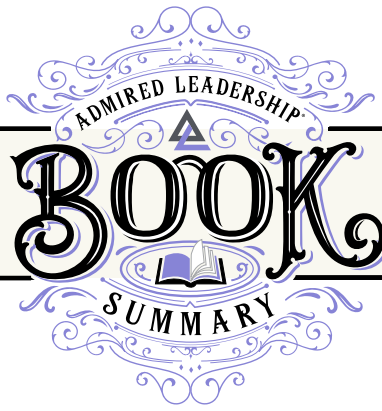




Eight Minutes, Not Eight Hours



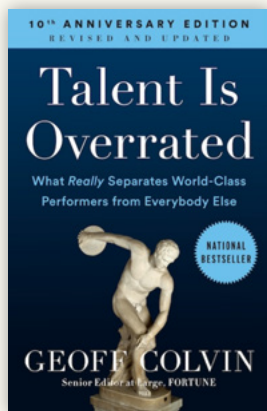
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# Talent is Overrated

What Really Separates World-Class Performers From Everybody Else

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A common perception in our culture is that innate talent and hard work are both required to be truly great at something. In his book *Talent Is Overrated*, Geoff Colvin explores this idea, presenting research describing the key factors behind high achievement across vocational categories. In doing so, he finds that elite achievers across many fields share in common a particular approach, and the results of the approach have little to do with innate talent. Researchers call this method “deliberate practice,” and it is the defining factor among high achievers – whether the activity is sport, music, chess, ballet, medicine, or business. Deliberate practice is a focused, structured form of long-term training that involves targeting one’s weaknesses, stretching oneself beyond one’s limits, and receiving constructive feedback.

## Key Quote

“We tend to think we are forever barred from all manner of successes because of what we were or were not born with. The range of cases in which that belief is true turns out to be a great deal narrower than most of us think. The roadblocks we face seem to be mostly imaginary” (p. 53). — **Geoff Colvin**

## Key Points

**The Mystery.** Repeated studies show that, over time, length of experience and natural talent do not seem to correlate with exceptional performance. “The factor that seems to explain the most about great performance is something researchers call deliberate practice” (p. 8).

**Talent Is Overrated.** Objective measurements of high levels of achievement – such as admittance into elite music schools – are clearly tied to the numbers of hours practiced vs. natural talent. Yet we steer others and ourselves into or away from pursuits based on perceived innate talent. Whatever the role of talent, it tends to be less important to success than we have been taught to think.

**How Smart Do You Have to Be?** It's complicated. In general categories, high IQ correlates with success. However, when we focus on narrower populations, complex factors, and success over time, it turns out that "in a wide range of fields, including business, the connection between general intelligence and specific ability is weak and in some cases apparently nonexistent" (p. 42). The more people practice, the less IQ correlates with performance.

**A Better Idea.** Whether the pursuit is sport, music, chess, or some other activity, the difference between good and great is not just **any** kind of practice, but years of devoted and focused (and often solo) practice – which is hard and not intrinsically pleasurable (p. 62).

**What Deliberate Practice Is and Isn't.** Deliberate practice is "designed specifically to improve performance," it stresses you a little bit (but not too much!) past "your current limits," it's repetitious, it seeks feedback "continuously," it requires mental focus, and "it isn't much fun" (pp. 71, 74, 76). The greats do not go on autopilot; they never stop deliberately practicing.


**How Deliberate Practice Works.** The more deliberate practice a person has engaged in, the more accurate and nimble their perception. And they simply get more out of less information. Deliberate practice also increases knowledge and memory.

**Applying the Principles in Our Lives.** In your daily work life, commit to your goal, then design and settle on a method of practice – mentors in your field and methods used in other fields (music, chess, and sports) can be a help at this stage. Before, during, and after a task at work, be intentional in planning, implementing, and assessing your development. Pursue more in-depth knowledge, and use "mental modeling" to understand your "domain" at work as a system.


**Applying the Principles in Our Organizations.** To apply the deliberate practice principle at work, understand that people and groups grow through being "stretched," and being stretched is not easy. Develop leaders by making this development "part of the culture" (p. 151). Develop teams by putting together groups who work together well, focused on team success vs. individual agendas.

**Performing Great at Innovation.** We think of innovation as springing into the mind of a creative person like a lightning bolt, but, in reality, it is the fruit of knowledge and intention. Organizations can become more innovative by helping their employees "expand and deepen their knowledge in their field" (p. 177).

**Great Performance in Youth and Age.** We can encourage early- and late-in-life excellence by creating supportive, stable environments – broadly, in cultures and civilizations, and narrowly in homes and organizations. Counterintuitively, studies show that excellent performers may suffer a decline in certain areas as they age, but, interestingly, **not** in their field of expertise.



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**Where Does the Passion Come From?** Achievers tend to be focused on the task itself, and for high achievers, incremental mastery can become a type of “high” to be achieved by next aiming a little higher and reaching mastery again – and again and again (p. 207). The ones who maintain passion are people who are internally driven and focused on the task, but who also receive recognition and constructive feedback – which let them know objectively that they are progressing. Organizations would do well to foster motivation by encouraging employees to pursue projects they have a passion for and by providing constructive, task-oriented feedback. Passion will build over time as mastery increases along with positive and constructive feedback.

### Key Concepts:

#### WHY TALENT IS OVERRATED

Talent is “the natural ability to do something better than most people can do it” (p. 22). While past research has not disproved the existence of raw talent, this same research also suggests that the abilities we are born with may not be as important for our success as we think (p. 22).

People often believe that you need to be born with certain abilities to be highly successful, but researchers have found that is not the case. Those who use certain methods in their development but do not seem to possess natural abilities will perform surprisingly well and will strengthen their abilities over time, even competing at elite levels (p. 47).


Research even finds that general intelligence is not a strong predictor of success and, sometimes, it is not even a relevant factor. There is also evidence that suggests that “memory ability is acquired, and it can be acquired by pretty much anyone” (p. 48). Other natural abilities do not seem to predict success either. Individuals who appear to be born with above-average natural abilities do not always perform better and often lose their abilities over time (p. 48).

“We tend to think we are forever barred from all manner of successes because of what we were or were not born with. The range of cases in which that belief is true turns out to be a great deal narrower than most of us think. The roadblocks we face seem to be mostly imaginary” (p. 53).


#### DELIBERATE PRACTICE

Anders Ericsson, a researcher known for his study of human performance, proposed a new framework for how to become a high-achieving performer without depending on natural abilities. Ericsson and his colleagues asserted that certain people become extremely skilled within their field because they engage in “deliberate practice.” They are quoted in the book as saying, “the differences between expert performers and normal adults reflect a life-long period of deliberate effort to improve performance in a specific domain” (p. 66).

Deliberate practice is an “activity that is designed specifically to improve performance, often with a teacher’s help; it pushes the practitioner just beyond, but not way beyond, his or her current limits; it can be repeated a lot; feedback on results is continuously available; it’s highly demanding mentally,



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whether the activity is purely intellectual, such as chess or business-related activities, or heavily physical, such as sports; and it isn't much fun" (p. 70).

Continual deliberate practice allows individuals to become more productive by focusing on improving weaknesses. It also involves seeking out mentors who can provide unbiased performance feedback and examples of high performance for individuals to compare themselves (p. 71).


Although deliberate practice is taxing and forces individuals out of their comfort zone, dedicating time and energy to gaining skills and knowledge while collaborating with highly skilled mentors leads to greatness (p. 76).

## THE IMPACT OF DELIBERATE PRACTICE


"Deliberate practice works by helping us acquire the specific abilities we need to excel in a given field" (p. 106). Specifically, deliberate practice helps individuals to develop a greater ability to perceive, organize, and remember information related to a specific field (p. 106).

### **Deliberate practice leads to four significant outcomes:**

Heightened Perception: Deliberate practice allows people to notice subtle distinctions and recognize small but significant details that others often miss. Deliberate practice trains individuals to see beyond surface-level information for important trends, patterns, and causal relationships. They will also be able to gather more knowledge from limited information and make smarter snap decisions (p. 101).



*Deliberate practice allows people to notice subtle distinctions and recognize small but significant details that others often miss.*



Increased Knowledge: Engaging in deliberate practice allows individuals to gain field-specific knowledge. By dedicating time and energy to improving one's abilities within a certain field, an individual can develop "the critical connections that organize all that knowledge and make it useful" (p. 110). Learning to consolidate a large amount of knowledge helps great performers approach problems from different perspectives (p. 110).

Enhanced Memory: Deliberate practice helps individuals gain a greater ability to remember information related to their specific field. These individuals can access and alter long-term memory in a faster and more reliable way. They learn to relate new information to their existing knowledge in meaningful ways that create an outline for storing and retrieving field-specific knowledge (p. 113).

Delay of Cognitive Decline: As we age, we all experience a general decline in cognitive speed and ability. However, research conducted on excellent performers indicates that deliberate practice can delay the decline of the skills used in their specific field of expertise. Deliberate practice allows individuals to prevent some effects of aging and continue performing exceptionally well, even in old age (p. 197).

## OTHER FACTORS THAT LEAD TO HIGH PERFORMANCE

"Deliberate practice does not fully explain achievement – real life is too complicated for that" (p. 87).

High performance is directly related to two additional factors:

Supportive Environment: Many employees are unwilling to volunteer to participate in challenging work experiences that focus on eliminating their weaknesses. For this reason, leaders need to push their employees to continue developing and to create an encouraging and supportive environment in which this can happen (p. 191).

Intrinsic Motivation: Individuals who are driven internally to find solutions to problems within their field and who experience enjoyment along the way are more likely to become high-achieving performers than those who are only motivated by external rewards. However, extrinsic motivators that reinforce intrinsic motivation – such as rewards that give employees the freedom to be creative – have also been proven to effectively encourage innovation and improve performance (p. 210).

## APPLYING THE PRINCIPLES OF DELIBERATE PRACTICE TO ORGANIZATIONS

Employees should be placed in positions that will challenge them and require them to learn and grow. Developing young employees creates an opportunity to identify future leaders early. An organization's "pipelines of high achievers become bigger, better, and more reliable" (p. 149).

Although developing people requires a great deal of time, money, and energy, this investment in others does not go unnoticed and trickles down throughout the company, creating a company culture that values growth (p. 151).

The best leaders are also active in their communities. A leader's involvement in the community exhibits to employees that he is committed to his organization's values and serves as a source of encouragement and inspiration (p. 147).

Leaders should ensure that employees have mentors who can advise them on which skills will be most useful to them, as well as how best to develop those skills. Past research on the effectiveness of different types of constructive feedback suggests that "when people really understand what happened, they're eager to try to do it better." Employees who get immediate feedback on their performance will clearly understand what did and did not work, as well as why, and will seek out more opportunities to practice their skills (p. 148).

The best leaders motivate their employees through inspiration rather than authority. They identify or create a sense of mission that brings their employees together and creates intrinsic motivation (p. 210).

It is important to apply the principles of deliberate practice when creating teams. The most effective teams are made up of employees who share interests and goals and are committed to being open and honest with one another. Leaders can create these kinds of teams by normalizing the provision of constant, honest feedback and by preventing personal agendas from interfering with the goals of the team (p. 156).



*Be prepared to practice in a place  
that is not glamorous and might  
pay nothing or very little, but  
nevertheless makes you excited.*



*Pressure will only increase as  
you climb, so you must learn  
to manage it.*



## DELIBERATE PRACTICE LEADS TO CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION

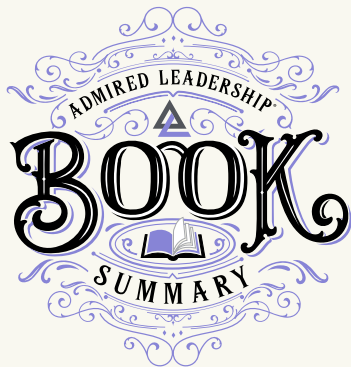
It is a common misconception that too much practice and knowledge in a particular field hinders creativity and innovation. In fact, when finding creative solutions to problems, more knowledge is better (p. 166). The most successful creators have “immersed themselves utterly in their chosen field, have devoted their lives to it, amassed tremendous knowledge of it, and continually pushed themselves to the front of it” (p. 171).

Innovation does not “strike” bolt from out of the blue. All novel creations build upon what already exists and what is already known. Without a deep understanding of past achievements and findings in one’s field, it is difficult to contribute new ideas and developments (p. 166).

Leaders can promote creativity and innovation by encouraging their employees to engage in deliberate practice, which will deepen their knowledge of their field. However, leaders must clearly communicate what type of innovation is valuable and give their employees the freedom to be creative (p. 179). Individuals who are internally motivated by passion and an interest to create are more likely to be creative (p. 180).

As more and more advances are made in every field, it is becoming more difficult and time-consuming to reach the highest level of a field. “In a world of forces that push toward the commoditization of everything, creating something new and different is the only way to survive. A product unlike any other can’t be commoditized. A service that reaches deep into the psyche of the buyer can never be purchased solely on price. Creating such products and services was always valuable; now it is essential” (p. 162).

Colvin, Geoff (2018). **Talent Is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers From Everybody Else.** New York: Penguin Random House.



*While your resume is important,  
remember that “producers hire  
people for jobs – not paper.”*

*Maximize your role by delivering  
exceptional work and being  
proactive.*

### The Latest and Greatest Books for Leaders

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