

Growing talent? Just add Myelin



By [Douglas Kruger](#)

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In game-changing books like Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers*, Geoff Colvin's *Talent is Overrated*, and Daniel Coyle's *The Talent Code*, the mechanics of talent are broken down to a few simple things. (Video)...

In any field, it has the following essential formula:

Talent = Yearning + Input + Coaching + Deliberate Practice, Sustained Over Time.

The formula is simple. Applying it, of course, is where the work lies.

Let's break it down for a closer look:

Without the first ingredient, **Yearning**, or a desire to become good at something in the first place, talent will simply not develop. A human being will only learn so much if they have no specific desire. Yearning is the first barrier to entry. Therefore, inspiring a love of the thing is step number one in developing talent.

We sometimes err in growing talent by not providing a moment of ignition. We try to teach people *how*, but not *why*, and the human mind is not wired to learn the *how* without a compelling *why*. Igniting the desire to learn, by showing a clear picture of what can be achieved, and how a person's life can be improved, is a necessary starting point for talent. Show me a hero in this field, and I will want to be like the hero. But just force me to start working, and I will likely shut down.

When *Yearning* is present, the individual must then be given the second ingredient: **Input**. Without specific how-to knowledge, a passionate individual will have to re-invent the wheel, significantly slowing their learning curve.

Input comes in two essential forms. It can be self-gleaned through reading and personal study, which is effective, but only up to certain limitations, or it can come in the form of external mentoring and input, which is much more effective. Personal coaching is the most effective form of Input of all.

Deliberate Practice then makes the individual good at what they do. They've got the yearning. They've got the know-how. They have received decent, useful feedback on how to do better. Now it's all about practice, practice, practice. And 'Deliberate' practice has a specific focus on breaking things down into chunks, slowing them down and getting to understand each 'chunk' in isolation, then rebuilding the whole.

Playing a game of golf is not deliberate practice. Repeatedly throwing a ball into a bunker and working on getting it back out

again, until you're a master at that one thing; then mastering the next thing - *that's* deliberate practice. Break it down into its constituent parts; dissect it into chunks; then get better at each in turn.

You can do this with just about anything.

Deliberate Practice (also called 'Deep Practice' by Daniel Coyle, in *The Talent Code*), is extremely messy. "It focuses more on understanding and avoiding mistakes than what it does on 'doing it perfectly the first time.'" Coyle says. "You need to 'feel what it's like to...' and then explore it in minor variations, over and over again."

(Watch Douglas speak about the Talent Formula:

The Magic of Myelin

Deliberate Practice promotes the development of a substance called Myelin in the brain. Myelin is a conductor. Basically, the more you do something, the more you promote the growth of myelin. The more myelin you have, the greater your brain's capacity to conduct the signals necessary to do that thing.

Practicing is like creating ever-greater conductors that allow more and more bandwidth in your brain.

Practice something enough, and it's like you have developed broadband in your own mind. Before, a tiny trickle of electricity was struggling to get through, and you had to think very hard about what you were doing, but the more myelin you develop, the greater your 'broadband' capacity, and the easier it becomes to do that thing.

Public speaking is a great example of how people never get to do 'Deliberate Practice.' Most public speaking is not practice. It is live, in front of real audiences, with real consequences. The average person's level of myelin in the necessary circuits is extremely low, which means that they are really struggling, and having to think hard about what they do. Every sentence is a struggle, the body language feels disjointed, the ebbs and rhythms all feel belaboured. Once again, it's as if too little electricity is trying to run too many circuits.

Break it all down into chunks and practise each chunk, and a person's myelin capacity for each skill-set grows. Eventually, they have sufficient broadband; more than enough electricity running the various systems. Energy to spare.

For that reason, whenever I train public speaking, I do exercises that allow my delegates to focus on just one thing in isolation, such as gestures only, or body movement only, or voice. You can take just about any endeavour and break it down into its constituent chunks, then build it back up again.

After 10 years in the speaking industry, I have sufficiently myelinated the circuits related to public speaking in my own brain that I can be delivering a complex point, thinking of the next point into which I want to transition, managing my body language, using the space on stage to create different psychological effects, noticing feedback from the audience and considering my vocal patterns, all without any particular stress. The circuits all flow, because they have been trained to flow. They have enlarged capacity.

The same principle applies with learning to type, play an instrument, speak a language or perform in sport. Tiger Woods is dripping with hard-won Myelin, which he has earned over the years. Anyone you've ever seen doing something complicated and making it look easy is simply a highly myelinated brain in action.

Myelin, it's the new black.

The same principles work for complex, non-linear pursuits like managerial skill, and, naturally, the ability to innovate.

Let them struggle

The act of struggling is very important in the development of myelin. For this reason, neurologists and specialists on talent are increasingly advocating that a subtle shift is necessary in the way teachers teach. Take the example of a math class. If one student struggles with a problem, the average teacher will tend to want to gloss over that problem relatively quickly, and keep the class moving through its curriculum. However, a better approach would be to slow down and really engage with that problem. The struggle itself is important. It leads to greater understanding.

In truly excellent teaching and coaching, the focus is not so much on 'perfect solutions,' but rather on 'understanding problems thoroughly.' We learn and we develop myelin through struggle, not through being handed answers and outcomes.

Talent is about increasing your myelin. Myelin is grown using the formula: Yearning + Input + Coaching + Deliberate Practice, Sustained over Time.

ABOUT DOUGLAS KRUGER

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