

## Practice does make perfect

### The C-Tip

BY STEVEN ST. PIERRE



We've all heard the saying, "practice makes perfect." So why is it that some of us continue to blame our lack of success in a particular specialty — be it music, golf, business — on a so-called lack of talent?

In his book, "Talent is Overrated — What Really Separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else," Geoff Colvin — senior editor-at-large at Fortune magazine — urges us to acknowledge that, yes, perhaps some are born with natural advantages in certain fields due to their family history and upbringing. But in every case of extraordinary achievement, there is also evidence of extraordinary drive, passion and practice.

Those who have achieved greatness all seem to have these factors in common: a mentor whom they admired and wanted to emulate; a structure that was conducive to fostering a specific result; and a long-term commitment to mastering their chosen craft.

Colvin stresses that to reach maximum level of performance in any field, one must follow a strict regimen of deliberate practice. Deliberate practice implies a much more concentrated and specific routine of practice than the usual methods of repetition. Rather, deliberate practice forces one to acknowledge one's flaws and practice long and hard to eliminate those flaws. Further, expert performers never stop deliberate practice, even

after they have achieved "expert" status.

If one is determined enough to use the strategies of deliberate practice, the possibilities for achievement are endless. Not only does deliberate practice increase your skills in your specialty area, but it also has been proven to improve your mental health and brainpower.

One study in 1978 conducted by a psychology lab at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pa., concluded that there is "apparently no limit to improvements in memory skill with practice"; the study's test subject exemplified "the remarkable potential of 'ordinary' adults and their amazing capacity for change with practice."

The unfortunate reality behind deliberate practice is that because it is so demanding, most people won't do it and won't get anywhere near their potential. Using the deliberate practice methods, however — methods designed to improve performance, allow for repetition, receive feedback, challenge you mentally, and make you work for it — combined with a "willingness to do it" will lead you one step closer to greatness.

Of course, everyone excels in different areas. If you are five feet tall, for example, you are never going to be an NFL lineman. But when it comes to nonphysical limitations on achievement, there are virtually none. Sure, you may excel in particular fields over others, but that is due more to your own interests and personality rather than your intelligence.

Deliberate practice is the powerful tool that enables great performers to "perceive more, know more, and remember more than most people," writes Colvin.

Deliberate practice extends beyond individuals and can be applied by any organiza-

tion, both out of its individual members and out of the organization as a whole.

In any organization, be it a team or a business, we seek individuals who will work hard and be the right fit. Studies have proven that all-stars do not a winning team make, but rather individuals who can trust one another and work well together. The sooner your organization begins developing people individually and as teams, the more difficult it will be for competitors to ever catch you.

There is one last secret to great performance and achievement, and that is passion.

Becoming a great performer takes years of sometimes boring, and often painful, deliberate practice.

To become an Olympic figure skater, for example, it takes an estimated 20,000 falls on your butt on cold, hard, ice before gaining any sort of fame or glory. So why do people do it? The simple answer — passion combined with an intrinsic desire to achieve.

In the end, Colvin teaches us a few simple but key lessons about success. You must believe that "if you do the work, properly designed, with intense focus for hours a day and years on end, your performance will grow dramatically better and eventually reach the highest levels," he writes. And what does all this prove? "That great performance is not reserved for a preordained few. It is available to you and to everyone."

If you're still not convinced, Curtis Martin, a recent inductee into the NFL Hall of Fame, had some wise words to share: "It's not necessarily what you achieve in life that matters most, but it's who you become in the process of those achievements that really matters."

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