

KEEPING YOUR SANITY BY UNDERSTANDING EXCELLENCE

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Air Jordan

How good do you want to become at what you do? In the next several columns we'll seek out the path to gaining expertise in whatever you wish to master.

We can learn a lot about gaining our own expertise from seeing how the great masters gained theirs.

Back in the 19th century, Sir Francis Galton in his book "*Hereditary Genius*," argued that performance of skills for mature adults improves rapidly at first, but then at some point "Maximal performance becomes a rigidly determinate quantity." What limits any significant improvement beyond that, in Galton's view, was whatever nature endowed us with.

Other researchers – as far back as 1899 – added to this that it may take over 10 years to become an expert. The idea that this is a relatively orderly process, moving from novice to intermediate to expert, led to the belief that we can judge expertise through someone's social reputation, education, accumulated knowledge, and length of experience.

There's truth to this, of course, but it's missing something important.

Because it turns out that people's level of training and experience don't always predict high performance. From psychologists to software designers, to wine experts, to decision makers and forecasters on investing, research has shown that the amount of time spent in the field is not a reliable measure of performance.

Something else is essential, which K. Anders Erickson and his co-editors map out in their tome, "*Expertise and Expert Performance*."

What makes the difference between a Mozart or a Beethoven and somebody who can play quite well? What

makes the difference between a Michael Jordan and a good overall basketball player?

There is a role for raw talent, of course. You have to be capable of accomplishing such feats as these incredible masters to begin with. There is a role for genius and natural ability. There is also the role played by parents and mentors from an early age, which is usually significant.

But there are plenty of people with loads of talent and ability who never, ever come near their potential. There are a lot of people with very high IQs who never really challenge their mental capacities.

Everybody knows that we have to practice something to get good at it. But there are plenty of people who spend years and years at their instrument or profession or sport, but who reach a level of basic competence and go no farther. The now famous 10,000-hour rule, or ten years of experience, doesn't apply when we just go through the motions doing what we already know.

The one element that is most crucial for developing and maintaining an exceptional level of performance is *deliberate, conscious, and concentrated practice*.

Deliberate practice involves actively, purposely focusing on each precise skill of our endeavor, paying attention to the details, and consciously adjusting and modifying what we do so that we are bringing out the very best outcome that we possibly can.

This is hard work, and it can be emotionally challenging to consistently open ourselves to the kind of feedback and criticism that it sometimes takes to keep our skills growing.

With most everyday skills like typing, driving a car, or learning how to play a game like tennis well enough to have fun with it, there is an initial learning period, which involves intensive focus and attention to detail.

But the goal for most of these skills is not excellence, but the ability to perform them easily and nearly automatically. This usually takes no more than about 50 hours to get to the point where mistakes become rare, and the performance is relatively smooth and competent.

Once these things become automatic, we become used to performing them without reflecting on or re-evaluating what we're doing – and when we stop bringing that level of consciousness to our skills, we continue to drive in the habits we've built just as they are. Once our habits are dug in deeply, it's much harder to then change, grow, or fine-tune our skills.

At some point, many people stop consciously, deliberately honing their skills, and settle into a fixed level of competence. This is how professionals with decades of experience can underperform those who have been at it for far less time – they stop growing, and spend their time practicing what they already know.

Can you remember the intensity of focus, the conscious awareness, and the level of fatigue that you experienced when you first were learning to drive a car?

You probably don't think about it much now. You get in and drive. Even though you may have decades of experience at it, you're probably not really much improved from when you had been driving only a couple of years – for better or worse...

But to really master something, and to continue to improve our level of expertise, we need to maintain something like that initial level of conscious, deliberate practice that we brought when we were first learning to drive.

An expert basketball player won't just go shoot baskets. They will spend time and energy paying attention to the

fine points of each and every shot, bringing their total focus and awareness to the minute movements and body positioning that allows them the most accurate and consistent execution of that particular kind of shot.

And they'll keep doing this throughout their playing career.

When you see a much older musician who is still performing at a virtuoso level, you can be assured that it's not just because they're older and have some kind of magical wisdom – it's because they continue to deliberately and painstakingly think about and practice every element of their instrument.

The same principle holds true for any field of expertise.

So now, how can you hone your own skills so that you become better a year from now than you are now – and continue to improve those skills, for as long as it's worth the time and energy to do so? Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Study every aspect of your desired area of expertise, and continue to study as long as these skills have relevance for you.
- Stay curious about everything that might impact your knowledge and skills in this area.
- Look for, and question, your own limitations, assumptions, and blind spots.
- Pay attention to the effects of your actions, and be open to changing (or sticking with) your thinking and your strategy, even when your “usual way” points elsewhere.

If you want to become excellent at something, whether it be your work, your play, or your relationships, the key is to purposefully, consciously, and deliberately practice everything that goes into doing it well.

You don't have to become Michael Jordan, Mozart or Beethoven in order to become excellent at what you do. Use this principle of deliberate practice, and find the level of expertise that suits you.

PS: My new course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* can help you with this part of your life in much greater detail, with deep understanding and practical skills for mastering these systems and living well. And *A Master's Course in Happiness* can help you to take charge of your habits and your life in ways you may not have thought possible.

And I'm now offering both at a lower price.

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