

**DISCUSSION PAPER****NURTURE OR NATURE?**

While teaching a compressed (about 8 days) MBA course in Shanghai, I have had a fair bit of free time during the weekdays as the students all go to work, so I've been able to do a fair bit of reading. One book I've read is "Talent is Overrated, What really separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else", written by Geoff Colvin, Fortune's senior editor at large and published by Penguin in 2008, 224ppp, ISBN: -10:159184224, US\$25.95.

I could have written a book review of this book but as it really got me thinking I decided to write a short paper with some thoughts instead.

The author's central thesis is as the title suggests, that talent, raw talent and ability, is overrated and that what really makes great performers great is nurture rather than nature.

He believes that great performance in any area of activity is largely developed rather than being the result of any overriding 'natural' ability. He supports this by referring to many studies which he considers strongly support his thesis. He tends to debunk any ideas of 'true genius' being inherent in any individual, i.e. to be 'born' with this quality or to get it from heredity. He does not indicate any studies that support this alternative view. Indeed, he says that there are no such genuine or authoritative studies which do so.

In his many and various examples, he refers to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Tiger Woods as usually being held up as examples of genius, as having superior 'natural' talent, of being able to reach the pinnacles of their two areas, music and golf, mainly because of their natural abilities in these areas.

As indicated, he debunks this view. He points out that Mozart's father, Leapold Mozart was a highly acclaimed musician and composer, who after the birth of his son gave up his own musical career in order to assist his son to develop his musical performance and composition. The author also points out or asserts that the young Mozart's early compositions are not so great and that they are largely copied or "borrowed" or adapted from the works of other contemporary composers. He points out that as well as having the significant assistance from his father, Wolfgang also experienced other great musical tutors such as Johann Christian Bach and that during this period, Wolfgang's work followed Bach's style and influence. Wolfgang worked very hard and made many alterations and improvements to his compositions and his major works did not begin to appear until he was into his 20s, after he had already had many years of practice and tuition.

Tiger Woods, the second example, also had a father who was dedicated to his success. Earl Woods, Tiger's father was regarded as a highly successful teacher who only himself took up golf in mid-life and who became a fine player. When Tiger was born, Earl was determined that he (Tiger) would become a world champion golfer and do everything he could to ensure this and, indeed, Tiger was introduced to golf by his father before he (Tiger) could even walk or talk. As in the case of Wolfgang, Tiger became famous as a young boy for his prowess.

The author continues to indicate and use many examples from many fields not only music and sport, but also business and management, to support his view. Such names as Warren Buffett, Bill Gates, Jack Welsh, and

Steve Balmer are given as examples. Not all of these, of course, had parents dedicated to their children's achievements and success as did Wolfgang and Tiger. For example, he says that Buffett, as a boy, was intensely interested in learning about investing, and he wanted to make money. But he also says that Buffett like Gates showed no early signs of interest in his eventual field of eminence, like Gates, but also precocity.

His thesis is that these 'superstars' in their various fields of activity largely developed their talents through experience and practice but special sorts of experiences and 'deliberate practice'. Indeed, he says that many people have years of experience and practice but they still never become 'champions' and indeed, over time, their performance usually deteriorates. Colvin believes in experience coupled with good and great coaching and with 'deliberate practice' over long periods. He points out, for example, that Tiger Woods and other champion golfers and sportspersons continue to have coaches even after continuously winning major championships. Colvin says that deliberate practice is highly specific, what needs to be developed and how to do so. He refers to the need to develop greater perception, to look further ahead, to know more from seeing less (and therefore to reacting faster than others), to making finer discrimination than average performers, to knowing more, not general but specific knowledge, and to remembering more (again specific not general), all this with high level specific advice and coaching. He says that 'deliberate practice' is very hard but highly necessary work if one wants to achieve greatness in any field.

I am a business and management academic, alas not a great or champion one but I think a fairly good one, so I obviously believe in and try to 'nurture' my students which is what I hope and think 'good' academics try to do, whatever is our field. In business or management programs we try to teach students about such things as marketing, production, finance, leadership, etc. So I and presumably most academics in virtually all areas of academic teaching and learning try to pass on valuable and useful knowledge to our students. And we may use various methods to try to do this, laboratories, demonstrations, case studies, role plays, talks from industry leaders, etc. We may use work experience assignments, apprenticeships, assistantships, research projects, etc. to try to assist in this process. We usually also undertake various research projects, attend various relevant conferences, etc., to try to update and improve our knowledge and we may assist students to undertake various research projects.

Despite Colvin's central thesis, certainly, in my view, some people do appear to have 'natural' abilities. Sure these abilities have to be honed, developed, practiced, and coached in order for those people with these 'natural' abilities to progress to higher levels of achievement in their various fields and particularly, to become world class champions but I still feel that if one has no or very little 'natural' ability to start with, then one is pretty unlikely ever to achieve a really high level of competency in that field, no matter how long or how well you work at it.

I'd like to give a couple of examples from my own lifetime experiences covering quite a long time.

As a teenager I learnt to love tennis both as a player and as a spectator. I played a lot and practiced a lot but not very effectively. I became a fair club player, I won some club tournaments and some interclub or association tournaments but after a couple of years I reached a level of competence which I largely stayed at.

Maybe if I had had effective coaching and guidance I could have gone to a higher level but, frankly, I doubt it. Another player in our club was a 'great' player. He was only a year or two older than me, he had been playing longer than me but not for that much longer and he certainly did not play or practice as much or for as long as I did. He was a 'natural'. Any sport he tried, he was immediately good at even if it was not his regular sport, such as cricket, or basketball. He was the envy of all the 'just-so-goods' in his group. I am sure that if he had really concentrated on his tennis, he could have become one of the Australian tennis 'greats', in those days, Frank Sedgman, Ken McGregor, and a little later, Rosewall and Hoad, Roy Emerson and the great Rod Laver. However, to my friend, even though he loved his tennis and won many trophies, it was just a great sport and recreation for him but, boy, did he have great talent!

My other story comes from my university days as an undergraduate. I was studying for a Commerce degree from the University of Melbourne, at that time, Melbourne's only university. In my first two years, I studied quite hard and had pretty good results although I certainly was some way from being the 'best' student in the course, however, I was invited to join the Honours degree group, which was a four year degree, one year longer than the normal degree. We only had 19 students in this group out of total student numbers of over 2,000 in the Faculty. I now found myself in the group which included the very 'top students'. I certainly worked much harder in those last two years and I did achieve markedly better results but there were always three or four students whose ability I simply could not match and I still think that they had greater 'natural' ability than did I. Anyway, I certainly enjoyed reading Colvin's book. Any book that develops one's interest and thinking is worthwhile and his book certainly did that for me even though I do not completely agree with his premise. As a classical music and also a sports 'buff' I cannot believe that Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was not an absolute genius or that Tiger Woods, Roger Federer, Nadal or Messi's skills are not far short of magical and that no matter what one's background and one's opportunities and efforts most of us are 'mere mortals' who are unlikely to ever achieve these levels of genius!

One last word, as a classical music 'buff' one of my very favourite works is the "Messiah" by George Frederick Handel. I was and still am amazed that this work took him only 3 weeks to compose entirely. This IS sheer genius in my book!

Brian Sheehan