

Book Review

Ericsson, Anders and Pool, Robert. *Peak: How to master almost anything*. Penguin Canada. 2016.

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Have you ever been so completely wowed by someone's ability – in sports, music, acting, public speaking or leadership – that you're left asking, 'How is that even possible?' Well, according to Anders Ericsson, author of *Peak: How to master anything*, you don't need mystical notions of divine inspiration or innate human genius to explain seemingly unbelievable feats of human performance. We are all, according to Ericsson, capable of extraordinary human performance if we just spend enough time practicing.

If this all sounds eerily familiar it's probably because you've heard a variant of this thesis in Malcolm Gladwell's 2011 bestseller *Outliers*. Gladwell based his '10,000 Hour Rule' – the 'rule' that it takes 10,000 hours to become expert in any given domain – on Ericsson's research. But he only told half the story, according to Ericsson. This book, written by Ericsson himself and his co-writer Robert Pool, tells the other half, in detail, with countless examples that illustrate exactly *how* those 10,000 hours (and it's not always 10,000 hours, because not every domain of expertise is equally complex) need to be spent if you want to become a world-class expert.

The central claim in *Peak* is that superior performance is a result of 'deliberate practice,' which Ericsson distinguishes from 'naïve practice' and 'purposeful practice.'

Naïve practice – simply doing an activity

Purposeful practice - doing an activity that is outside your comfort zone, with a specific goal in mind

Deliberate practice - doing an activity that is outside your comfort zone, with a specific goal in mind, informed by expertise

Naïve practice is simply doing an activity. You learn how to play tennis, for instance, and then you just play tennis. There are very real limits to how much better you will get at tennis if you do this, according to Ericsson's research. In fact, your game is likely to deteriorate over time if you don't consciously do anything to improve it.

Purposeful practice, on the other hand, is doing an activity that is outside your comfort zone and with a specific goal in mind. Continuing with the tennis example, you might develop a purposeful practice regime around your backhand. You realize you don't use your backhand enough, and you'd like to build more backhand strength. So you get somebody to return balls to you and consistently use your backhand for a couple of days. As a result, you become more comfortable with your backhand and build strength. In this instance you're getting out of your comfort zone (using your backhand when you'd rather not) with a specific goal in mind (to build strength).

That's what most of us consider a good enough practice regime. But it's not optimal, according to Ericsson, because it doesn't sufficiently capitalize on the expertise of others. There may be a trick to a great backhand that neither you nor your practice partner are aware of. If you had an experienced coach or teacher sharing their expertise with you, you might learn how to hold and angle the racket for optimal returns, how to distinguish between different kinds of spin on balls coming at you, or countless other nuances of a great backhand, that would allow you to improve more quickly.

That's where deliberate practice comes in. Deliberate practice is doing an activity that is outside your comfort zone, with a specific goal in mind, informed by expertise. To again return to the tennis example, an expert tennis coach will not only know everything there is to know about backhands, and be able to share that with you, but will also know how to push the body outside its comfort zone just enough that you build strength, while stopping short of injury. In short, an experienced tennis coach has been there, done that, and can jump start your progress in a way that ensures you are getting the absolute best bang for your buck when it comes to the practice time you put in.

What an expert coach brings to the practice of a skill is experience – and in particular the experience of how to think about a particular activity. Ericsson calls these thinking tools mental representations. The more sophisticated and efficient our mental representations, the better our performance will be.

A good example of this can be seen in a TED talk given by Boston pops conductor Benjamin Zander. Illustrating his points at the piano, he shows how a young piano student's conception of a piece of music becomes increasingly complex, beginning with a series of discrete notes of differing duration and pitch, before becoming a series of notes arranged in meaningful relationship to each other, before becoming a phrase with a beginning, middle and end. Each one of these three stages occurs as a result of a change in mental representation; and without a teacher or coach encouraging the student to perform a more complete musical phrase this change in mental representation would likely never occur.

(I'm reminded here of a story my godfather told me, of a successful entrepreneur who, after selling his company for a tidy sum, set himself the task of teaching himself the piano. He worked hard at it, day after day, year after year, until he could play a Bach fugue perfectly – or so he thought. Buoyed by his success, he booked himself a lesson, only to discover he'd substantially missed the point of the music, his performance barely indistinguishable from how a computer might interpret the notes on the page.)

Deliberate practice is thus key to becoming a world-class performer because not only does it build capacity by setting achievable goals that are outside your comfort zone (as purposeful practice does) but in addition prevents you from re-inventing the wheel. It is this built-in capitalization on the experience and expertise of others in deliberate practice that enables human performance to continually improve over time. Runners run faster and tennis players serve faster today than they ever did in the past because increasingly complex mental representations of the human body and the methods by which it can be optimized for a particular skill are incorporated into deliberate practice, rendering each new generation superior in performance to its predecessor in an ongoing virtuous cycle.

So far we've been focusing on building sporting and musical skill, much of which resides in the body. But one of the most interesting discoveries of the new millennium is the extent to which the brain is adaptable in much the same way as the body is. We have long known that exercising certain parts of the body can lead to concrete changes, both in the musculature and in the skeleton. Well it turns out the same is true of our brains, albeit with some differences. Consistently practiced cognitive activities lead to measurable changes in the brain. The cerebellum, for instance, is larger in musicians than in non-musicians, and the more hours of training a musician has put in the

larger the cerebellum is. So just as exercising the body increases your ability to perform physical activity, so exercising the brain increases your ability to perform cognitive activity. The emphasis here is on ‘ability,’ because you are not just using more of what you already have. You are actually creating more capacity – or, as Ericsson puts it, you are increasing your “talent.”

In established fields there is little debate about what excellence looks like. In tennis, for instance, excellence looks like winning Wimbledon and other grand slams. In music performance, although there’s more room for debate, excellence looks like speed, agility, musicality – all the things we associate with a virtuoso. It is these established measures of excellence that make deliberate practice possible, as we know exactly what we’re aiming for, and can call on recognized experts who have already reached the destination to help us get there.

But what of less established fields, where it’s not clear who the superior performers are. In these fields the criteria for excellence are more contested. Take popular music, for example. Who are the top performers there? The ones who sell the most records? The ones with the longest careers? The ones whose musical skills most closely resemble those of classical musicians? It’s not clear what the benchmark standard for excellence in popular music is, making it difficult to develop a deliberate practice regimen for anyone wanting to become a world-class popular musician.

This distinction between established and emerging fields of excellence is relevant to coaches because it raises the question ‘What are you coaching toward when you’re coaching?’ Are you coaching toward excellence in a field like classical music, where the benchmark standard for excellence is known, or are you coaching toward excellence in a field like popular music, where the benchmark standard for excellence is unknown? And how does the way you answer that question impact how you engage with your clients, particularly when it comes to making requests or assigning ‘homework’ with a practice component?

Let’s take leadership coaching as an example. If you think of leadership as an established field, where the criteria for excellence in leadership are well known, then a deliberate practice approach to leadership coaching makes sense. But if you think of leadership as an emerging or evolving field, with each new leader having to discover their own unique way of being a leader, then a deliberate practice approach is not an option.

Similarly for life coaching. If you believe there is a particular way of being human that is better than other ways of being human, and that there is an established path toward becoming that better kind of human being, then deliberate practice regimens can be incorporated into life coaching. But if there are no fixed criteria for how to live, no 'experts' in being human, then each of us has to figure it out for ourselves, with little or no role for deliberate practice in life coaching.

My sense is that coaching as it is currently theorized is conflicted in this regard. On the one hand it holds clients naturally creative, resourceful and whole, being careful to avoid any fixed criteria of excellence. And on the other hand it uses tools and assessments that contain within them, either implicitly or explicitly, fixed criteria for excellence.

Take the Leadership Circle Profile, for example. This assessment measures how reactive a leader you are, where reactivity is negatively correlated with leadership effectiveness. Leadership in this model is understood as an established field with recognized benchmarks, such that, at least according to Ericsson, anyone can become a great leader through deliberate practice.

Other coaching models, however, seem less directive. They reject benchmark standards in favor of a more internal process of self-discovery. Yet the tools these models use to support self-discovery often contain within them implicit benchmarks. Helping clients clarify their values, get clear on their life purpose, take multiple perspectives, and process emotions, is not value neutral. Embedded in that process are benchmark standards of what it means to be a 'better,' more 'evolved,' or 'optimal' human being (which includes knowing your values, being clear on your life purpose, being able to take multiple perspectives and process your emotions).

There are many more fascinating and thought-provoking ideas in this book than I have been able to cover here. With countless compelling stories drawn from his 30-year career researching outstanding performers, Ericsson makes the case for deliberate practice as the primary means of achieving excellence in any established field. The questions I'm left with after reading *Peak* are personal ones, though: Am I coaching in an emerging or an established field? And is it even possible to coach in an emerging field?