

Title: “Talent Is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers From Everybody Else”

Author: Geoff Colvin

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Reading time: 6.5 hours

Reading rating: 9 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy).

Overall rating: 4 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding).

Geoff Colvin, Senior Editor at Large for Fortune Magazine, painstakingly dissects enormous amounts of scientific research in the field of performance improvement and utilizes case studies of famous athletes, musicians, entrepreneurs, Nobel Prize winners, scientists and prodigies to lay the foundation for his main thesis: “the evidence shows also that by understanding how a few, become great, anyone can become better. Above all, what the evidence shouts most loudly is striking, liberating news: that great performance is not reserved for a preordained few. It is available to you and everyone”.

He begins “Talent is Overrated” by examining the traditional notions of what it takes to be extraordinarily great in any field or endeavor. Those popular beliefs range from being born with a God-given gift (divine-spark theory) to having a genetic predisposition (not one gnomonic study has identified any specific talent gene) to the fortuitous discovery of an innate gift for talent early in life (natural-gift theory). Yet, over the past two millennia, the research clearly demonstrates that our knowledge about the genesis of great performance has gradually shifted to the point where our original beliefs have now been reduced to mere mythology.

But, what about the perceived genius of wunderkinds like Mozart and Tiger Woods? Weren’t they born with divine gifts, talents and innate abilities? Not exactly. Colvin brilliantly and systematically dismantles those myths. Rather, the research clearly proves that talent alone is highly overrated as the essential ingredient for great performance. A great many world-class performers do not have an off-the-charts IQ or a pristine photographic memory. In fact, many have average intelligence and absolutely no superhuman abilities.

“What really separates world-class performers from everybody else”, as the subtitle states? Researchers identify the secret sauce as deliberate practice, something that is not performed in our workplaces by most people, nor by the neurosurgeon at our local hospital nor by the scratch golfer at our country clubs. Certainly, there are many of these stars who are very good at what they do but they never achieve greatness as true masters in their field.

In case after case, Colvin recounts the studies of our greatest performers and how they reached the pinnacle of success through deliberate practice. Perhaps the quintessential case is that of storied NFL wide receiver, Jerry Rice, whose practice regimen was so difficult and so deliberate, his trainers were afraid to release it to his own teammates for fear of causing them injury.

In explaining what deliberate practice is the author is careful to explain what it is not. Practice does not make perfect. Repetition, repetition and more repetition is not the answer, either. Instead, it consists of five basis elements:

- It’s specifically designed to improve performance.

- It must be repeated a lot where both the amount of repetition and the type of activity are carefully calculated.
- It requires continuous feedback by a teacher, coach or mentor.
- It must be highly demanding mentally.
- It isn't fun.

Colvin argues in his second major thesis that the C-suite must do a better job of developing their people. Some companies like GE, Whirlpool, P & G, Lilly and General Mills do apply these principles of great performance, thereby gaining a clear competitive advantage. He also stresses that small companies should and can do the same.

Colvin is an opportunist who by implication suggests that companies with low and nonperforming cultures hire him as an expert consultant. Notwithstanding, he is a talented writer who synthesized a plethora of academic studies and biographical minutiae into quite an informative and enjoyable read.

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