgent context, communicating with people is a waste of time; it slows us down. Yet over the long-haul, exceptional performers got the best results by investing in the relationships around them.

As we saw in Quality #2, exceptional performers guard their time margins, their own discretionary time. So during our research we were curious to see how these people used this time. What we discovered astonished us. So much so, that I went on to write a book about it: *Practical People Engagement: Leading Change through the Power of Relationships*. These people chose to use between 40-80% of their discretionary time reaching out to others around their work. We asked them why, and the responses were broadly the same: “Because it works.”

We have developed such an decomposed view of work that we overlook the need to involve others, especially those whom we seek to serve. Exceptional people know that they must take others along with them, and adapt to the styles of key people around them, to achieve the extraordinary.



We overlook the basic reality of synergy: we can always achieve much more than the simple addition of my efforts and yours. Teams exist because there is power in a team where everyone works from their strength for the good of the team’s objective.

One way of looking at relationships is to use Stephen Covey’s metaphor of the relational bank account. Consider each relationship as an account. We make ‘deposits’ into a relationship by being considerate, responsive, showing deep listening, affirming them, and serving them well. We make ‘withdrawals’ by asking favours, by doing something that affects them without consulting or warning them, by neglecting the relationship. Asking people to cooperate with us is to make a withdrawal. With this metaphor, we can discover that some relational bank accounts are overdrawn. No wonder people resist what we want them to do, or even actively obstruct us.

Practical Tip:

Think about who you might approach and how. Set yourself a target of making at least two calls every day for the next week and see what happens. Seek to ‘deposit’ into those relationships in a way that you can afford.

As you consider the relational bank account concept, consider who has an most overdrawn account. What could you do to make amends and repay something into that account?

Quality #5: They Look to Deliver Value rather than merely Getting Things Done

We can become too delivery focused. This can easily change into aimless busyness.

In every piece of work an exceptional person undertakes, every conversation they have, their focus is beyond the transaction, beyond the delivery of the completed work; it is towards creating value. This value can be for their customer, but ultimately that value returns to them in some form. Exceptional consultants, for example, seek to leave value with every contact with their client, leaving the client bettered in some way, even if this is non-chargeable time.

Exceptional performers look beyond the finish line towards the prize. They have the habit of asking themselves “why”, which connects them with the value or the benefit of what they are doing.

On larger, longer projects this sustains them. They frequently return to the reasons, the benefits, the vision of that better future in making every tactical decision.

We also discovered that exceptional leaders rose to positions of leadership not merely because of their higher performance, but because they used the language of value and meaning with others. Jack Welch, former CEO of GE, gives a leader the job title of “Chief Meaning Officer.” Exceptional people tend to make better leaders because they are always asking “why”, and gossiping the conclusions they have come to in answering the “why” question. They become purveyors of meaning.



Practical Tip:

Look through your current commitments and consider these questions:

Why am I doing this?

What is this for?

Have I explained this to others involved in this work?

Could I achieve this value in a different/more effective/easier way?



Quality #6: Self-Awareness

The departure point for our research was the question: “Do all high performers have a mental checklist?” We asked this because of the idea that this checklist could be written down as a methodology, perhaps, and we could all follow it.

What we found was that these high performers did indeed have their internal checklist, in fact, they could articulate it very easily. But we found no common checklist. It was different for each individual. This indicated to us that what was really important was not so much their checklists in themselves, but how these people had arrived at them. We found that these exceptional people treated their own working practices, and their own thought processes and beliefs as a work-in-progress. These people regarded their own thinking as part of their professional work. They made themselves

reflect. So not only did they have a leaning to action (Quality #3), but they also reflected on these actions and their results. They were agile in their thinking so they were re-working their frames of reference in how they saw their work. Of all creatures on this earth, we humans are unique in that we can think about our thinking. We can observe our own thoughts. We can stand outside our thinking to a degree and critically analyse it. These days, practises such as mindfulness and journaling are popular. Bringing ourselves back into the present reality is an aspect of this ability to stand outside our stream of conscious thinking, to observe it and to correct or adjust it.

This appears to be a key quality in driving out excellence.

Yet very few work cultures seem to value ‘thinking time’. Is there any wonder that our organisations struggle and lose their way?

Practical Tip:

Here is a practice that many have found to increase their self-awareness:

For the next few days, either at the start of the day or at the end, write a few words into a journal of your previous twenty-four hours. Reflect on it, on the highs and lows. Ask yourself, “What was I thinking about in that moment?” Use this question as a launch-pad for your thoughts. Practice this enough and you will find that writing down your thoughts, begins to help you think about your thinking.



Quality #7: A Growth Mindset

The final quality is an extension of Quality #1, in that exceptional people believe they are **still learning**, still growing, and also they believe that they have the capacity to learn anything. Professor Carol Dweck has written on the research about this and clearly shows that some of us get the results we do because we limit ourselves by our own beliefs. Taken further, psychologists have shown how we can adopt patterns of hopeless learned helplessness.

Exceptional people have a paradox: they are lifelong learners. One of my personal heroes is Alexander von Humboldt, the 19th century German geographer. This man made huge advances in sense-making of patterns across the earth's surface. If you were to visit the geography lecture hall of Berlin University in the 1890's you would very likely see a grey-haired old man sitting at the back behind all the students. It was Alexander von Humboldt. The lecturer would very likely be referencing von Humboldt's own work. If asked why he was there, he would simply reply: "*Lest I missed anything in my youth.*" Admirable.

Practical Tip:

What inhibits us in adopting a growth mindset is often fear of failure.

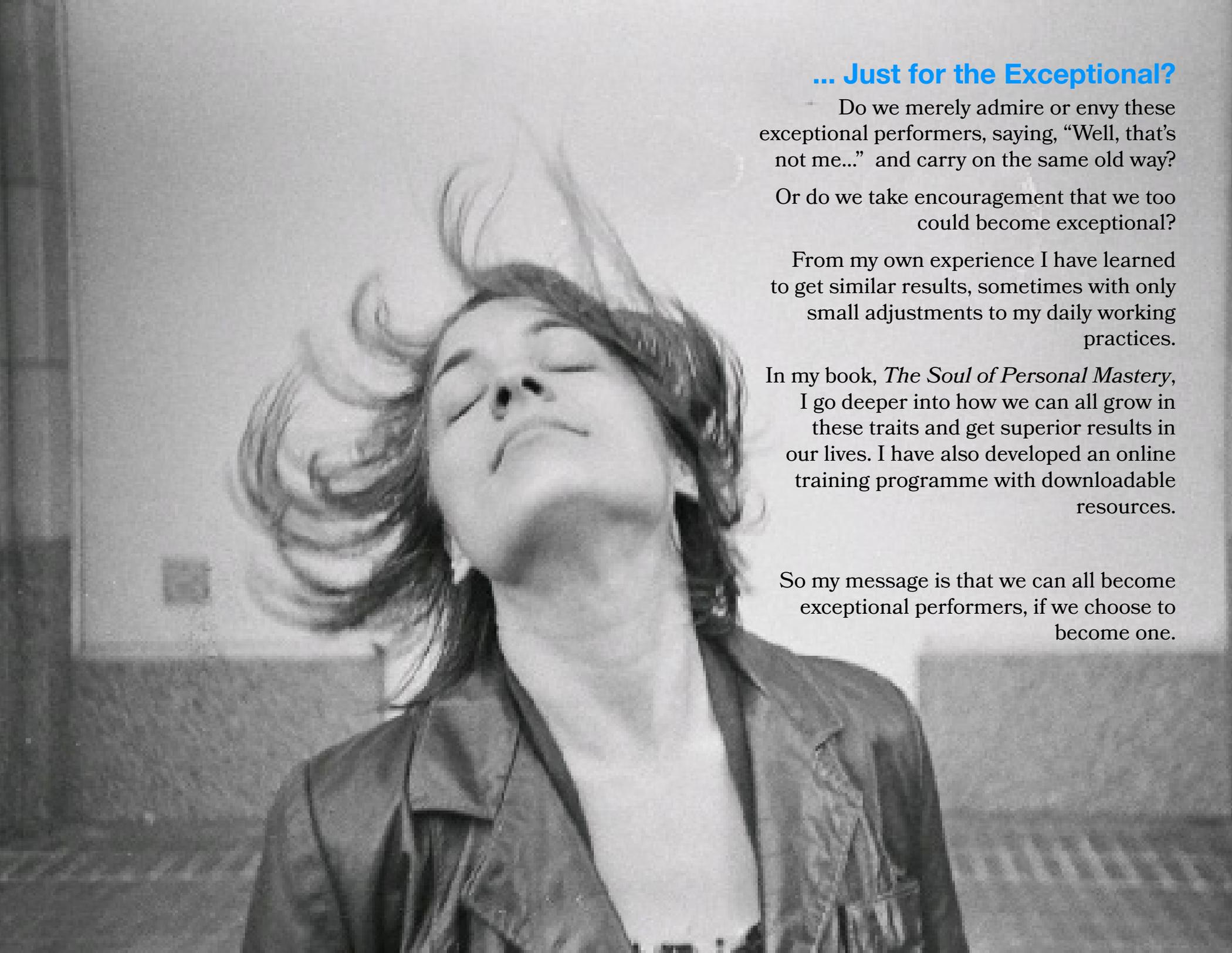
A familiar question is worthy of another look in this context. It's the question:

What would you do if you knew you could not fail?

Another is what significant figures in our lives - our parents, teachers at school, our boss - have said which effectively limit what we could ever be. Ask yourself:

What if they were wrong about me?

Moving from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset is a process, and far more complex than can be treated here. These questions, though, can be part of that process.



... Just for the Exceptional?

Do we merely admire or envy these exceptional performers, saying, “Well, that’s not me...” and carry on the same old way?

Or do we take encouragement that we too could become exceptional?

From my own experience I have learned to get similar results, sometimes with only small adjustments to my daily working practices.

In my book, *The Soul of Personal Mastery*, I go deeper into how we can all grow in these traits and get superior results in our lives. I have also developed an online training programme with downloadable resources.

So my message is that we can all become exceptional performers, if we choose to become one.

Resources

Here are some useful resources you can access to continue your journey of living exceptionally.

PatrickMayfield.com

This is my main resource hub. Here you will find articles, events, and other resources that you will find helpful in your journey to becoming an exceptional leader.

[Practical People Engagement](#)

This book has become a best-seller, with five stars on Amazon. I wrote it to provide practical advice in how to live the fourth trait - leaning to relationships. Stories I have heard back from people who have read it have helped them turn some of the people around them from blockers to allies.

You can get a copy from my website at a special price here.

[The Soul of Personal Mastery](#)

Out in Early Autumn 2016, my latest book unpacks all of these traits and shows how you can work from the inside out to thrive in this increasingly-turbulent world.

You can pre-order a copy of the eBook here.

[Time Freedom Online Course](#)

On this programme, I take you through material that has not only gained me huge amounts of time, but has allowed me to use that time more powerfully, on the right things at the right time. This has paid enormous dividends in the results I have achieved. It will take you through some approaches that are more suited to the turbulent times we live in. Using the material on this course will help you become more resilient in the face of extraordinary volatility, and give you strategies to engage with the increasing uncertainty we all face.

Check out patrickmayfield.com for details.

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Pearce Mayfield is a global consulting and training business in transformational change. I set this company up in 2001 and since then the company has gained many grateful clients across the world. Here you will find all kinds of qualifications-based courses, workshops, and other ways of helping your organisation make a step-change in performance.

