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Talent Is Overrated

What *Really* Separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Few people are truly great at what they do. But why aren't they? Why don't they manage businesses like Jack Welch or play golf like Tiger Woods?

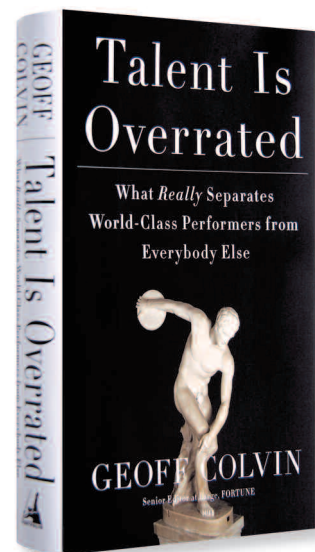
Asked to explain why a few people truly excel, most of us offer one of two answers. The first is hard work. Yet hard workers aren't always great. The other possibility is that the elite possess an innate talent for excelling in their field. The trouble is, scientific evidence doesn't support the notion that specific natural talents make great performers.

So what's the real solution to the mystery of high performance? According to author Geoff Colvin, both the hard work and natural talent camps are wrong. What really makes all the difference is a highly specific kind of effort called "deliberate practice."

Based on extensive research, *Talent Is Overrated* shares the secrets of extraordinary performance and how to apply these principles to our lives and work. Colvin explains cutting-edge research and eye-opening facts that debunk the myth of innate talent. Most profoundly, Colvin shows that great performance isn't reserved for a preordained few. The price may be high — but it is available to us all.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The real source of great performance.
- Why innate abilities are not necessarily indicative of great performance.
- The true role of intelligence and memory in high achievement.
- Why "deliberate practice" is the real method for achieving great performance.
- How to apply the principles of great performance in your life.
- How to apply the principles of great performance in your organization.



by Geoff Colvin

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: TALENT IS OVERRATED

by Geoff Colvin

The author: Geoff Colvin, senior editor at large for *Fortune* magazine, is one of America's most respected journalists. He lectures widely and is the regular lead moderator for the *Fortune* Global Forum. A frequent television guest, Colvin also appears daily on the CBS Radio Network, reaching 7 million listeners each week. He co-anchored *Wall Street Week* on PBS for three years.

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The Mystery

The odds are that few if any of the people around you are truly great at what they do — awesomely, amazingly, world-class excellent.

Why — exactly why — aren't they? Why don't they manage businesses like Jack Welch, or play golf like Tiger Woods, or play the violin like Itzhak Perlman? The hard truth is that virtually none of them has achieved greatness or come even close, and only a tiny few ever will.

This is a mystery so commonplace that we scarcely notice it, yet it's critically important to the success or failure of our organizations, the causes we believe in, and our own lives.

Extensive research in a wide range of fields shows that many people not only fail to become outstandingly good at what they do, they frequently don't even get any better than they were when they started.

Hundreds of research studies have converged on some major conclusions that directly contradict most of what we all think we know about great performance. Specifically:

- The gifts possessed by the best performers are not at all what we think they are.
- Even the general abilities that we typically believe characterize the greats are not what we think.
- The factor that seems to explain the most about great performance is something the researchers call “deliberate practice.” Exactly what that is and isn't turns out to be extremely important.

Understanding where extraordinary performance comes from is crucial. The 19th-century humorist Josh Billings famously said, “It ain't so much the things we don't know that get us into trouble. It's the things we

know that just ain't so.” The first step in understanding the new findings on great performance is using them to help us identify what we know for sure that just ain't so. ●

Talent Is Overrated

If it turns out that we're all wrong about talent, that's a big problem. Our views about talent, which are extremely deeply held, are extraordinarily important for the future of our lives, our children's lives, our companies and the people in them. Understanding the reality of talent is worth a great deal.

A number of researchers now argue that giftedness or talent means nothing like what we think it means, if indeed it means anything at all.

When researchers have looked at large numbers of high achievers, at least in certain fields, most of the people who became extremely good in their field did not show early evidence of gifts.

No specific genes identifying particular talents have been found. The most one could say is that if genes exert any influence, it would seem to be much less than the whole explanation for achieving the highest levels of performance.

What About Tiger?

Researchers on great performance sometimes call Tiger Woods the Mozart of golf, and the parallels do seem striking. Woods' father, Earl, was a teacher, specifically a teacher of young men, and he had a lifelong passion for sports.

Here's the situation: Tiger is born into the home of an expert golfer and confessed “golf addict” who loves to teach and is eager to begin teaching his new son as soon as possible. Earl gives Tiger his first metal club, a putter,



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service@summary.com

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Rebecca S. Clement, Publisher; Sarah Dayton, Editor in Chief; Andrew Clancy, Senior Editor; Christine Wright, Senior Graphic Designer; Barry Silverstein, Contributing Editor

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at the age of seven months. Before Tiger is 2, they are at the golf course playing and practicing regularly.

Neither Tiger nor his father suggested that Tiger came into this world with a gift for golf. Tiger has repeatedly credited his father for his success. Asked to explain Tiger's phenomenal success, father and son always gave the same reason: hard work.

In Search of Business Talent

The overwhelming impression that comes from examining the early lives of business greats is that they didn't seem to hold any identifiable gift or give any early indication of what they would become.

Jack Welch showed no particular inclination toward business, even into his mid-20s. He majored not in business or economics but in chemical engineering and earned a master's and a Ph.D. in that field. At 25, he decided to accept an offer to work in a chemical development operation at General Electric.

If anything in Welch's history to that point suggests that he would become the most influential business manager of his time, it's tough — in fact, impossible — to spot it.

Bill Gates is a more promising prospect for those who want to explain success through talent. He became fascinated by computers as a kid and says he wrote his first piece of software at age 13: It was a program that played tic-tac-toe.

It's clear that Gates' early interests led directly to Microsoft. The problem is that nothing in his story suggests extraordinary abilities.

In surveying the world's business titans we find Welch-like stories more often than Gates-like stories, lacking even a hint of inclination toward the fields or traits that would one day lead to fame and riches.

For most of us, the critical point is that, at the very least, these talents are much less important than we usually think. They seem not to play the crucial role that we generally assign to them, and it's far from clear what role they do play. ●

How Smart Do You Have to Be?

Everywhere we see hypersuccessful companies seemingly filled with people who got perfect scores on their SATs.

So it's definitely surprising, at least at first, to find that research doesn't support the view that extraordinary natural general abilities are necessary for high achievement. In fact, in a wide range of fields, including business, the connection between general intelligence and specific abilities is weak and, in some cases, apparently nonexistent. As for memory, the whole concept of a powerful

memory is problematic, because it turns out that memory ability is very clearly created rather than innate.

A wide range of research shows that the correlations between IQ and achievement aren't nearly as strong as the data on broad averages would suggest, and in many cases there's no correlation at all.

Many of the most successful people do seem to be highly intelligent. But what the research suggests very strongly is that the link between intelligence and high achievement isn't nearly as powerful as we commonly suppose. Most important, the research tells us that intelligence as we usually think of it — a high IQ — is not a prerequisite to extraordinary achievement.

How's Your Memory?

The evidence is similar when it comes to that other general ability we often associate with hypersuccessful people, an amazing memory. A large mass of recent evidence shows that memory ability is acquired, and it can be acquired by pretty much anyone.

The widespread view that highly accomplished people have tremendous memories is in one sense justified — they often astound us with what they can remember. But the view that their amazing ability is a rare natural gift is not justified. Remarkable memory ability is apparently available to anyone.

It may seem surprising that off-the-charts general abilities, especially intelligence and memory, are not necessary for extraordinary achievement, but it becomes less surprising when we consider the qualities that highly successful companies and business leaders look for in employees, or rather what they don't look for. It's striking to notice the companies that don't put extreme cognitive abilities at the top of the list, or sometimes even on the list.

The message from these companies raises an important question: Even if superior intelligence and memory aren't the critical factors for success, are the traits the companies seek — team orientation, humor, confidence and so on — reliably related to success across companies, and if so, are they innate traits that you either have or you don't? Research suggests that some personality dimensions do match up with success at certain types of work.

At this point you can't help but wonder if there's anything at all (a) that makes a significant difference to whether you achieve extraordinary performance, and (b) that you can't do anything about it. The answer is yes, of course there is.

What's surprising is that when it comes to innate, unalterable limits on what healthy adults can achieve, anything beyond basic physical constraints is in dispute.

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That fact is profoundly opposed to what most of us believe. We tend to think that we are forever barred from all manner of successes because of what we were or were not born with.

But what we'd really like to know is not what does or doesn't stop us, but what makes some people go so much further than others. And what we have discovered so far is not what makes some people excel but rather what doesn't. Specifically:

- It isn't experience.
- It isn't specific inborn abilities.
- It isn't general abilities such as intelligence and memory.

In short, we've nailed down what doesn't drive great performance. So what does? ●

A Better Idea

Consider a critically important and highly rigorous scientific study conducted in the early 1990s in Berlin that examined music. The objective of the study was to figure out why some violinists are better than others.

There were three groups of test subjects — we'll call them best, above-average and good. All three groups were spending the same total amount of time on music-related activities.

The violinists were quite certain which activity was most important for making them better: It was practicing by themselves. They all knew it, but they didn't all do it. Though the violinists understood the importance of practice alone, the amount of time the various groups actually spent practicing alone differed dramatically.

The advantage of practice was cumulative. All the research subjects were asked to estimate their weekly practice hours for each year of their violin-playing lives. The results were extraordinarily clear. By age 18, the violinists in the first group had accumulated 7,410 hours of lifetime practice on average, versus 5,301 hours for violinists in the second group and 3,420 hours for those in the third group.

What the authors of the research study called “deliberate practice” makes all the difference. Or, as they stated it with stark clarity in their scholarly paper, “The differences between expert performers and normal adults reflect a lifelong period of deliberate effort to improve performance in a specific domain.”

This position was highly significant for two reasons. First, it explicitly rejected the you've-got-it-or-you-don't view. Second, it resolved the huge contradiction in the

body of scholarly research on performance and high achievement as well as in our everyday experience. On the one hand, we see everywhere that years of hard work do not make most people great at what they do. On the other hand, we see repeatedly that the people who have achieved the most are the ones who have worked the hardest. How can both sets of observations be true?

The problem, observed the researchers, is that “the current definition of practice is vague.” Their framework is not based on a simplistic “practice makes perfect” observation. Rather, it is based on their highly specific concept of “deliberate practice.”

Precisely what this means turns out to be critically important. An understanding of it illuminates the path to high achievement in any field, not just by individuals, but also by teams and organizations. ●

What Deliberate Practice Is and Isn't

The concept of deliberate practice is quite specific. It isn't work and isn't play, but is something entirely unto itself. What we think of as practice frequently isn't what the researchers mean by deliberate practice.

Deliberate practice is characterized by several elements, each worth examining. It 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, whether the activity is purely intellectual or heavily physical; and it isn't much fun.

What we generally do at work is directly opposed to the first principle: It isn't designed by anyone to make us better at anything. Usually it isn't designed at all; we're just given an objective that's necessary to meeting the employer's goals and are expected to get on with it.

As for the second principle, the activities that would make us better are usually not highly repeatable. Even in jobs where we do the same few things, we face few (if any) incentives to get better at them by exceeding our limits and discovering what we can't do well.

Feedback? At most companies this is a travesty, consisting of an annual performance review dreaded by the person delivering it and the one receiving it.

Work is often not fun, because getting anything accomplished in the real world is a grind.

If that's life in most companies, then the opportunities for achieving advantage by adopting the principles of great performance, individually and organizationally,

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would seem to be huge. In fact they are. Indeed, what's especially surprising about the cluelessness of most organizations with regard to deliberate practice is that the principles are not counterintuitive or hard to grasp.

What We Need to Know Next

Deliberate practice does not fully explain high achievement — real life is too complicated for that. We're all affected by luck. But more significantly, a person's circumstances, especially in childhood, can powerfully affect his or her opportunities to engage in deliberate practice.

It turns out that deliberate practice can extend one's ability to perform at higher levels far longer than most people believe. In addition, even though performance seems to improve with increased deliberate practice in a wide range of research studies, it must also be true that the relationship cannot be simple and direct in every case.

Regardless of how well practice is designed, another important variable is how much effort a person puts into it.

Frequently when we see great performers doing what they do, it strikes us that they've practiced for so long, and done it so many times, they can just do it automatically. But in fact, what they have achieved is the ability to avoid doing it automatically.

Great performers never allow themselves to reach the automatic, arrested development stage in their chosen field. The essence of practice, which is constantly trying to do the things one cannot do comfortably, makes automatic behavior impossible. Ultimately the performance is always conscious and controlled, not automatic. ●

How Deliberate Practice Works

What makes deliberate practice work? It turns out the answer is the same whether we look at business or sports or any other field, and it isn't what you might expect.

Indeed, the most important effect of practice in great performers is that it takes them beyond — or, more precisely, around — the limitations that most of us think of as critical. It enables them to perceive more, to know more and to remember more than most people.

Perceiving More

Top performers can figure out what's going to happen sooner than average performers by *seeing more*. Sometimes excellent performers see more by developing a better and faster understanding of what they see.

The superior perception of top performers extends beyond the sense of sight. They hear more when they listen and feel more when they touch.

When excellent performers look further ahead than

average performers do, they are literally looking into their own future. Knowing what lies ahead for them, they prepare for it and thus perform better. They may be looking only one second ahead, but for them that extra moment makes all the difference.

Much of the power of looking further ahead comes from the simple act of raising one's gaze and getting a new perspective, and doing it not once or occasionally, but using practice principles to do it often and get better at it.

Knowing More

Top performers in a wide range of fields have better organized and consolidated their knowledge, enabling them to approach problems in fundamentally different and more useful ways.

Many of the best-performing companies explicitly recognized the importance of deep knowledge in their specific field, as opposed to general managerial ability.

Building and developing knowledge is one of the things that deliberate practice accomplishes. Constantly trying to extend one's abilities in a field requires amassing additional knowledge, and staying at it for years develops the critical connections that organize all that knowledge and make it useful.

Remembering More

How can great performers in every realm recall more than would seem possible? Researchers find that excellent performers in most fields exhibit superior memory of information in their fields. What's the explanation?

All these people have developed what we might call a memory skill, a special ability to get at long-term memory in a fast, reliable way.

Top performers understand their field at a higher level than average performers do, and thus have a superior structure for remembering information about it.

Practice exerts an additional, overarching influence that in a way is even more impressive: It can actually alter the physical nature of a person's brain and body.

Endurance runners have larger-than-average hearts, an attribute that most of us see as one of the natural advantages with which they were blessed. But no, research has shown that their hearts grow after years of intensive training.

We've all had the powerful feeling, when watching or contemplating an extraordinary performer, that in some deep way this person is simply not like us. Great performers really are fundamentally different. Their bodies and brains are actually different from ours in a profound way. But we're wrong in thinking, as

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many do, that the exceptional nature of great performers is some kind of eternal mystery or preordained outcome. It is, rather, the result of a process, the general elements of which are clear. ●

Applying the Principles in Our Lives

Step one to applying the principles in our lives is knowing what you want to do. Because the demands of achieving exceptional performance are so great over so many years, no one has a prayer of meeting them without utter commitment. The first challenge in designing a system of deliberate practice is identifying the immediate

next steps. In a few fields those steps are clear. But in the great majority of careers, and in the advanced stages of all of them, there is no published curriculum, no syllabus of materials that must be studied and mastered.

From this perspective we can see mentors in a new way — not just as wise people to whom we turn for guidance, but as experienced masters in our field who can advise us on the skills and abilities we need to acquire next and can give us feedback on how we're doing.

The skills and abilities one can choose to develop are infinite, but the opportunities to practice them fall into two general categories: opportunities to practice directly and opportunities to practice as part of the work itself.

Practicing Directly

What separates the great musicians from the rest is how well they perform music. In business we find many analogous situations. The most obvious involve presentations and speeches, and these form the one element of corporate life that is commonly practiced. Yet for most people, practice consists of perhaps a few run-throughs.

Many other important elements of business life can be practiced. One of the most dreaded tasks for many managers is giving job evaluations to their direct reports. The message can be broken down into pieces and each piece analyzed for intent, then practiced repeatedly with immediate feedback from a coach or by video.

The chess model has been used widely in business education for 80 years, but under a different name: the case method. You're presented with a problem, and your job is to figure out a solution. The process of focusing on the problem and evaluating proposed solutions is powerfully instructive.

The practice of top athletes falls into two large categories. One is conditioning. The other category is working on specific critical skills.

Conditioning in business means getting stronger with the underlying cognitive skills that you probably already have. It can mean reviewing the fundamental skills that underlie your work.

Specific skill development is based on focused simulation, and that concept can be applied widely in business. Try to improve a specific aspect of your performance, achieve high repetition and get immediate feedback.

Practicing the Work

We all face a different way to practice business skills, and that is by finding practice in the work itself. These activities, called self-regulation, are done before, during or after the work activity itself.

Applying the Principles of Great Performance in Our Organizations

Organizations that apply the principles of great performance follow several major rules:

- Understand that each person in the organization is not just doing a job, but is also being stretched and grown.
- Find ways to develop leaders within their jobs.
- Encourage their leaders to be active in their communities.
- Understand the critical role of teachers and of feedback.
- Identify promising performers early.
- Understand that people development works best through inspiration, not authority.
- Invest significant time, money and energy in developing people.
- Make leadership development part of the culture.

Applying the Principles to Teams

Turning groups of great individuals into great teams is a discipline in itself, which also operates on the principles of great performance. That's why the best organizations follow one additional rule:

- *Develop teams, not just individuals.* Organizations that are the most successful at building team performance are especially skilled at avoiding or addressing potential problems that are particularly toxic to the elements of deliberate practice, such as the following:
 - Picking the wrong team members.
 - Low trust.
 - Competing agendas.
 - Unresolved conflicts.
 - Unwillingness to face the real issues.

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Self-regulation begins with setting goals. The best performers set goals that are not about the outcome but about the process of reaching the outcome. The next prework step is planning how to reach the goal. The best performers make the most specific, technique-oriented plans. The best performers also go into their work with a powerful belief in their ability to perform.

During the work, the most important self-regulatory skill that top performers use is self-observation. They are in effect able to step outside themselves, monitor what is happening in their own minds, and ask how it's going. Researchers call this metacognition — knowledge about your own knowledge, thinking about your own thinking.

The practice opportunities that we find in work won't do any good if we don't evaluate them afterward. Excellent performers judge themselves differently from the way other people do. They're more specific, just as they are when they set goals and strategies.

As you add to your knowledge of your domain, your objective is not just to amass information. You are building a mental model — a picture of how your domain functions as a system. This is one of the defining traits of great performers: They all possess large, highly developed, intricate mental models of their domains.

For anyone, a rich mental model contributes to great performance in three major ways:

- A mental model forms the framework on which you hang your growing knowledge of your domain.
- A mental model helps you distinguish relevant information from irrelevant information.
- Most important, a mental model enables you to project what will happen next. ●

Performing Great at Innovation

The greatest innovators in a wide range of fields all have at least one characteristic in common: They spent many years in intensive preparation before making any kind of creative breakthrough.

The most eminent creators are consistently those who have immersed themselves utterly in their chosen field, have devoted their lives to it, amassed tremendous knowledge of it, and continually pushed themselves to the front of it.

Making Organizations Innovative

Since organizations are not innovative — only people are innovative — it follows that the most effective steps an organization can take to build innovation will include helping people expand and deepen their knowledge of their field. Creating innovation networks within the organization is one step.

Organizations can take two other steps that are especially effective in light of how innovation really happens: telling people what's needed and giving them freedom to innovate. ●

Great Performance in Youth and Age

Becoming world-class great at anything seems to require thousands of hours of focused, deliberate practice. For an adult facing the responsibilities of a family and a career, devoting that kind of time to purely developmental activities would be exceedingly tough. Only in childhood and adolescence will the time typically be available.

That reality creates another advantage to starting early. In any field where people can start early, starting late may put one in an eternal and possibly hopeless quest to catch up.

Should We Create Business Prodigies?

Early training can produce high achievers who are surprisingly young. Traditionally, however, training in business skills doesn't start early. There isn't intensive, focused development of business skills in young people that's anything like what happens with swimmers, artists and mathematicians, for example. The question then arises whether it's even possible.

The answer is clearly yes. Beyond general domain knowledge, it would be possible to train quite young people in more specific business skills.

Our society has very little problem with children being directed toward fields other than business at early ages. If similar techniques were applied to early training in business, and similar results were produced, would the same effect follow?

Continued deliberate practice enables top performers to maintain skills that would otherwise decline with age and to develop other skills and strategies to compensate for declines that can no longer be avoided. We've seen business people performing at the highest levels at advanced ages. Warren Buffett continues to run Berkshire Hathaway brilliantly in his late 70s.

The perspective of both youth and age raises a profound question about great performance. If it's all about the punishing demands of deliberate practice, the continual, painful pushing beyond what's comfortable, then why does anyone do it? ●

Where Does the Passion Come From?

The central question about motivation to achieve great performance is whether it's intrinsic or extrinsic.

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Most of us believe the drive must be ultimately intrinsic. Much of the research supports this view.

The consistent finding reported by many researchers examining many domains is that high creative achievement and intrinsic motivation go together.

The great majority of the research in business motivation has focused on what motivates employees generally, not on what drives the top performers. The drivers are almost never extrinsic. Long after executives and entrepreneurs accumulated more money than they could ever use and more fame than anyone could hope for, they keep working and trying to get better.

Yet that can't be the whole story. Intrinsic motivation may dominate the big picture, but everyone, even the greatest achievers, has responded to extrinsic forces at critical moments.

The Multiplier Effect

In our search for the source of the motivation that sustains people through the trials of getting better, the evidence is pushing in a clear direction. The passion doesn't accompany us into this world, but rather, like high-level skills themselves, it develops. World-class achievers are driven to improve, but most of them didn't start out that way.

If the drive to excel develops, rather than appearing fully formed, then how does it develop? Several researchers have separately proposed "the multiplier effect." The concept is simple. A very small advantage in some field can spark a series of events that produce far larger advantages. This multiplier effect accounts not just for improvement of skills over time but also for the motivation that drives the improvement.

The concept of the multiplier effect is embedded in the fundamental theory of deliberate practice. A beginner's skills are so modest that he or she can manage only a little bit of deliberate practice, since it's highly demanding. But that little bit of practice increases the person's skills, making it possible to do more practice, which increases the person's skill level more.

What Do You Believe?

We've seen that the passion develops, rather than emerges suddenly and fully formed. We've also seen hints that childhood may be especially important in how the drive's development gets started.

What would cause you to do the enormous work necessary to be a top performer? It depends on your answers to two basic questions: What do you really want? And what do you really believe?

How Organizations Blow It

Most organizations seem to be managed brilliantly to prevent people from performing at high levels.

How often is feedback at most companies constructive, nonthreatening and work-focused rather than person-focused? Evaluations at most companies are exactly the opposite. As for rewards, at most companies they almost always entail more responsibilities and less freedom. Extrinsic motivators may be, by definition, the only type that a company can offer employees, but most companies do it about as poorly as they can.

What you want — really, deeply want — is fundamental because deliberate practice is a heavy investment. What would you want so much that you'd commit yourself to the necessary hard, endless work, giving up relationships and other interests, so that you might eventually get it? Whatever it is that the greatest performers want, that's how much they must want it.

The second question is more profound. What do you really believe? Belief is tragically constraining. Everyone who has achieved exceptional performance has encountered terrible difficulties along the way.

What you really believe about the source of great performance becomes the foundation of all you will ever achieve. Regardless of where our beliefs in this matter originated, we all have the opportunity to base them on the evidence of reality.

The evidence offers no easy assurances. It shows that the price of top-level achievement is extraordinarily high. Perhaps it's inevitable that not many people will choose to pay it. But the evidence shows also that by understanding how a few become great, anyone can become better. Above all, what the evidence shouts most loudly is striking, liberating news: that great performance is not reserved for a preordained few. It is available to you and to everyone. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Talent Is Overrated*, you'll also like:

1. ***A Whole New Mind* by Daniel H. Pink.** A new age has emerged and right-brainers — artists, inventors, caregivers, designers — are leading the pack. Learn the six essential aptitudes you'll need to excel in this new business environment.
2. ***Talent Is Never Enough* by John C. Maxwell.** Leadership expert Maxwell outlines 13 crucial things you can do to maximize your strengths and become a "talent-plus" person.
3. ***What Got You Here Won't Get You There* by Marshall Goldsmith.** Goldsmith details the 20 habits that may be holding you back and provides solutions.