



Talent is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else

Geoff Colvin

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Expanding on a landmark cover story in *Fortune*, a top journalist debunks the myths of exceptional performance.

One of the most popular *Fortune* articles in many years was a cover story called: "What It Takes to Be Great." Geoff Colvin offered new evidence that top performers in any field -- from Tiger Woods and Winston Churchill to Warren Buffett and Jack Welch -- are not determined by their inborn talents. Greatness doesn't come from DNA but from practice and perseverance honed over decades.

And not just plain old hard work, like your grandmother might have advocated, but a very specific kind of work. The key is how you practice, how you analyze the results of your progress and learn from your mistakes, that enables you to achieve greatness.

Now Colvin has expanded his article with much more scientific background and real-world examples. He shows that the skills of business: negotiating deals, evaluating financial statements, and all the rest, obey the principles that lead to greatness, so that anyone can get better at them with the right kind of effort. Even the hardest decisions and interactions can be systematically improved.

This new mind-set, combined with Colvin's practical advice, will change the way you think about your job and career, and will inspire you to achieve more in all you do.

Talent is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else Details

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Robert says

Colvin set out to answer this question: "What does great performance require?" In this volume, he shares several insights generated by hundreds of research studies whose major conclusions offer what seem to be several counterintuitive perspectives on what is frequently referred to as "talent." (See Pages 6-7.) In this context, I am reminded of Thomas Edison's observation that "vision without execution is hallucination." If Colvin were asked to paraphrase that to indicate his own purposes in this book, my guess (only a guess) is that his response would be, "Talent without deliberate practice is latent" and agrees with Darrell Royal that "potential" means "you ain't done it yet." In other words, there would be no great performances in any field (e.g. business, theatre, dance, symphonic music, athletics, science, mathematics, entertainment, exploration) without those who have, through deliberate practice developed the requisite abilities.

Colvin duly acknowledges that deliberate practice "is a large concept, and to say that it explains everything would be simplistic and reductive." Colvin goes on to say, "Critical questions immediately present themselves: What exactly needs to be practiced? Precisely how? Which specific skills or other assets must be acquired? The research has revealed answers that generalize quite well across a wide range of fields." Even after committing all of my time and attention to several years of deliberate practice, under the direct supervision of the best instructor (e.g. Hank Haney, Butch Harman, or David Leadbetter) I probably could not reduce my handicap to zero but I could lower it under those conditions. Colvin's insights offer a reassurance that almost anyone's performance can be improved, sometimes substantially, even if it isn't world-class. Talent is overrated if it is perceived to be the most important factor. It isn't. In fact, talent does not exist unless and until it is developed...and the only way to develop it is (you guessed it) with deliberate practice. When Ben Hogan was asked the "secret" to playing great golf, he replied, "It's in the dirt."

Throughout his narrative, Colvin inserts clusters of insights and recommendations that literally anyone can consider and then act upon to improve her or his individual performance as well as helping to improve the performance of a team of which she or he is a member. For example:

1. Attributes of deliberate practice (Pages 66-72)
2. What top performers perceive that others do not notice (Pages 89-94)
3. Benefits of having a "rich mental model"(Pages 123-124)
4. Rules for peak performance that "elite" organizations follow (Pages 128-136)
5. Misconceptions about innovation and creativity (Pages 149-151)
6. How innovators become great (Pages 159-161)
7. How to make organizations innovative (Pages 162-166)
8. What homes can teach organizations (Pages 172-175)
9. The "drivers" of great performance (Pages 187-193)
10. How some organizations "blow it" (Pages 194-198)

Corbin provides a wealth of research-driven information that he has rigorously examined and he also draws upon his own extensive and direct experience with all manner of organizations and their C-level executives.

E says

Telling examination of the power of practicing

Author Geoff Colvin rejects the popular notion that the genius of a Tiger Woods, a Mozart or a Warren Buffett is inborn uniquely to only a few individuals. He cites research that refutes the value of precocious, innate ability and he provides numerous examples of the intensely hard work that high achievement demands. Best performers' intense, "deliberate practice" is based on clear objectives, thorough analysis, sharp feedback, and layered, systematic work. getAbstract finds that Colvin makes his case clearly and convincingly. He shows readers how to use hard work and deliberate practice to improve their creative achievements, their work and their companies. The author's argument about the true nature of genius is very engaging, but, in the end, he makes it clear that the requirements of extraordinary achievement remain so stringent that society, after all, turns out to have very few geniuses. Colvin admits that the severe demands of true, deliberate practice are so painful that only a few people master it, but he also argues that you can benefit from understanding the nature of great performance. Perhaps, he says, the real gift of genius is the capacity for determined practice. You can improve your ability to create and innovate once you accept that even talent isn't a free ticket to great performance. It takes work.

Steve says

A continuation of the discussion I first read about in Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers: The Story Of Success* - are high-achieving performers naturally talented or is it the result of hard work? *Talent Is Overrated* sides with Gladwell in that hard work is the defining bit and pure, native talent is truly hard to find, but it goes farther in examining the *type* of hard work necessary to produce greatness, specifically, "deliberate practice": identifying weak areas and following a comprehensive plan to improve those weaknesses and improve overall performance.

This is easy(-ier) to do - not easy, but easier - in sports and music, fields with fairly narrowly-defined competencies and obvious end goals: throw the ball, run the ball, perform the music. These fields also often have a readily-available supply of "coaches," third party observers who understand the field and can apply a critical eye to performance and weaknesses. It gets harder when you try to apply it to other occupations that have much more nebulously-defined skills and goals.

Colvin does a good job of making the case for deliberate practice, an okay job of explaining what it is and how to utilize it, but then spends a lot of time trying to make a business case for it at the executive and corporate level, and these last bits weaken the book, in my opinion, because right now the challenge is to figure out how to apply these principles at all on an individual level, not how to do it for groups, which is that much harder.

So, three stars - it could use more detail on how individuals could apply this in their lives. But still very interesting and worthwhile.

Trevor says

This was surprising in some ways. The start of it is pretty much Gladwell's *Outliers*, the end is pretty well *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* and the middle is about the least interesting part of the book. So, I guess I would recommend those two books rather than this one, except that there were some things about this that made the whole thing worthwhile.

I'm more convinced than ever that talent is overrated. What is talent? Essentially it is directly connected with performance – talented people are people who can perform well. So if you are trying to improve performance

looking at the 'innate' abilities of the performer is probably the least interesting and least worthwhile thing to do. Surely the best way to improve performance is to look at what high performers DO and work out how to help weaker performers do that.

Much of this book is about the benefits of deliberate practice – which is, doing stuff that is not fun to do so as to be able to be successful at something. That is, piano practice or pumping iron or swimming at 5am. However, I think he overdoes the 'this is hard and horrible but needs to be done' stuff. The real lesson is that if it is meaningful and is directed at a goal the person wants to go in then it will not be horrible. Meaning is key here.

The bits of this I liked the most were the little anecdotes he says along the way. My favourite of these as the CEO who would find out who was going to be having a birthday on his visits and during his talk would tell staff, "It's Jane's birthday – sing her her song." And they would all sing Happy Birthday! And then he would say, once they had finished. "Look, that was okay, but only just okay – I want you to sing it again but this time do it better." And then there would be a pause while everyone tries to work out what 'better' means. I loved this story so much. Sometimes feedback isn't just poor, it actually stops performance altogether. If you know you need to improve but have no idea how or what might help you are going to tend to give up.

His stress on learning is hard is the opposite of what I really believe – learning is generally effortless, practice may be hard, but if it is meaningful the 'hard / easy' opposition really doesn't apply. I know that it is hard to feel more alive than after 'getting it'. What gets called 'hard work' is often just play that requires lots of focus.

So, this was okay – but I would recommend the other two books first. They are both better written than this one (not that this one is not competently done) and much more engaging.

Alex says

I read this as a primer to the study of expertise, which is something I'd like to learn more about academically. So my rating of 3 stars is more a reflection of my intrinsic interest in the topic than the quality of the book. As a piece of writing and reporting, I'd put it at 2 stars--Colvin is at his best when he is explaining Anders Ericsson's research, but a bit out of his depth when he tries to draw independent conclusions.

Like several popularizations of social psychology theories I've read, there is one great idea that has been mostly expressed within 100 pages. I was glad Colvin included a section on 'flow' at the end, because one of the main tenets of his early chapters is that deliberate practice is "not fun." Flow directly contradicts this, providing evidence that people often enjoy the rigors of practice. Colvin didn't take the time to edit out his earlier note about fun, but at least he takes into account another research perspective.

I was also bothered by a hypothesis he suggests later on that we can develop child prodigies by praising children before they have done well. I understand his logic--children who are praised often practice more and become more motivated because of the praise, and there is a temptation to want to jump-start the virtuous circle of practice -> praise -> practice with a careful praise intervention. However, as the self-esteem movement has taught us, praise disconnected from performance creates a culture that is afraid of failure, expects positive assessment without effort, and seriously impairs the natural ability of children--and adults--to learn from their mistakes. But that is a small section, and I'm nitpicking.

The best part of the book was the thrill of the first 100 pages--where Ericsson's incredible research shines

through and readers are instilled with a passion for hard work as a method of betterment. After reading this, I was inspired to go out and take notes on how I would be able to practice everything I wanted to learn. The distinction between simple repetition or homework and deliberate practice--with its properties of feedback, focus on skills, and continual mental focus--also helps explain what a good practice regimen should involve.

If I were to recommend this book, I would tell people just to read the first 100 pages and skim any other chapters that seem interesting. But I would recommend those first 100 pages.

Tom LA says

Insightful analysis of excellence and excellent performance in any field. The point of the book is in the title: the concept of "innate talent", when it comes to great performance, is overrated in our society, because the number 1 element that generates great performance is something else. Taking the term from a paper published years ago by someone else, the author identifies this "holy grail" of excellence in "deliberate performance", that means: whoever is ready to spend more time than the others outside of his comfort zone, and work constantly hard at improving his skills, will eventually excel. Perfect example, even though not quoted by this book, is Jiro from "Jiro's dream of sushi", a documentary about the pursuit of excellence. I felt the concept could have been presented in less chapters and with less words, but I do think this book goes beyond the usual "et voilà: here is common sense dressed up as a great new discovery" business books (99% of them). It's not just "hard work" that generates the best performances, it's something more specific, deliberate, and painful.

Negatives: chapter 10 promises to look at "why" some people accept to go through terrible training processes and most people don't, but it doesn't even scratch the surface. There could be a gene that determines the willingness to excel, or it could be that you get that drive while living your life. Truth is, nobody will know until we better understand how the brain works. Also, the author never seems to have any understanding or empathy at all for the majority of human beings, who normally get into comfortable daily patterns and don't give a crap about constant learning and achieving excellence.

However, the liberating principle by which virtually anyone can achieve excellent performance is a breath of fresh air, in a time when still too many people, while watching their favorite NBA or football player on TV, turn around and say to their kids "Wow, that guy is a genius! Why didn't God give those skills to your daddy instead?? We would be millionaires now!".

Nick says

There have been a number of books lately that attempt to disabuse us of the myth of talent -- that some people are born gifted, like Mozart or Tiger Woods. When you look into the details of such cases, you almost always find a passionate parent, a good understanding of the field of expertise, and hours and hours of practice. Both Mozart and Woods had all of these. Colvin asks us to replace the idea that people are born gifted with the idea that anyone who's willing to put in the time can do wonders. He advocates the principle (developed elsewhere) of deliberate practice, which means focusing on the stuff you don't do well, and crunching it endlessly until you get better. Doesn't sound like fun, but then greatness rarely is. Even the Beatles put in thousands of hours of practice in German clubs, fueled by amphetamines, beer, and cigarettes, catcalled by the crowd, and occasionally hit with physical estimations of their abilities -- like beer bottles thrown by angry audience members. You get good by getting good. Get to work or give up and watch TV. It's your choice. An unpopular point of view, to be sure, for everyone except perhaps Tiger mothers.

Andy says

This book is overrated.

After meandering for several chapters through what does NOT lead to high performance, Colvin finally gets around to arguing that the secret is "deliberate practice." This turns out basically to be Flow, so I would recommend just reading that book, which is by the scientist who originally described the concept, and is I think a much more interesting and useful work.

Beyond that, Colvin mixes apples and oranges in terms of what "talent" means. Winning at something isn't the same as having a talent; you can win by cheating and this happens in sports and business all the time. Another confusion is the difference between playing games and making great discoveries. While he gives anecdotes to show that you can train anyone to be a chess grand master, it seems absurd to argue that you can train anyone to be Einstein. Only a small part of the book is devoted to how to get better at useful tasks (like doctors reading X-rays correctly) and here his amazing insight is that experienced workers are better at this than new trainees. Wow!

Constantine says

I couldn't put it down...(although the sections devoted to achieving world class excellence in the corporate realm did drag ...revelatory of my lack of interest in the business of business). It is a very straightforward read: competent prose, a degree of research based, that provides insight into what separates those elite individuals at the very top of their chosen fields (golf, football, sales, music, chess, invention, chairmanship of mega corporations, comedy, physics, medical analysis, etc). Colvin's main point...talent is, overrated (title is the premise)!

The real secret lies in the concept of deliberate practice...for at least 10,000 total hours. Before you run out and begin your 20 hour a week, decade long regimen of practice...make absolutely sure you know exactly what subsets of skills are necessary to your endeavor...otherwise you're just spinning your wheels. It is not the practicing per se that is essential, it is the kind of practice you do. Tangentially, your prime years are probably between the ages of 8-18 (unless you are going to trump the genius /physicists of the world in their accomplishments). The role of parenting and, after that, the luxury of having world class mentors, coaches and teachers is a biggie, too...although you can get better at your obsession with age, which is a comfort to those of us that did not grow up in an ideal genius-producing environment, have a dad uniquely disposed and prepared for his role in raising a phenom (Tiger Woods) and are way past the age of 18. You'll also need that will-o-the-wisp called intrinsic motivation (Colvin does offer some interesting insight on the slippery psychology of that human trait). You might want to prepare yourself for the ugly side of this kind of pursuit of greatness (narcissism, ego centrism and narrowness can play a role in your development of world class ranking....and probably, divorce.

As a Junior High teacher, I, somewhat quixotically, try to instill the Three "D's" in my students: Desire, Dedication, and Discipline. Colvin's book gave me more food for thought on role these essential dimensions of the human psyche play in fostering greatness.

In his final paragraphs, Colvin states that: "Ultimately, we cannot get to the very heart of this matter; we cannot explain fully and generally why certain people put themselves through the years or decades of punishing, intensive daily work that eventually makes them world-class great. We've reached the point where we are left without guidance from the scientists and must proceed by looking in the only place we have left, which is within ourselves."

Good read for anyone that aspires to greatness, wants to be better at something, admires greatness, teaches or mentors, is in a leadership position, has children.

Mike says

The title of this book should be 'Talent is Irrelevant,' as that's essentially the author's argument. I guess he wanted to hedge his bets, and he does grudgingly acknowledge (in the last few pages) that innate capacities *may* play some role in performance, particularly in regard to physical skills. But his constant assertion, which runs very much contrary to popular belief, is that there is no real evidence for innate or genetic abilities playing any role in the success of world-class performers.

What these performers do have in common is--surprise!--practice, and lots of it. Not just any practice, though; the key is what he terms 'deliberate practice'--the kind where you ruthlessly identify your weaknesses, then mindfully and persistently improve them with well-designed practice, then repeat that process for (ideally) many hours every day over a long period of time. It's the kind of practice that generally isn't any fun, which is why so few people do it in first place, much less stick with it over the long haul. The elite among us--those who are often seen as being touched by some 'divine spark,' somehow fundamentally more talented than us mere mortals--are simply those who have managed to stay in that 'deliberate practice' zone long enough.

The author cites luminaries mainly from sports and music--Jerry Rice, Tiger Woods, Yo-Yo Ma, Mozart--but his goal (as a writer from Fortune magazine) is to encourage business people to embrace the deliberate practice model. It's a worthwhile read for anyone, though (I'm a musician), even if it is the sort of book that can easily be boiled down to a few words ("Forget talent: just practice a lot, and practice well."). His point is that great performance is available to *anyone* who is willing to put in the work; I found that very encouraging, and his examples inspiring. It renewed my drive to make the most out of the limited practice time I have by focusing relentlessly on my squeaky wheels (I have a lot of them) and setting specific, attainable goals for myself, not just a general aim of "getting better," which is too vague and open-ended to get my butt in the practice chair with any kind of determination. For that alone, this book was well worth the time.

Kate says

The takeaway from this approachable book is that a particular kind of practice--what Colvin refers to as "deliberate practice"--is what allows mere mortals (who include all of us, even Mozart, he argues) to painstakingly climb toward world-class performance in our respective fields. Colvin spends a few chapters arguing that talent, an inborn gift most of us assume is responsible for world-class performance, is a slippery concept whose cause-and-effect relationship to excellence hasn't been born out consistently in studies. Intelligence is important, but not in the way we typically think. Instead, personally designed practice regimens (which he spends the middle part of the book explaining), in which we are periodically evaluated by a mentor, teacher, or other source of insightful feedback, allow us to work on a skill set just beyond our current comfort zones. Much of this work is solitary, and physically and mentally taxing. Almost all of it is remote from the "game-time" exercise of the skill; that is, you don't become a great football player by playing football, but by conditioning in the particular set of skills you need during the game, and by reviewing your past performances with an eye to adjusting your practice routine. Excellence can be attained only by spending countless hours over many years doing this kind of grueling practice, Colvin argues. There are no shortcuts, and the most direct route is to start young and keep working maniacally as one ages. Excellence, he writes, is much more equal-opportunity than we thought, but most of us are not equal to its

challenge.

Brooke says

"Expanding on a landmark cover story in Fortune, a top journalist debunks the myths of exceptional performance." I think anytime I read that a book is an expansion of an article, I should just read the article. I liked this book but I think I could have gotten as much out of the short version. It's similar to Malcolm Gladwell's theory about how people need 10,000 hours of practice to become exceptional, which is something I think about a lot. This author, Colvin, talks about "deliberate practice" which is a specific kind of professionally designed, not fun, practice that creates world-class professionals/artists/performers. It helps to have dedicated parents to get you started on your skill early in life and you have to work ridiculously hard but Colvin's assertion is that most "geniuses" had/have a perfect combination of tutelage and hard work more than an inborn talent that creates world-class results.

Robyn Blaber says

Well, I think I could have written this book and made it a lot shorter. 3 stars is perhaps low considering that the research was good... and that I agree with the author's findings. It's just that the conclusion was obvious. How do you advance to a world class at some skill? Malcolm Gladwell explained that in his book outliers; simply spend 10,000 hours at a thing. You'll become a master.

Colvin points out that many people spend years... 10,000 hours plus at a task, however they never achieve world-class mastery of their skill. What is the difference between these mediocre performers and their world-class contemporaries? The difference here is boiled down to "deliberate practice". The kind of practice or training that focuses on individual aspects of a certain skill. Every sports practitioner and musician knows about this kind of practice as do I. Colvin makes a case for using deliberate practice in other fields as well, business and science. It's a strong argument and as a former musician, I found it easy to agree with his idea strongly... but he could have stated it in a single chapter. That being said, my review will save you the time of reading this book. How do you get to Carnegie Hall? (Deliberate) Practice!

Mark Fallon says

One of, if not THE best book I read this year. Some of this book supported theories I've read in other books (the "10-year rule" and "deliberate practice"), yet Colvin presented the ideas backed with more research. This book reinforced my beliefs on the benefits of coaching. Colvin also pointed out specific ways to apply this knowledge to business.

The last chapter, "Where Does Passion Come From?", has inspired me to add the books and articles from the "Resources" section to my reading list.

Few books have inspired to change my actions immediately. "Talent is Overrated" is one of them.

David says

This is a fun book that starts out in a vein similar to Malcolm Gladwell's "Outliers". Later the emphasis of the book changes, and becomes a self-help book. For best performance, the name of the game is "practice", and not any old practice--it must be focused, deliberate, planned practice. This practice is not just for musicians; it is for every type of career, in business, sales, marketing, engineering--you name it, practice is what it takes. This type of practice can be mentally taxing, and very time-consuming--it normally takes years before a truly excellent performance is honed.

Colvin brings up the examples of Mozart and Tiger Woods. Neither of them was born with innate talent. They were both born to fathers who were both experts in their respective fields (music and golf), and started teaching their boys at a very early age. Lots of hard work and specially designed practice were the keys to their top-notch performance.

This may not be the best book on the topic--the subject is covered in a number of other books. But it is competently written, and for most part, it is engaging.
