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Growing Greatness

- Gary Klaben

The holidays are upon us again—which reminds me of an old plumber story Ed Coyle used to tell.

It was New Year's Eve. A couple living in a posh condo in downtown Chicago were preparing to receive friends and family for a New Year's Eve party. An hour before guests were due, the hostess discovered their toilets were backed up. No functioning commode—and thirsty, hungry guests were on the way. Panic set in! Quickly, the couple searched the Yellow Pages for plumbers, and after repeated tries, reached a plumber closing up shop. They pleaded with him to fix their broken toilet.

The plumber came, looked around for a few minutes, banged on a pipe, and the toilets began working again. Evening saved! The party was a great success, and in early January the plumber's bill arrived: $225. The couple was astounded! He was five minutes away from their condo and spent maybe five minutes fixing the backed-up toilet. They were incensed. They called the plumber, thanked him again, but requested him to send a revised bill itemizing the $225 charge.

A few days elapsed, then another bill arrived from the plumber. It read simply: House Call, $25. Knowing where to bang on pipe, $200.

Enough said.

When we witness the performances of Michael Jordan, Annika Sorenstam, Yo Yo Ma and Placido Domingo, we stare in seeming disbelief at how easily they excel. Super-talented artists, athletes, business moguls—and plumbers—all seem to have been born with extraordinary talents.

Well—not so fast.

Maybe something else is in play here.

In 2006, psychologist K. Anders Ericsson wrote The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance about his research on talented, expert individuals. Lots of commonly held beliefs were dispelled. In one study, at Berlin's elite Academy of Music, he divided the school's violinists into three groups. The first group were stars, destined to become world-class violinists. The second group were strong orchestra candidates. The third group would go on to teach music in local public schools.

Every student had started playing at about the same age. Their differences began to occur when some of them at age 10 started practicing more hours, then added more hours in high school, until they were practicing 30 hours a week at age 20. Ericsson then asked the students to calculate the total hours they had practiced since beginning violin practice.

The results? The first group practiced for 10,000 hours, the second group 8,000 hours, and the third group 4,000 hours. Sounds like the advice my mother gave me: "Work hard and eventually good things will happen."

Practice makes perfect.

Now, you may still be shaking your head—how about the concertos that Mozart was writing at age 6? Amadeus certainly did not have 10,000 hours of practice by that tender age. The fact is, Mozart did not write his first masterwork until age 21, though he had written concertos that were formalistic hybrids of other composers' work from age 6 to 21.

Researchers have studied many different "talented" prodigies in many different fields of endeavor. Each time, the "talent" showed up after 10,000 hours of practice. So, it should come as no surprise that a blacksmith apprentice in centuries past was required to spend seven years with his master before setting up his own shop.

Talent is cheaper than table salt. What separates the talented individual from the successful one is a lot of hard work.
– Stephen King

By the time Bill Gates started Microsoft, he had accumulated 10,000 hours of computer time. As an 8th grader in 1968 in Seattle, he began programming just up the street at the University of Washington. Computer terminals there were open late at night and, between 3 - 6 a.m., Bill would sneak out of his house and spend many hours working on programs. By the time he dropped out of Harvard and launched Microsoft, he had already topped his requisite 10,000 hours.

Malcolm Gladwell, in his book Outliers, warns that one can innocently learn the "wrong lesson" from Gates' successful entrepreneurship: "Our world only allowed one 13-year-old unlimited access to a time-sharing terminal in 1968. If a million teenagers had been given the same opportunity, how many more Microsofts would we have today?"

Another 10,000-hour example: The Beatles. Between 1962-1964 they performed live more than 2,000 times. Some of their live sessions lasted up to eight hours in a single day. By the time these English moptop lads invaded America in 1964 and topped the charts, they had paid their 10,000-hour dues. How many bands today—even ones around for decades—have performed 2,000 live concerts?

In the world of finance, investment, real estate and asset management today, how many practitioners have the time- and performance-logged expertise?

Today's economic crisis resulted from the abuse of debt. You may recall the previous time America abused debt as a nation, during the limited-partnership frenzy of the 1980s. Like the current economic meltdown, a similar meltdown occurred for U.S. banks and thrifts that loaned money for new buildings and over-leveraged office space. In the 1980s, just as most recently, many young people fresh out of graduate school with newly minted MBAs were attracted to the banking and real estate industries. They earned six-figure salaries and kept busy churning out new commercial real estate deals.

As often happens after a financial calamity, questions abound: "How could this disaster happen?" "How did we get into this mess?"

Well—the tongue-in-cheek answer is: "The MBAs know how to run the numbers; they just don't know what they mean."

Wisdom and experience trump youth and inexperience any day.

Over the past decade, neurologists and psychologists have made some remarkable discoveries about how our brains function in obtaining talent and wisdom. Already at Coyle, these new findings are helping mentor our staff and, in turn, are helping our clients mentor their children and grandchildren.

These new insights are especially important in guiding today's youth to build upon what they love doing and prepare them for the passing of the family leadership torch. They also are important for working with young MBAs, lawyers, doctors and other professionals until they become seasoned professionals.

There are two distinct facets to this learning. One is time spent "exercising" our brains. The other is building myelin insulation in our brains.

What did I just say?

Like many people, I thought for many years that the neurons and synapses in our brains somehow functioned better as we learned and experienced life. But now, the new science of myelin's vital role reveals something far, far different.

Briefly, scientists have discovered that a human being's "talent code" involves a neural insulator called myelin. Some neurologists now consider it the "holy grail" for acquiring skill.

As Daniel Coyle (no relation) writes in his book The Talent Code, every human skill—"whether it's playing baseball or playing Bach"—is created by chains of nerve fibers carrying a tiny electrical impulse, essentially a signal traversing a circuit.

"Do you mind if I chase a few practice balls first?"

Myelin's key role is to wrap these nerve fibers "the same way that rubber insulation wraps a copper wire," writes Coyle. In doing so, each signal becomes stronger and faster by preventing electrical impulses from leaking out.

The more we fire a particular circuit, the more myelin optimizes that circuit, and the stronger, faster and more fluent our movements and thoughts become.

One example that Coyle cites: The Link Aviation Trainer for pilots. In the winter of 1934, when skilled pilots in the U.S. Army Air Corps were dying in crashes, FDR demanded a solution. Inventor Edwin Link's trainer permitted pilots to practice more deeply, to stop, struggle, make errors, and learn from them. During a few hours in a Link trainer, a pilot "took off" and "landed" a dozen times on instruments. He could dive, stall and recover, spending hours inhabiting the "sweet spot" at the edge of his capabilities in ways he never could risk in an actual plane.

The Air Corps pilots trained on Links were not braver, smarter or luckier. They simply had the opportunity to practice more deeply.

Let's take a look at a baby acquiring the skill of walking. First, the baby holds onto the coffee-table, standing, wobbling, and tentatively moving legs back and forth. The baby lets go of the furniture for a moment, then falls down on a padded behind. This goes on for awhile—until one day the baby lets go of the furniture, takes a step, and then another, and topples over again. Junior gets back up with a big smile and tries again. Doting parents rush to child-proof the whole house, now that their toddler is building mobility skills.

More parental smiles, more baby stumbles—and many, many more confident steps. Junior is quickly laying down myelin in the part of the brain that controls movement. Remarkably, the child is being transformed.

Scientists have documented that our subconscious mind can process 11 million pieces of information per second while our conscious mind can only manage 40 per second. You and I don't "think" about walking. We have built up very thick myelin around those walking nerve fibers that make us expert walkers. But our baby can't

become an expert walker until accumulating those 10,000 hours of walking skill—usually around age five or six.

Babies are not born with phenomenal walking talent. What they do have is the time to walk, and the passion to learn how to walk.

If people do not love what they are doing, they will never work hard enough to be great at it. In our brains, myelin insulation does not grow unless action takes place. Merely thinking about something is not action. We must DO the action.

Once again, harkening back to our mentor, Ed Coyle, who liked to share his Grandmother's expressions: "If wishes and buts were candy and nuts, every day would be Christmas."

Now, myelin may sound like an exotic new neuroscience, but actually it's similar to another biological mechanism we use every day: muscles built through bodybuilding. Athletes, musicians, engineers, plumbers, financial advisers—each one, through individualized deep training, sends precise impulses along wires that give signals to myelinate those wires.

They end up, after all their training, with super-duper wires—lots of bandwidth called talent.

When Air Corps pilots deep-practiced inside Edwin Link's trainer, they were firing and optimizing neural circuits—and growing myelin and talent.

Passion and continual practice matter greatly. As Vladimir Horowitz, the virtuoso pianist who kept performing into his eighties, put it, "If I skip practice for one day, I notice. If I skip practice for two days, my wife notices. If I skip for three days, the world notices." Repetition is invaluable and irreplaceable.

Why are passion and persistence key ingredients of talent? Because the best way to build a good circuit is to fire it, attend to mistakes, then fire it again, over and over and over. Struggle is not an option; it's a biological necessity.

Ericsson's research shows that most world-class experts—including pianists, chess players, novelists and athletes—deep-practice between three and five hours a day, no matter what skill they pursue.

So, the whole talent-and-success equation demands three vital prerequisites: Desire to learn, time in the saddle, and doing what one absolutely loves to do. All three must be present to lay down myelin and build talent.

This is exactly what our parents taught us. Dedication, hard work and a great attitude will go a long way to achieving success.

They just didn't express it in terms of brain electric signals and chains of neurons!

The business-advice industry today is full of gurus and novel concepts—some good, some bad. But the neuroscience of myelin is straightforward. Families—and businesses and organizations—are groups of people who are building and honing skills in exactly the same way as violinists and tennis players. The more we embrace the core principles of "ignition" (passion), deep practice and master coaching (mentoring), the more myelin is built and the more success that can result.

Time is of the essence, though. Age does matter. The vast majority of world-class experts start young. While we can learn throughout life, it's a fact that anyone who has tried to master a new language or musical instrument later in life requires a lot more time and sweat to do so.

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Too many young people today want too many things too quickly. They need guidance by older family members and seasoned professionals. They need a sense of belonging to family, to community, to nation, and to an inclusive stewardship that far transcends themselves. They also need to be allowed to learn the lessons of failure and accountability and in the process discipline and dedication.

George Bartzokis, a prominent UCLA professor of neurology and expert on myelin, once posed the question: "Why do teenagers make bad decisions?" Not waiting for an answer: "Because the neurons are there, but they are not fully insulated. Until the whole circuit is insulated, that circuit, although capable, will not be instantly available to alter impulsive behavior as it's happening. Teens understand right from wrong, but it takes them time to figure it out."

As the Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young hit song of 1970 goes, "Teach Your Children Well."

All of our futures—financially, politically, socially, ethically—will depend upon how well we coach the next generation to passionately excel.

To grow into greatness.

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