

Break Through to Your Elite Level of Leadership



This article is for experienced, seasoned leaders who feel, or who have felt at some time in the past, the aspiration to bring their highest values, skills, and passion to any and all situations, including those that are very provocative and difficult.

This would certainly be an elite level of leadership.

Thankfully, there is guidance about how to get there from many studies of top performers in multiple fields like surgery, mathematics, sports, and chess. It turns out that desire, hard work, and repetition of skills are not likely to get you to an elite level and may even lead to stagnation. A critical element these approaches leave out has to do with developing new ways of seeing complex situations.

Seeing complex situations in new ways

A study about the top players in chess helps to understand this aspect of elite performance.⁽¹⁾ Players were allowed to look for just a few seconds at a chess board with 12 – 24 pieces. When the pieces were arranged in a pattern taken from the middle of an actual game, the elite player remembered about two-thirds of the pieces and their positions while novices remembered only around four. Surprisingly, when the pieces were placed completely at random, all players, even elite ones, could remember only about two to three pieces.

The condition taken from a real-life game, unlike the random condition, had pieces in *meaningful* connection to each other. That is, the pieces arrived at their positions as a result of actual *strategies*. In such real conditions, elite players seem to have learned to quickly see patterns within large amounts of information and then devise creative alternatives. Novice players don't see patterns as readily, devise fewer options, and are less flexible in response.

Key elements of deliberate practice

Elite performers develop these quick ways of grasping a complex situation through what is called "deliberate practice." Several key elements of this practice are: a strong motivation to improve; well-defined goals; and taking action through trial and error. In trial and error, elite performers learn about effectiveness of their actions from immediate feedback, adjust ways of seeing a situation, and then adjust actions.

The unique challenges of leadership in taking on deliberate practice

Leaders face unique challenges in taking on "deliberate practice." Daily complexity, stress, and endless to-do lists tend to wear down motivation and creativity. Also, while chess players are able to practice outside of real-life competition by thinking through historical games, leaders are quite constrained by time and lack access to useful examples for practice. So, deliberate practice must happen mostly in the midst of work by reflecting about situations before and

after. This is very hard to do and is one reason why coaching can be so helpful with leadership. It helps to sustain motivation and learning from experience.

Another major challenge is that leadership is predominantly a relational endeavor. Human behavior in work relationships can be daunting in its messy complexity and huge diversity. On top of this, our brains are hard-wired to respond to the stress of relational issues with leaps to nearly automatic, negative conclusions which limit creativity of response. For example, all of us, at times, attribute relational problems to personality or lack of skills or less than good intentions. While very compelling, these conclusions are most often inaccurate.

Knowing relational patterns can accelerate practice

This leap to negative conclusions is an example of a “pattern” that, recognized in-the-moment, can be *intentionally* set aside through deliberate practice, enabling new ways of seeing and more effective action. Based on research and experience, there are multiple known patterns concerning relational issues at work which can inform and accelerate deliberate practice. Below the article are instructions on how to access a resource guide about these patterns or “strategies” for changing the way we see and respond to work situations.

The sky is the limit

Research indicates reaching an “elite” level of performance is a long term endeavor requiring around 10,000 hours of practice. Because perceptions and creativity are so vulnerable to stress at work, deliberate practice usually offers immediate benefits. The hard part is staying with it. If we do, research suggests there is no predefined limit to our potential—the sky may be the limit to our abilities.

Instructions to access Resource Guide

The Resource Guide for strategies which accelerate deliberate practice is available for subscribers only. Obtain a link to the guide by subscribing for free monthly articles at [Subscribe](#). You may unsubscribe at any time.

References

The full reference list is available for subscribers only. Obtain a link to the list by subscribing for free monthly articles at [Subscribe](#). You may unsubscribe at any time.

1. Ericsson Anders, Pool Robert **Peak: secrets from the new science of expertise** Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2016

About Neil Baker M.D.

Neil Baker M.D. works with healthcare organizations to enhance leadership and team impact through *In-the-Moment Leadership Strategies*. This means using any work situation, even the

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most complex and difficult, as an opportunity to achieve immediate impact on quality of work relationships and on progress toward results.

He has developed these approaches as a leader, speaker, consultant, and executive coach for 30 years. Past positions include serving as Director of Psychiatric Inpatient Services at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver, Colorado; Medical Director of Clinical Improvement at Group Health Cooperative in Seattle, Washington; and faculty and improvement advisor for ten years for the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Currently, in addition to his consulting practice, he serves as faculty for the leadership track he created for the IHI—Project ECHO collaborative on improving access and office efficiency in primary care.

You can learn more and see client testimonials on his website at neilbakerconsulting.com.