

Talent is Overrated*

What Really Separates World Class Performers from Everyone Else

by Geoff Colvin
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Most of the people around you are **good** at what they do. They do it well enough to keep doing it. But it's highly unlikely that any of them are truly great at what they do – awesomely, amazingly, world-class excellent. Why? Why don't they manage businesses like Jack Welch, or play golf like Tiger Woods, or play the violin like Itzhak Perlman? This is a mystery that is critically important to the success of our organizations and our lives.

Most people assume that the small number of people who achieve greatness do so through hard work. Yet the research confirms that working at something for most of your life will not necessarily make you great at it....The other typical explanation for superb performance is that people are simply born with a talent, a "gift" for greatness, as if it were given to them...Two prime examples of naturally talented performers that immediately come to most people's minds are Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Tiger Woods. It turns out that both Mozart and Woods were born into the homes of experts who loved to teach and were devoted to teaching their young sons as soon as possible. That early education, more than any innate gift determined their success..

Hundreds of studies conducted over decades suggest very powerfully that there is no such thing as a genetic difference that determines the highest levels of performance. Both of the theories are wrong. So what does lead to excellent performance? **The answer is deliberate performance.**

Deliberate performance is not what most of us do on the job every day; (it's also) not what most of us do when we're practicing golf or the oboe or any of our other interests. Researchers Anders Ericsson and his colleagues stated in their scholarly paper, "the differences between expert performance and normal adults reflect a life-long period of deliberate effort to improve performance in a specific domain."

Deliberate practice is characterized by the following five elements:

- ***It is actively designed specifically to improve performance, often with a teacher's help***
- ***It can be repeated a lot.***
- ***Feedback on results is continuously available.***
- ***It is highly demanding mentally,*** whether the activity is purely intellectual, such as chess or business-related activities, or heavily physical, such as sports.
- ***It isn't much fun.***

The advantage of using a teacher's help is his or her ability to see you in ways you cannot see yourself. For example a golfer cannot see himself hitting a golf ball and would benefit from someone else's perspective. Very few people can make a clear, honest assessment of their own performance. Even if they could, they could not design the best practice activity for that moment in their development.

High repetition is the most important difference between deliberate practice of a task and performing the task for real, when it counts.... The hardest part of feedback is when the results require interpretation. You may feel that your rehearsal was flawless, but your opinion isn't what counts. These are the situations in which a teacher, coach or mentor is vital for providing crucial feedback.

Deliberate practice isn't much fun because it demands that you seek out what you're not good at. Then you must identify the painful, difficult activities that will make you better and do these things over and over.

In fact, life at most companies seems almost intended to defeat all the principles of deliberate practice. We face few (if any) incentives to get better at them by exceeding our limits and discovering what we cannot do well. Every incentive urges us to stick with what's safe and reliable.

How deliberate practice works

Deliberate practice is all about pushing ourselves just beyond what we can currently do. The most important effect of deliberate practice in great performers is that it enables them to do three things better than most people: they perceive more; they know more; they remember more.

Applying the principles

The first step is knowing what you want to do. Deciding which skills and abilities to work on, and how to do it, is not easy. From this perspective, we see mentors as experienced masters in our field who can advise us on the skills and ability to acquire next and give us feedback on how we're doing.

*This article abstracts the key concept of Deliberate Practice which is discussed in this book.

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