

November 2006, Practice Makes Perfect

What makes Tiger Woods one of golf's all-time greats? What makes Warren Buffett one of the world's premier investors? The general belief is that each is a natural who came into the world with a gift for doing exactly what they are doing. As Buffett recently remarked, he was "wired at birth to allocate capital."

According to an article in last month's Fortune Magazine by Geoffrey Colvin, senior editor-at-large, it's not so simple. People do not possess a natural gift for a certain job, because targeted natural gifts don't exist. There are no born CEO's or investors or scratch golfers. Greatness is attained only through a tremendous amount of hard work performed over many years. Not just any hard work, but a specific type that's demanding and painful. The good news is that a lack of a natural gift is irrelevant - talent has little or nothing to do with greatness.

To see how researchers could reach this conclusion, Colvin considers the problem they were trying to solve. In virtually every field of endeavor, most people learn quickly at first, then more slowly and then stop developing completely. Yet a few do improve for years and even decades, and go on to greatness. The question for researchers, according to professor K. Anders Ericsson of Florida State University, one of the most prominent in the field - is, Why? How are certain people able to go on improving? Scientists worldwide have conducted scores of studies since the 1993 publication of a landmark paper by Ericsson and two colleagues, many focusing on sports, music and chess, in which performance is relatively easy to measure and plot over time. But numerous other studies have also examined other fields, including business.

The first major conclusion is that nobody becomes great without work and lots of it. It's nice to believe that if you find the field where you're naturally gifted, you'll be great from day one, but it doesn't happen. There's no evidence of high-level performance without experience or practice. There is vast evidence that even the most accomplished people need around ten years of hard work before becoming world-class, a pattern so well established researchers call it the ten-year rule. But hard work for hard works sake is not enough. Something else is required.

The best people in any field are those who devote the most hours to what researchers call "deliberate practice." It is activity that's explicitly intended to improve performance, that reaches for objectives just beyond one's level of competence, provides feedback on results and involves high levels of repetition. For example: Just hitting a bucket of balls is not deliberate practice, which is why most golfers don't get better. Hitting an eight-iron 300 times with a goal of leaving the ball within 20 feet of the pin 80 percent of the time, continually observing results and making appropriate adjustments, and doing that for hours every day - that's deliberate practice.

Tiger Woods is a textbook example of what the research shows. Because his father introduced him to golf at an extremely early age and encouraged him to practice intensively, Woods had racked up at least 15 years of practice by the time he became the youngest-ever winner of the U.S. Amateur Championship, at age 18. Also consistent with the research, he has never stopped trying to improve, devoting many hours a day to conditioning and practice.

The evidence, scientific as well as anecdotal, seems overwhelmingly in favor of deliberate practice as the source of great performance. But, how does one practice business? Many elements of business, in fact, are directly practicable. Presenting, negotiating, delivering evaluations, deciphering financial statements - all can be practiced.

But great managerial performance still requires making judgments and decisions with imperfect information in an uncertain environment, interacting with people, and seeking information. The research says that these can be practiced also, but not in the way that you might practice at the driving range. Rather,

it's all about how you do what you're already doing - you create the practice in your work, which requires a few critical changes. The first is going at any task with a new goal: Instead of merely trying to get it done, you aim to get better at it.

For example, report writing involves finding information, analyzing it and presenting it - each an improvable skill. Chairing a board meeting requires understanding the company's strategy in the deepest way, forming a coherent view of coming market changes and setting a tone for the discussion.

An important step is to build what the researchers call "mental models of your business" - pictures of how the elements fit together and influence one another. The more you work on it, the larger your mental models will become and the better your performance will grow. Andy Grove of Intel could keep a model of a whole world-changing technology industry in his head and adapt as needed. Bill Gates had the same knack: He could see at the dawn of the PC that his goal of a computer on every desk was realistic and would create an unimaginably large market. That's a lot to focus on for the benefits of deliberate practice - and worthless without one more requirement: Do it regularly, not sporadically.

Colvin concludes that for most people, work is hard enough without pushing even harder. Those extra steps are so difficult and painful they almost never get done. But if great performance were easy, it wouldn't be rare.