

10,000 Hours

By William Hendricks
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In his bestselling book, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Malcom Gladwell (*Blink*, *The Tipping Point*) considers the question of what sets high achievers apart from the rest of us. One intriguing answer is the 10,000 Hour Rule.

Psychological research shows that people who end up at the top in any field get there as a result of one thing: they work harder than everyone else. In fact, much harder—10,000 hours harder, to be exact.

According to neurologist Daniel Levin: “The emerging picture [from the research] is that ten thousand hours of practice is required to achieve the level of mastery associated with being a world-class expert—in anything. . . . In study after study, of composers, basketball players, fiction writers, ice skaters, concert pianists, chess players, master criminals, and what have you, this number comes up again and again.”

Then Levin makes this intriguing disclaimer: “Of course, this doesn’t address why some people get more out of their practice sessions than others do.”

That’s a good question. A great question, really. From the standpoint of human motivation and getting results, it’s *the* key question:

What keeps someone at a task for 10,000 hours?

The implications of answering that question are staggering. Given the research, if we could answer that question for any given individual, we would be well on our way to unleashing countless world-class performers in countless fields, each blissfully driven to *practice, practice, practice* his/her way to excellence—to the benefit of all of us.

What would it mean to your company, or your portfolio of companies, if even ten percent of your key managers were so intrinsically motivated to focus on mastering their game that their performance rose, over time, to a world-class level? How would that impact EBITDA?

That is not just wishful thinking. It’s completely possible. But to get the best that a person has to offer requires knowing what motivates him/her. And that’s where the phenomenon of giftedness comes in—one’s inborn motivated abilities.

Giftedness has to do with the fact that every human being manifests a unique pattern of motivated behavior. Every person displays (early on) a set of core strengths and natural

motivation that combine to drive him/her to focus their energies on a particular outcome they find to be immensely satisfying.

A great example of that phenomenon producing a world-class performer is Warren Buffett. According to Alice Schroeder's masterful biography of Buffett entitled, *The Snowball*, Buffett displayed from childhood a fascination bordering on an obsession with numbers, the analysis of numbers, and the potential for gain from knowing how numbers work. Nobody taught him that. He just had that. It was/is a motivated ability for him.

And so young Warren memorized license plate numbers. He sold packs of gum (but not single sticks) and bottles of soda. His favorite toy was a moneychanger. He was fascinated, Schroeder writes, by the way that numbers "exploded as they grew at a constant rate over time," such that even a small sum could eventually grow into a fortune. She says he could *picture* the numbers compounding, just the way a snowball grows when rolled across a snowy lawn.

Imagine Buffet "playing" with numbers day after day until age 26. All through high school, college, and business school. Then a year at the securities firm of his mentor, Benjamin Graham. By that time he had easily devoted 10,000 hours to his fascination with numbers. Probably far more. In short, by the time Buffett formed his own, one-man investment firm, he was a world-class numbers man. The rest, as they say, is history.

At SIMA International, we have documented tens of thousands of cases like Warren Buffet's. We have discovered that every individual has their own unique set of motivated abilities, their own particular motivational drive that fuels and directs their efforts. Identify someone's core drive and place them in a role where they can put that drive to work, and you get spectacular results. Do that for an entire leadership team, and your company becomes a dominant force in its market.

Our conclusion, based on an estimated *2 million hours of inquiry* since the early 1960s, is that the phenomenon of motivated abilities directly answers Levin's question as to what keeps people to the task of mastering a given area. Every person is instinctively drawn to some particular task. When they *practice, practice, practice*, they work hard—sometimes quite hard. But they don't have to "work at" practicing, in the sense of straining to get it done. Certainly discipline is involved. But discipline comes naturally for the person who is gifted to the task.

So what are the motivated abilities of the key people at your company, or portfolio of companies? Are their roles designed to tap the *best* of what they have to offer? The reason there aren't that many truly great companies is not because we don't have great people with great ability. It's because we haven't set things up to take advantage of people's true greatness. Start doing that in your organization, and the rest, as they say, will be history.

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