The Little Book of Talent

By Daniel Coyle

Part 1: Getting Started - Stare, Steal and Be Willing to be Stupid

Tip #1 – Stare at who you want to become

- We each live with a “windshield” of people in front of us; one of the keys to igniting your motivation is to fill your windshield with vivid images of your future self.
- Studies show that even a brief connection with a role model can vastly increase unconscious motivation

Tip #2 – Spend fifteen minutes a day engraving the skill on your brain

- Many hotbeds use an approach I call the engraving method. Basically, they watch the skill being performed, closely, and with great intensity, over and over until they build a high-definition mental blue-print
- The key to effective engraving is to create an intense connection: to watch and listen so closely that you can imagine the feeling of performing the skill

Tip #3 – Steal without apology

- All improvement is about absorbing and applying new information, and the best source of information is top performers. So steal it!
- When you steal, focus on specifics, not general impressions. Capture concrete facts
- Ask yourself:
  o What exactly are the critical moves here?
  o How do they perform those moves differently than I do?

Tip #4 – Buy a notebook

- A high percentage of top performers keeps some form of daily performance journal
- Write stuff down and reflect on it: results from today, ideas for tomorrow, goals for next week

Tip #5 – Be willing to be stupid

- To improve, to push the boundaries of possible is to build new connections in the brain which means reaching, failing and, yes, looking stupid.
- Being willing to risk the emotional pain of making mistakes – this is absolutely essential, because reaching, failing, and reaching again is the way your brain grows and forms new connections.
- Whatever the strategy, the goal is always the same: to encourage reaching, and to reinterpret mistakes so that they’re not verdicts, but the information you use to navigate to the correct move.

**Tip #6 – Choose Spartan over Luxurious**

- Luxury is a motivational narcotic: it signals our unconscious minds to give less effort.
- The point of this tip is not moral; its neural. Simple, humble spaces help focus attention on the deep-practice task at hand: reaching and repeating struggling.

**Tip #7 – Before you start, figure out if it’s a hard skill or a soft skill**

- **Hard skills:**
  - High-precision skills are actions that are performed as correctly and consistently as possible, every time.
  - They are skills that have one path to an ideal result.
    - Shooting a free throw
  - Your goal is to build a skill that functions like a Swiss watch – reliable, exact, and performed the same way every time, automatically.
  - ABC: Always Being Consistent
- **Soft skills:**
  - Those skills that have many paths to a good result, not just one.
  - Being agile and interactive; about instantly recognizing patterns as they unfold and making smart, timely choices.
    - A soccer player reading the defense
  - The ability to quickly recognize a pattern or possibility, and to work past a complex set of obstacles.
  - Three Rs: Reading, Recognizing and Reacting
- Each different skill is developed through different methods of deep practice.

**Tip #8 – To build hard skills, work like a careful carpenter**

- Be careful, slow and keenly attuned to errors.
- Be précised and measured. Go slowly.
- Make one simple move at a time, repeating and perfecting it before you move on.
- Pay attention to errors, and fix them, particularly at the start.
Tip #9 – To build soft skills, play like a skateboarder

- Soft skills are built by encountering different obstacles and responding to them over and over, building the network of sensitive wiring you need to read, recognize, and react.
- When you practice a soft skill, focus on making a high number of varied reps, and on getting clear feedback.
- After each session, ask yourself: What worked? What didn’t? And why?

Tip #10 – Honor the hard skills

- The point of this tip is simple: Prioritize the hard skills because in the long run they’re most important to your talent.
- Picture your talent as a big oak tree – a massive, thick trunk of hard skills with a towering canopy of flexible soft skills up above. First build your trunk and then work on the branches.

Tip #11 – Don’t fall for the prodigy myth

- The praise and attention prodigies receive lead them to instinctively protect their “magical” status by taking fewer risks, which eventually slows their learning.

Tip #12 - Five ways to pick a high-quality teacher or coach

1. Avoid someone who reminds you a courteous writer
   - one who focuses his efforts on keeping you comfortable and happy, on making things go smoothly with a minimum of effort.
2. Seek someone who scares you a little
   - Watches you closely: he is interested in figuring you out – what you want, where you’re coming from, what motivates you.
   - Is action oriented: not much time talking.
   - Is honest, sometimes unnervingly so: he will tell you the truth about you performance in clear language.
3. Seek someone who gives short, clear direction
   - Teaching is not an eloquence contest; it is about creating a connection and delivering useful information.
   - John Wooden’s average utterance lasted only four seconds.
4. Seek someone who loves teaching fundamentals
   - The fundamentals are the core of your skills: the more advanced you are, the more crucial they become.
5. Other things being equal, pick the older person
   - Teaching is like any other talent: it takes time to grow.
People in talent hotbeds have a different relationship with practicing. In talent hotbeds, practice was the big game, the center for their world, the main focus of their daily lives.

The key to deep practice is to reach. This means to stretch yourself slightly beyond your current ability, spending time in the zone of difficulty called the “Sweet Spot.”

Tip #13: Find the sweet spot

- there is a place, right on the edge of your ability, where you learn best and fastest. It’s called the “Sweet Spot.”
- Here’s how to find it:
  o Comfort Zone
    ▪ Sensations: ease, effortlessness. You’re working but not reaching or struggling
    ▪ Percentage of successful attempts: 80% or higher
  o Sweet Spot
    ▪ Sensations: frustration, difficulty, alertness to errors. You’re fully engaged in an intense struggle
    ▪ Percentage of successful attempts: 50-80%
  o Survival Zone
    ▪ Sensations: confusion, desperation, over-matched
    ▪ Percentage of successful attempts: below 50%

- Locating your sweet spot requires some creativity
- Seek out ways to stretch yourself. Play on the edge of your performance

Tip #14: Take off your watch

- Deep practice is not measured in minutes or hours, but in the number of high-quality reaches and repetitions you make – how many new connections you form in your brain
- Ignore the clock and get to the sweet spot, even if its only for a few minutes, and measure your progress by what counts: reaches and reps

Tip #15: Break every move down into chunks

- Every skill is built out of smaller pieces – what scientists call chunks
- To begin chunking, first engrave the blueprint of the skills on your mind
- Practice one chunk by itself until you’ve mastered it – then connect more chunks, one by one, exactly as you would combine letters to form a word
- See the whole thing. Break it down to its simplest elements. Put it back together. Repeat!

Tip #16: Each day, try to build one perfect chunk

- As John Wooden said “Never mistake mere activity for accomplishment.”
- **Set a daily SAP: smallest achievable perfection**
  - The point is to take the time to aim at a small, defined target and then put all your effort toward hitting it
  - Wooden "Don't look for the big, quick improvement. Seek the small improvement one day at a time. That's the only way it happens – and when it happens, it lasts"

**Tip #17: Embrace Struggle**
- Deep practice has a telltale flavor, a feeling that can be summed up in one word: “struggle”

**Tip #18: Choose five minutes a day over an hour a week**
- With deep practice, small daily practice “snacks” are more effective than once-a-week practice binges
- “Practice on the days that you eat.”
- Our brains grow incrementally, a little each day – occasional practice forces our brain to player catch-up

**Tip #19: Don’t do drills – instead, play small, addictive games**
- Games are fun, connected and passionate.
  - Because of this, skills improve faster when they’re looked at this way.
- Governing principle is this: if it can be counted, it can be turned into a game.

**Tip #20: Practice alone**
- Solo practice works because it’s the best way to:
  - seek out the sweet spot at the edge of your ability
  - develop discipline – don’t depend on others for practice
- “The vision of a champion is someone who is bent over, drenched in sweat, at the point of exhaustion, when no one else is watching.”

**Tip #21: Think in images**
- Whenever possible, create a vivid image for each chunk you want to learn
- The images don’t have to be elaborate, just easy to see and feel
  - Which of the following is easier to remember:
    - Touch the strings as lightly as possible
    - Touch the strings as if they were burning hot

**Tip #22: Pay attention immediately after you make a mistake**
- Brain-scan studies reveal a vital instant, 0.25 seconds after a mistake is made, in which people do one of two things – they look hard at the mistake or they ignore it.
People who pay attention to an error learn significantly more than those who ignore it.

**Tip #25: Shrink the space**
- Smaller practice spaces can deepen practice when they are used to increase the number and intensity of the reps and clarify the goal.
- Ask yourself: what’s the minimum space needed to make these reaches and reps?

**Tip #26: Slow it down (even slower than you think)**
- It lets us sense our errors more clearly, and thus fix them
- Slow practice is used by many talent hotbeds to teach hard skills

**Tip #27: To learn from a book, close the book**
- Let’s pretend that one week from now you will take a test on the next ten pages of this book. You have thirty minutes to study. Which practice method would help you get a better grade?
  - Reading those ten pages four times in a row, and trying to memorize them
  - Reading those ten pages once, then closing the book and writing a one-page summary
- It’s not even close: method B can help you remember 50% more material over the long term than people who follow method A
- Learning is reaching. passively reading a book – a relatively effortless process doesn’t put you in the sweet spot.
- On the other hand, closing the book and writing a summary forces you to figure out the key points, process and organize those ideas so they make sense and writing them on the page

**Tip #28: Invent daily tests**
- To invent a good test, ask yourself:
  - What’s one key element of this skill?
    - How can I isolate my accuracy or reliability, and measure it?
    - How can I make it fun, quick, and repeatable, so I can track my progress?

**Tip #29: End on a positive note**
- a practice session should end like a good meal – with a small, sweet reward
Part 3: Sustaining Progress – Embrace repetition, cultivate grit, and keep big goals secret

Tip #30 – Embrace repetition

- repetition is the single most powerful lever we have to improve our skills, because it uses the built-in mechanism for making the wires of our brain faster and more accurate
- “I fear not the man who has practiced ten thousand kicks once, but I fear the man who has practiced one kick ten thousand times.” (Bruce Lee)

Tip #31 – Have a blue-collar mind-set

- top performers get up in the morning and go to work every day, whether they feel like it or not

Tip #32 – For every hour of competition, spend five hours practicing

- Games are fun but they are also slow for skill development
  - The presence of other people diminishes an appetite for risks, nudging people away from the sweet spot
  - Games reduce the number of quality reps
  - The pressure of games distorts priorities, encouraging shortcuts in technique
  - Games encourage players, coaches, and parents to judge success by the scoreboard rather than by how much was learned

Tip #33 – Give a new skill a minimum of eight weeks

- constructing and honing neural circuitry takes times, no matter who you are
- Resilience and grit are vital tools, particularly in the early phases of learning

Tip #34 – Cultivate your grit

- Grit is that mix of passion, perseverance, and self-discipline that keeps us moving forward in spite of obstacles
- Grit isn’t born. It’s developed

Tip #35 – Keep your big goals secret

- telling others about your big goals makes them less likely to happen, because it creates an unconscious payoff – tricking our brains into thinking we’ve already accomplished the goal

Tip #36 – Think like a gardener, work like a carpenter

- Think patiently, without judgment. Work steadily, knowing that each piece connects to a larger whole
Four ways to be a better teacher or coach

1) Use the first few seconds to connect on an emotional level
   - effective teaching is built on trust, and when it comes to trust: we decide if we’re going to trust someone in the first few seconds of the interaction

2) Avoid giving long speeches – instead, deliver vivid chunks of information
   - focus on delivering short, targeted, customized messages to each player, one at a time

3) Be allergic to mushy language
   - use language that is concrete and specific
   - communicate with precise nouns and numbers – things you can see and touch or measure – and avoid adjectives and adverbs, which don’t tell you precisely what to do

4) Maximize “reachfulness”
   - reachfulness is the essence of learning. It happens when the learned is leaning forward, stretching, struggling and improving
   - good teachers/coaches find ways to design environments that tip people away from passivity and toward reachful action