

## **Talent is Overrated**

### **What Really Separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else**

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#### **The Mystery.**

Why aren't more people amazing or world-class at what they do?

Then answer is critically important to the success or failure of organizations. Research confirms that many people fail to become outstanding in what they do. But, even more worrying, this research also shows that many people don't get any better during their career!

Some major and surprising conclusions of different studies:

- Gifts possessed by best performers are not at all what we think they are.
- General abilities of the great people are not what we think.
- The factor explaining great performers is called 'deliberate practice'.

#### **Talent is Overrated.**

Understanding the reality of talent is important for our future. The conclusion of a number of researchers that talent means nothing like what we think it means is surprising.

A lot of high performers in certain fields never showed early evidence of gifts. No genes related to specific talents are found.

The example of Tiger Woods: Tiger grew up with a father who was an expert golfer and real golf addict. His father started teaching his son to play golf as soon as possible. Tiger credits his father always for his success and explains the reason for his success: hard work.

Nothing in Jack Welsh's young life suggested that he would become the most influential businessmen in the world.

But Bill Gates became already fascinated by computers as a kid. But nothing in his story at this young age suggested extraordinary abilities.

In most of the stories on world business leaders we lack inclinations toward fields or traits that one may lead to be extraordinary performance.

### **How smart do you have to be?**

Research doesn't support the view that extraordinary natural abilities are necessary for high achievement. Connection between general intelligence and specific abilities is weak. Correlations between IQ and achievement are weak or non existing.

A lot of successful people seem highly intelligent, but the link between that intelligence and their high achievement is not that powerful.

When we look at the memory ability: this is more created than innate. Memory ability can be acquired by pretty much anyone.

We see that companies don't really put cognitive abilities at the top of the list of their requirement when hiring people. They seek team orientation, humor and confidence. But are these traits innate? Research here suggests that some personality types match better with success at certain types of work.

So we wonder: is there anything that makes a significant difference to whether you achieve top performance and can't we do anything about it?

Surprising we see that anything that goes beyond the physical constraints when it comes to innate limits, is in dispute.

So we discovered until known that people don't excel because of:

- Experience
- Inborn abilities
- General abilities (intelligence or memory)

### **A Better Idea.**

In the early 1990s a scientific study was conducted in Berlin to figure out why some violinists were better than others.

The three groups (best, above-average and good) were spending the same total amount of time on their music related activities.

They all knew that practicing was the most important to become better, but they didn't all do it. So the time the groups spent practicing alone differed drastically.

Practicing gives a cumulative advantage.

It proved that the group of 'best' violinists had practiced at the age of 18 in total 7.410 hours, the 'above-average' group 5.301 hours and the 'good' group 3.420 hours.

The researchers call this 'deliberate practice' and consider that this makes all the difference. This position of the researchers was significant because it rejected the you've-got-it-or-you-don't view and it resolved the contradiction on performance and high achievement.

We have two sets of observation:

- Years of hard work do not make people great in what they do.
- People who have achieved are the ones who have worked the hardest.

How can both sets be true?

The problem is that our current definition of practice is vague. The researchers talk of the specific concept of 'deliberate practice'.

### **What Deliberate Practice Is and Isn't?**

General characteristics of 'deliberate practice' are:

- Specifically designed to improve performance
- With teacher's help
- Can be repeated a lot
- Feedback is continuously available
- Highly demanding mentally
- Isn't really fun

When we see to our work environment: most activities are not designed to make us better at anything (just objectives to meet employer's goals) and the activities to make us better are not really repeatable. Feedback: in the best case an annual performance review.

But 'deliberate practice' does not fully explain high achievement. A person's circumstances (in childhood) can affect the opportunities to engage in deliberate practice.

Deliberate practice and its effectiveness is also related to the effort a person puts into it. The goal is not to do something just automatically but we see that great performers just spent a lot of practice time to avoid playing automatically. Performance is always conscious and controlled, not automatic.

### **How Deliberate Practice Works?**

Practice takes us beyond (or around) our most critical limitations.  
It enables us:

- Perceiving more and figuring out sooner what's going to happen. Excellent performers see more, listen more and feel more.  
They also look literally into their own future. This may be only one second ahead but that extra moment makes the difference. They do it by getting all the time new perspectives.
- Knowing more: better organized and consolidated data.



- Remembering more by using their memory. By a better understanding of your field of expertise you will have a superior structure for remembering information about it. Actually it can alter the physical nature of a person's brain.

### **Applying the Principles in Our Lives.**

If we want to apply the above in our lives we first have to know what we want to do.

Then we have to design a system of deliberate practice with immediate next steps.

Mentors (experienced masters in our field) can advise us on skills and abilities we need and can give feedback on how we're doing.

We start to practice directly but most of our practices will consist of perhaps a few run-throughs. The evaluation message managers give to their direct reports can be broken down into pieces. Each piece can be analyzed for intent and then practiced repeatedly with immediate feedback from a coach.

The 'case method' (coming from the chess model) is also widely used. The process of focusing on a problem and then evaluating the proposed solution is very instructive.

We need to focus on:

- Conditioning: getting stronger with our cognitive skills.
- Specific Skill development: through focused simulations.

We can also practice our business skills by finding practice in the work itself. We call these activities self-regulation.

Self-regulation is a process:

- Set goals not only on outcomes but also about the process.
- Plan how to reach the goal (specific and technique oriented)
- Believe in your ability to perform.
- Self-observation: step outside yourself and monitor what is happening.

Excellent performers will judge themselves differently than other people. They will be more specific.

While you add knowledge, you have to build a mental model (system of how your domain functions).

A great mental model contributes to great performance by forming a framework on which you hang your knowledge, by helping you to distinguish relevant from irrelevant information and by helping you to project what will happen next.

Rules for Great Performance in organizations:

- Understand that each person is being stretched and grown.
- Develop leaders within their job.
- Encourage leaders to be active in their communities.

- Teachers and feedback are critical.
- Early identification of performers.
- People develop best through inspiration.
- Invest time, money and energy in developing people.
- Leadership development has to be a part of the culture.

### **Performing Great at Innovation.**

Secret of innovation: years of intensive preparation before making a breakthrough. Organizations are not innovative, people are. So, we have to invest in helping people to expand and deepen their knowledge of their field. We have to create innovation networks within our organizations.

Another action as organization: tell people what's needed and give them freedom to innovate.

### **Great Performance in Youth and Age.**

The time to really engage in 'deliberate practice' is really available in childhood and adolescence.

Early training can produce high achievers at young age. But training in business skills doesn't start early. Is it possible to start earlier?

Yes, as we don't have a problem starting to train children in other domains.

If we continue to practice to maintain our skills and develop other skills, we can continue to be high performers at advanced age.

### **Where does the Passion Come From?**

Is the motivation to achieve great performance intrinsic or extrinsic?

Most believe the drive is ultimately intrinsic. Intrinsic motivation dominates the big picture.

But we cannot deny that also great achievers respond to extrinsic forces at critical moments.

World-class achievers are driven to improve but most of them didn't start out that way.

We discover here a 'multiplier effect': a small advantage in some field sparks a series of events that produce far larger advantages. This is not only true for the improvement of skills but also for the motivation that drives that improvement.

So passion will develop rather than suddenly emerge. Your drive to be a top performer depends on your answer to two questions:

- What do you really want?
- What do you really believe?