

School Builds Dependency. The Crucible Builds Telic Agency.

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Every principal knows the moment.

You give students a real task — not “*turn to page 47,*” but an actual open challenge with no script — and watch what happens. Hands shoot up before anyone has read the instructions. The questions pour in:

“What are we supposed to do? How do I submit this? Which one do I pick? Is this right? Do I have to watch the video? Does grammar matter?”

Not one of those questions is about the challenge. Every single one is a search for the teacher.

What you’re watching isn’t confusion. It’s **learned dependency** — and school built it, deliberately and systematically, over twelve years.

Here is what students have actually been trained to depend on:

Permission. Before they act, they need authorization. “What are we supposed to do?” isn’t a comprehension question — it’s a request for a green light. The gap between “go” and clarity is terrifying because school has taught them that acting without permission is risky.

The Rubric. Their brains don’t ask *what does this mission require?* — they ask *what does the teacher want?* Give them six choices and watch them panic — not because they can’t read, but because multiple valid options breaks the only decision-making tool they have: find the right answer, produce it, collect the grade.

Sequential Instruction. Traditional school trains linear execution: Step A → Step B → Step C. If Step B is unclear, they stop. They’ve never been asked to triage, skip, or prioritize — because in school, skipping a step loses points. The ability to navigate ambiguity was never built.

The Audience of One. When a student asks “do I really have to do this part?” they’re not asking about the campaign. They’re asking about the minimum cost to satisfy the teacher.

They are performing for an audience of one. Every decision filters through a single question: *what will he give me credit for?*

The result is a student who is capable, motivated, and entirely oriented toward the wrong target. *Psychology Today* diagnosed the mechanism precisely:

*“Learned helplessness is not imported by students; it is installed by design.” —
Psychology Today*

Points for formatting. Credit for completion. Grades for compliance. The system rewards teacher-seeking — and quietly punishes the instinct to just *figure it out*. These aren’t bad kids. They’re rational kids. They’re doing exactly what twelve years of schooling trained them to do.

The Workforce Doesn’t Need That Skill.

Nearly 1 in 2 hiring managers say the #1 reason recent graduates failed was lack of initiative — not technical skills, not communication. —HR Dive /
Resume.org, 2025

84% of hiring managers say high school graduates are not prepared for the workforce. 80% say this generation is less prepared than the one before it. —
U.S. Chamber of Commerce / College Board, 2025

The gap isn’t academic. It’s dependency.

The modern workplace is structurally built for self-directed people. Remote work, project-based roles, flat organizations, entrepreneurial expectations — none of those function when your employee is waiting to be told what to do next. The rubric doesn’t exist at work. Nobody tells you when it’s due. Nobody tells you what *done* looks like.

School produces dependency. The world of work punishes it. The Crucible closes that gap.

Day One: The Diagnosis

Here’s what the Crucible Class looks like on day one.

A student reads the challenge and asks: *“What are we supposed to do?”*

The guide answers: *“Read the challenge. It will tell you.”*

She reads it and asks: *“Which one do I pick?”*

“Whichever one you think gives you the best shot at pulling off an effective campaign.”

She stares. She looks around. She asks one more question — “*Does grammar matter?*” — and receives the only answer that makes sense:

“Does grammar matter for your campaign?”

That moment of bewilderment? That’s not a failure. That’s **the diagnosis**. And it’s the beginning of the cure.

What you’re watching is a student whose internal compass has never been pointed at a mission. Every skill she has — her motivation, her attention, her effort — has been calibrated to one signal: the teacher. Remove the signal, and she has nothing to navigate by.

The Crucible doesn’t punish her for this. It simply refuses to give the signal back.

By the End: Telic Agency

Here’s what the same class looks like by the end of a semester in the Crucible.

The same student reads a challenge, makes a strategic decision about which one gives her campaign the best leverage, skips the parts that won’t move the needle, focuses hard on the parts that will, and asks exactly one question — not of the guide, but of herself:

“Will this actually work?”

That shift — from teacher-seeking to mission-seeking, from dependency to self-direction — is what the Crucible forges.

What We Call It: Telic Agency

What the Crucible builds is something researchers are only beginning to name. We call it **telic agency** — from the Greek *telos*, meaning purpose or end.

Telic agency is the capacity to:

- **Identify** what you’re actually trying to accomplish
- **Navigate** toward it under ambiguity and open-endedness
- **Make decisions** with real stakes and no answer key
- **Keep moving** when the teacher leaves the room

It is the opposite of dependency in every dimension. And it is exactly what the world is waiting for your students to show up with.

The Crucible doesn’t build this by lecturing students about initiative. It builds it by placing them, repeatedly and deliberately, in conditions where telic agency is the only path

forward — surrounded by a culture, a community, and a competition system that makes it the norm.

Your students are capable. They're motivated. The system just taught them to aim that energy at the wrong target.

The Crucible repoints the compass.

The Crucible Institute · thecrucibleinstitute.com ·
lance.stewart@thecrucibleinstitute.com · 801-390-3803