

Be Intentional, Seek Candid Feedback, and Practice Until it Hurts



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A cross-country flight offers the perfect opportunity to turn the pages of a real book. On Monday evening after hearing the aircraft door slam shut in “preparation for taxi and take-off” and dutifully stowing my prohibited electronic gadgets, I opened my recently acquired copy of [“Talent is Overrated,”](#) by Geoff Colvin.

After reading the following statement in the very first chapter I knew I was hooked. Colvin writes: “Most of us would be embarrassed to add up the total hours we’ve spent on our jobs and then compare that to the number of hours we’ve given to other priorities that we claim are more important... Yet after all those hours and all those years, most people are just okay at what they do.” He continues by explaining that despite lots of practice and “experience” in a particular field of study, we frequently “don’t get any better” doing what we’re doing for work or play. Simple “practice” does not make “perfect”!

So if it isn’t practice that makes perfect, perhaps “talent” is the key? I’ve cited “no talent” many times as an accessible excuse for the multitude of errors I’ve made while playing the organ at church. But Colvin argues that “talent”—the natural ability to “do something better than most people can do it”—is not what leads to great performance on the playing field, in the concert hall, or in the conference room at work. Instead, he asserts, the best explanation for truly great performance is “deliberate practice.”

He explains that “Deliberate practice... is activity designed specifically to improve performance, often with a teacher’s help; it can be repeated a lot; feedback on results is continuously available; it’s highly demanding mentally...; and it isn’t much fun.” In short: “Deliberate practice is hard. It hurts.”

The key characteristics of “deliberate practice” sound an awful lot like the process of designing a mission-suited, culture-sensitive risk management framework in a nonprofit organization. Let’s take a closer look at three of the telling characteristics of deliberate practice to explore the connection to sound risk management.

- **Designed to improve performance** – Colvin explains that one key difference between “practice” and “deliberate practice” is intentionality. When we are committed to improving results, we focus our attention on those aspects of an activity where our skills are less than they need to be, and where our weaknesses hold us back. Instead of playing the entire piece over and over again, we devote special attention to the rough spots. If your risk management policies are not being followed consistently, where are the rough spots? The use of language subject to varying interpretations? The tone of the

communications piece explaining the new policies? The lack of training in what the policies actually mean and why they are important?

- **Continuous feedback** – Colvin reminds his reader that if you can't see the effects of your efforts, you "won't get any better, and you'll stop caring." He explains that a coach, teacher or mentor available to observe your performance is essential to truly seeing and understanding weaknesses. And it's true whether you're trying to improve your golf game, hone a marketing strategy or test the viability of a risk management framework. In several recent engagements for large, complex nonprofits I have heard clients say, "I never saw it that way," or "that option hadn't occurred to me." In each case the approach I was suggesting wasn't especially brilliant—it was simply the result of bringing an independent perspective and point of view to the table.
- **It isn't much fun** – This characteristic of "deliberate performance" gave me the greatest pause. I work pretty hard to persuade reluctant leaders who have been coerced by their boards, insurers, legal counsel or funders to "embrace" risk management that managing risk can be fun. Colvin explains that deliberate practice requires that "Instead of doing what we're good at, we insistently seek out what we're not good at." Of course he's right when it comes to developing appropriate policies to protect the missions and assets of the nonprofits we serve. The "easy" approach is rarely the strategy that will make a real difference and build a sustainable, risk-aware culture.

Although I'm not sure that promoting "deliberate practice" as a cornerstone of sound risk management will inspire tentative leaders to embrace the discipline, I'm intrigued by Geoff Colvin's thoughts about being intentional about the results we seek; reaching out to mentors, coaches and teachers to help us get a clearer perspective; and recognizing that fixing what clearly ain't working may require difficult choices and actions rather than simple "fixes." And I guess that means I need to stop blaming my recent screw-ups at the keyboard on my lack of innate talent.

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