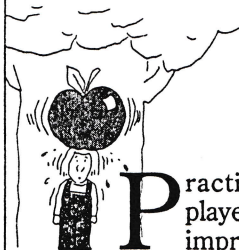


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The Importance of PRACTICE PRACTICE ...and more practice



Practice has always played a major role in improving the performance of athletes and musicians.

New research shows that practicing can help us perform much, much better because it actually improves the way we think. The secret, as athletes and musicians have long known, is *how* you practice—and for *how* long.

WHAT IS PRACTICE?

For practice to have an impact on your work, you must have well-defined goals—goals that are achievable through repetition *and* innovation.

Example: If a tennis player misses a backhand volley, it may be several matches before he/she has a chance to correct the same move. In the practice situation with a tennis coach, he can reproduce the situation repeatedly—and experiment until he learns to refine his move and control the shot.

In other words, you must know what you're doing wrong so you can do it right. Feedback helps, but ultimately you must develop a *mental picture* of what you're trying to accomplish—whether it is a basketball player's two-hand jump shot, a pianist's flawless glissando or a presentation for work. You must measure your performance against this mental standard and adjust your efforts accordingly.

SECRETS OF BETTER PRACTICE

• **Concentration.** Some people practice mindlessly, doing the same thing over and over, hoping to get better as if through magic. True practice requires *focused attention*—to identify what aspects you want to improve and to override old habits that lead to errors.

Example: When serious musicians practice, they have to concentrate on one

specific element at a time—such as speed, control and phrasing—and keep the goal of the specific improvement in mind as they diagnose what is going wrong and learn to get it right. If you were giving a speech, you would focus on elements such as body language, the speed at which you speak and eye contact with the audience.

• **Level of difficulty.** A person's practice tasks must stretch him and tax the limits of his abilities—or they won't make him any better. On the other hand, setting your goals too high is demoralizing. Finding the right level of difficulty for effective practice may take some ingenuity.

Model yourself after experts you admire. Once you master their approaches, try to add your own flair.

Example: An aspiring chess player who is able to beat all of his opponents may learn to practice by studying the games of grand masters, predicting their moves and analyzing his own mistakes in predicting those moves.

• **Knowing when to stop.** *Too much* practice can hurt performance—and can undermine motivation. When you can no longer muster the concentration that practice requires—*stop*.

There's good evidence that athletes and musicians who practice too much increase their risk of injury. And over extended periods of time, they may also develop depression and burnout.

Athletes and musicians make deliberate efforts to rest and sleep so they are fully recovered before resuming

Bottom Line/Personal interviewed Anders Ericsson, PhD, the FSCW/Conradi Eminent Scholar of Psychology at Florida State University, Tallahassee. He has researched performance and practice for 18 years and is editor, with Jacqui Smith, of *Toward a General Theory of Expertise: Prospects and Limits*. Cambridge University Press, \$27.95.

