

KEEPING YOUR SANITY BY TAKING YOUR TIME AT THE START

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When we see someone who truly excels at what they do, one quality often jumps out: they make it look easy. Like Roger Federer above.

But what is it that gives us the impression of ease?

They seem to take their time. Even when you're seeing an elite athlete making lightning quick moves, it seems to be moving more slowly than the actual elapsed time. They're not panicked, they're not forcing things; the moves look fluid.

When someone has reached a state of mastery, with all the deliberate practice that requires, they've accumulated a vast store of knowledge and experience in their working memory. So when they get to work, they don't need to take time to look things up; or when it's a physical skill like athletics or music, they don't have to think about the movements themselves.

Because of this, they also don't feel rushed to act. They have time to orient to the problem or the task, and before they take action, they will have scanned their working memory for the information they need – the facts, the experience, the causes and effects they know – and then when they do act, they do so magnificently.

In my college astronomy course, our professor brought in a guest speaker one day who had once shared an office with Albert Einstein. He told us how Einstein had been on vacation for a couple of weeks, and during this time this (then very young) professor was working on a complex formula on the board in their office. He was stumped by one section of the formula, and had not made any headway on it for most of those two weeks.

When Einstein returned, he was curious about the formula, and he began asking what seemed, to this professor, to be some very simple – and kind of dumb – questions. This went on for about twenty minutes, during which time this professor was beginning to seriously question the great genius of Albert Einstein.

But then, all of a sudden, Einstein said, "Oh, well then..." and he promptly completed the formula, easily solving the problem that had flummoxed the professor for two weeks.

When approaching a problem, a true expert will approach it with curiosity, take their time, orient to the situation, and get to know the problem first, before they act.

Novices, on the other hand, will tend to jump in quickly, getting to work on the problem *before they really understand what they're dealing with*.

Those who have spent a lot of *time* at their craft, but without the kind of *deliberate practice* we talked about in last week's column on Understanding Excellence, will also tend to move too quickly to action – because they assume they know it all already, and so they have suspended their curiosity in favor of their familiar toolkit.

How does this help us if we don't actually have expertise yet?

As novices, what we're missing is the vast store of accumulated knowledge in our working memory. That takes

a long time of deliberate practice to achieve. But we can do the next best thing: when faced with a problem, be patient, do some research, ask advice, find the information and the understanding that we need, *before we act*.

A true expert will quickly sort through their internal working memory before taking action, but they will still take their time with it, orienting completely, and with abundant curiosity to the problem before diving in – just like Albert Einstein did with that “unsolvable” problem.

When we’re not yet an expert, we need to take even more time and learn what we need to know first before acting. This will be slower and less reliable than would be the case for somebody with decades of experience of growth through deliberate practice. To get the best results given that reality, spend some extra time learning and orienting to the problem first.

As a novice, we will also experience more failures – because not only do we not know a lot, we also don’t yet know what we don’t know. Getting comfortable with making mistakes and experiencing failure is essential to gaining the expertise we need over time.

Thomas Edison famously said: *I have not failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work.*

In a study on organizational learning, Vinit Desai and Peter Madsen found “... that the knowledge gained from success was often fleeting while knowledge from failure stuck around for years,” Desai said. “But there is a tendency in organizations to ignore failure or try not to focus on it. Managers may fire people or turn over the entire workforce while they should be treating the failure as a learning opportunity.”

Any great innovation or accomplishment – including the accomplishment of our own expertise over time – is dependent on how strong we are in *facing failure*, learning from it, and solving the new problems that it presents. This takes emotional resilience; and emotional resilience takes practice.

Expertise takes years of deliberate practice, paying attention to what works, what doesn’t work, and painstakingly, purposefully searching for our own blind spots. A big part of doing this successfully is accepting and learning from our own failures.

As we can see, to get really good at something takes a lot of time and energy – which means that it really has to matter to us

But you’ll also notice an essential ingredient: *Curiosity*. If you want to get really good at anything, bring with you a vibrant curiosity. Every problem is an opportunity to learn; every setback is an opportunity to grow. With each failure, we have the opportunity to gain much more understanding than if we were always successful.

Curiosity is a spirit and an orientation that allows us to explore a problem, a concept, an opportunity, with much greater depth. Taking the time to enjoy the process of learning that every new problem brings is the most resilient and effective stance from which to gain greater expertise. (There is a lot more to say about this, which will come in a future column.)

Like Einstein wondering about seemingly obvious details in the story above, take your time at the start. Look to understand the problem you’re dealing with, your strategy, and your own tendencies as though you don’t fully understand them yet. That’s how you’ll find the treasures that will build your wealth of expertise.

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can help you to take charge of your habits and your life in ways you may not have thought possible.

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