

By Roshan Thiran

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What do The Beatles, Warren Buffett, David Beckham, Mokhtar Dahari and Bill Gates all have in common? They're all famous, they're all gifted, and they're all geniuses in their own realms. But more importantly, they all got to where they are today by doing one thing in common – they all poured their hearts and souls, blood and tears into achieving “perfection” through lots of practice.

Thomas Alva Edison said “genius is 1 per cent inspiration and 99 per cent perspiration.” Based on research done by Anders Ericsson and a team of scientists, they now claim to know just how much ‘perspiration’ is required to become a genius-- apparently ten years or 10,000 hours.

Ericsson writes, “*a lot of people believe there are some inherent limits they were born with. But there is surprisingly little hard evidence that anyone could attain any kind of exceptional performance without spending a lot of time perfecting it.*”

Gladwell, “

” A book by Malcolm

*Outliers*”,

reinforces this point with evidence that geniuses simply become great by practice.

The Beatles remain the best-selling musical group of all time. But this success did not come overnight. In his book, Gladwell explains why the Beatles became so good. They played for hours and hours in the German underground scene in Hamburg, receiving little money or recognition but a lot of practice. According to John Lennon, they played eight hours per night, 7 nights a week for 270 nights. In comparison, most bands of their time (and probably even now!) only performed one-hour sessions per week. Fortunately for the Fab Four, by the time they were “discovered” they had performed “live” an estimated of 1200 times! Most bands today don't even perform that many times in their entire careers. These 1200 “live” practice performances really was the differentiator.

Warren Buffett is famed for being the world's greatest investor. But his success is the result of sheer discipline and hard work and lots of practice. He practiced the discipline of “mental strategies” of investment for years and years and became an expert in investments over time.

Beckham is no different. Famed for his lethal free kicks, he wasn't born with those skills. He practised free kicks diligently to impress his dad at first and developed it into his trademark.

Quoting Sir Alex Ferguson, "he practised with a discipline to achieve an accuracy that other players wouldn't care about." After the usual practice session, David would stay back and continue practising and practising. 500 free-kicks a day. 180,000 free kicks a year. And that practice soon translated into an ability and talent which we called genius.

We know that Gates, a Harvard dropout, is among the world's richest men because of his Microsoft fortune. But there is more to his story than meets the eye. For starters, he went to an elite high school, with access to a computer. This was back in the 60s, when even universities didn't have computers! This allowed him to do real-time programming as a fourteen year-old. Obsessed, he programmed 8 hours a day, 7 days a week. He skipped athletics, sneaked out after bedtime, hacked passwords, and told the occasional lie, just so that he could have more hours of programming. By the time he dropped out of Harvard, he just happened to have 10,000 programming hour under his belt!

We don't even need to look far to prove this point. Think of teenage kids. Loads of computer geniuses. How do they become such experts? With their short attention span, how do they learn? Observe these kids for a day and you will see them surfing the internet, playing videogames, and sharing everything they learn on blogs and YouTube. And if you rake in the hours they spend a day, it's no wonder that these teenagers are computer experts. Clearly, there is a correlation between time and expertise.

Greatness is only achieved through hard, painful, and demanding practice. "It can take 10 years or 10,000 hours of extensive practice to excel in anything," says George Kohlrieser, the head of leadership at IMD. "Mozart was 6 when he started composing, but his world-class compositions started at age 21." George believes that talent and luck are important, but it is practice that makes the difference between being good and being great. So what does this all mean?

We live in a world where there is an expectation that everything needs to be instantaneous. 2-minute Maggi Mee, instant coffee, instant profits, and we even produce leaders by using the 1-Minute Manager manual. Yet, to be truly exceptional and great, we need to put in the time. We expect world class football players in Malaysia, yet we start formal football training for kids at age 12, when teams like Everton start developing their Wayne Rooneys at age 4. And we wonder why we don't see football geniuses? There are no shortcuts.

We can conclude likewise on leadership. Nobody becomes a great leader without working at it.

To develop leaders, we need to provide our future leaders with early exposure and practice to leadership, possibly even in their schooling years. Why aren't there leadership clubs in our schools that enable our kids to practice leadership?

There is a belief that if you're good at something it should be effortless. That unfortunately is baseless. To become a great leader, you will require notching your hours of practice. Even Jack Welch spent 10 years as CEO of GE practicing and practicing before he finally got it right. If you do the math, just 3 hours a day of practicing for ten years makes you an expert.

Just one problem: How do you practice business? Many elements of business, in fact, are directly practicable. Presenting, negotiating, delivering evaluations, deciphering financial statements - you can practice them all. And even the softer pieces of management like giving feedback on performance, coaching your reports and hiring the right people can all be practiced.

I remember when I was at MBSKL, playing football under the great Mokhtar Dahari as my coach. Mokhtar was an intense coach, always pushing us to the limit during our training sessions. One day I asked him about the goal he scored against England. He replied, "I guess I was just lucky." Then he turned around to me and said, "But Roshan, you make your own luck. The more you practice, the luckier you get. So stop asking questions and keep practicing." I took his advice and before long I broke into the state team. Practice Practice Practice. It works.

My old headmaster at MBS kept insisting that genius was NOT reserved for the special few only". And I took it to heart.

However, practice is never easy. If achieving great performance was so easy, it wouldn't be rare. So, you want to be brilliant or a genius, just practice lah! Hopefully, you will have 10,000 hours to spare!

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*Roshan Thiran believes there is a science to developing leaders. He is a former student at MBSSKL and is CEO of Leaderonomics, a social enterprise focussed on developing leaders especially amongst the youth. He spent the past 15 years working for GE and Johnson & Johnson across the globe and is now looking forward to making a difference in Malaysia. Roshan is also live on radio and TV and you can view his shows at <http://leaderonomics.com/theleaderonomicsshow>*