

Talent is Overrated

**by Geoff Colvin; Penguin Group (2010). \$16.00 (paperback), 234pp.
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Book Review by Cole J. Kupec, II

Talent is Overrated was written by Geoff Colvin, a distinguished journalist and current senior editor for *Fortune* magazine. He writes a column called "Value Driven" and is also a lead moderator in the *Fortune* Global Forum.

Colvin begins by exploring and diminishing the idea of talent being inherent in any individual from birth. He admits to physical capabilities and physical limitations holding people back from reaching the highest levels of performance. For example if you are 5 foot 2 inches tall, it is very unlikely that you will ever play in the NBA, regardless of how good a player you are.

Within the physical limitations Colvin suggests that it is possible to excel in fields with something he calls "deliberate practice." He rejects the idea that some people are born with natural talents or a "divine spark" that are not inherently physical. He goes one step further to suggest that "talent does not exist," but "if it does, it may be irrelevant." He insists that through deliberate practice anyone can become a great performer, including the field of project management.

So what is deliberate practice and how is it achieved? Colvin provides a number of examples from different fields including music, sports, chess, and business. Deliberate practice is a highly demanding, repeated form of practice that requires immense mental fortitude. It is not supposed to be fun and must be designed specifically for a particular individual with the goal of consistently improving performance past their previously perceived limits. Due to the nature of deliberate practice requiring mental fortitude, sheer amount of hard work, which implies a lack of fun, the participant must be passionate about the field or subject matter to which they want to excel or become a great performer. As Colvin writes, it comes down to "a question about what people decide to do with their lives and what kind of passion drives them." Often that passion requires a supportive environment that provides constructive feedback aimed at improving the performance of that individual.

The book explores how memory factors in to the inspiration of talent. He determines that memory, like anything else, is something that can be expanded with deliberate practice. There are examples of number memorization drills and how the mind can be naturally expanded for the purposes of memorizing information. One example was an experiment at Carnegie Mellon University where an undergraduate student was able to increase the number of randomly generated numbers that he could memorize and recite back from 22 single digit numbers to 82 after 250 hours of deliberate practice.

Colvin's book does not necessarily break ground on any new concepts in performance, but it does put the possible in a more easily digestible and achievable perspective. He points to research in the field and suggests that "we're more responsible for our own achievement than we thought." By understanding what it takes to become a great performer we can decide if our drive will be sufficient enough to get us to the highest pinnacle of that performance arena. Colvin refers to a finding by two Nobel Prize winners Herbert Simon and William Chase on page 61 of his book about a study of chess players. The study proposed "the ten-year rule" based on observations of the top ranks of chess players. The ten-year rule suggests that a ten year period of practice is the length of time it takes to become a great performer in any one thing. Even as the age of the top level grandmaster chess players continues to drop, with the youngest being 12 years and 7 months old, "the ten-year rule" seems to hold true. (see footnote, Magnificent Magnus, 2004)

Colvin admittedly writes the book to cater to a business and organizational performance audience. This includes the project management audience. He discusses how the principles of deliberate practices work when applied to organizations. The book argues that the need for greater performers continues to increase as standards of performance continue to rise due to a more global economy and global competition. The scarce resource today is not monetary capital, it is human ability. With a scarcity of human ability, companies are under great pressure to ensure that their employees are as developed as is humanly possible. The problem is that no one is sure what the limits of development are. Colvin argues that these "are reasons enough for organizations to start applying the principles of great performance in a big way," and I agree. He suggests that companies would benefit if they can find ways to develop leaders within their jobs and understand the critical role of candid feedback, a necessary skill set for project managers.

Colvin discusses the need to develop works through inspiration and not authority. These again are not ground breaking or new ideas, but are much easier said than done. The difficulty isn't in identifying the need and placement of great performers so much as it is in implementing these principles from an organizational perspective to develop great performance. In a business setting there is often little time to repeat a task over and over again that may be critical to leadership development. For instance, stopping a meeting halfway through and restarting it to try a different approach simply isn't practical or productive. However, being self aware and learning from previous meeting mistakes and applying a different, hopefully improved approach in future meetings can be more productive and practical.

More often than not employees are busy and have little time to reflect and strive to be self-aware enough to really focus on what would make them better in their occupation. Candid feedback is necessary and Colvin says that corporate culture is the only thing that stands in the way. He states that candid feedback is a trait of the best performing organizations and organizations that want it can have it. Furthermore when applying the principles of deliberate practice to organizations having a lot of great people usually isn't enough. This is because most people in an organization don't work alone. Colvin stresses the need for teams to develop together, not just as individuals, which provides even another hurdle for organization project managers to overcome in their pursuit of great performance.

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The reasons teams fail to come together to achieve better performance can be attributed to competing agendas or unresolved conflicts. The book suggests the reason teams cannot come together to become great performers is because they are unwilling to face and resolve the real issues when the principles of great performance require just that. Those who really want to achieve great performance in business, as in other fields, must set goals for their efforts, be self-aware during their participation in those efforts, and seek candid feedback afterwards.

Colvin admits that, as mentioned above, the book was marketed primarily for a business audience; but it has caught traction with a wider audience of parents and coaches who want to inspire their kids and players to understand what it takes to become an outstanding performer. Colvin uses a number of popular figures in this thought-provoking book from comedian Chris Rock to business icon Jack Welch. I would highly recommend this well-written book to industry trainers, coaches, educators, parents, and anyone seeking guidance to become a great performer.

Footnote Reference:

"Magnificent Magnus, The World's Youngest Grandmaster." *Chess Base News*, 4 30, 2004. <http://www.chessbase.com/newsdetail.asp?newsid=1614> (accessed May 31, 2012).

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Overall Rating: 3 (out of 5):  Cole J. Kupec, II.