

Much of what Atul Gawande writes can be transposed into any professional field. Though his anecdotes and experience are in the medical field, where the stakes are higher than most other fields, his observations and conclusions are universal. In medicine learning is ever-present but Gawande argues that there are other characteristics that cannot be taught which constitute the art of the profession. “Better is possible. It takes diligence. It takes moral clarity. It takes ingenuity. And above all, it takes a willingness to try” (246). Diligence, moral clarity, and ingenuity are important but matter little if the desire to improve is not present.

Diligence is careful and persistent work or effort. In Gawande’s essay, “Education of the knife,” he cites the results of studies of elite performers that show that the main difference between the average and the elite is the amount of deliberate practice (20). Top performers practice their craft. Through anecdotes, Gawande is able to show how diligence impacts performance. One such anecdote compares teams formed to train in the new heart operation and observed for a Harvard Business School study on the learning curve. The most successful team was calculated in their practice. Through the team’s diligence, they were able to dramatically lower the learning curve in comparison to the other teams in the study. Whether in medicine, professional sports, or education, as we practice our craft “conscious learning becomes unconscious knowledge...” (21). Deliberate and careful practice creates habits as Aristotle once noted, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

From the doctors in India who believed they were part of something larger and therefore should contribute to that something to Gawande’s own personal experiences with patients, there is a moral component to improvement and performance. Again, the stakes in medicine are as high as can be and perhaps that is why moral clarity is so important in medicine. When a patient is suffering and facing the uncertain, they want nothing less than a doctor who will not give up because a doctor who fights to find a way can potentially save lives. There are other sectors of society where morality pushes people to always look for whatever else they can do. This is certainly true amongst educators. As educators, we are responsible for preparing future generations. If educators were to give up and not look for more ways to connect or better ways to deliver content, for example, we could succumb to complacency and likely fail in our mission.

Ingenuity does not always have to take a complicated form. Sometimes the most impactful changes or inventions come from simplicity. The Apgar score had a dramatic impact on obstetrics and is a simple number score to help rate the condition of a newborn baby. In complicated fields such as medicine, there are daily occasions in which details are forgotten in light of more major events that a patient may be undergoing. A simple checklist procedure has proven to bring down rates of infection in ICUs across the nation. Ingenuity is directly related to creativity and there are ample instances when creativity is needed for improvisation. Not many

life or work scenarios are scripted and having the ability to improvise can prove to be a key to success.

In the afterword of *Better*, Gawande offers suggestions as to how to make a worthy difference in life and work. He states that one must “be willing to recognize the inadequacies in what you do and seek out solutions” (257). One cannot be afraid of change. In fact, those that empower change have much better results than ones who try to manage change. Those who empower change can be considered positive deviants and often are some of the first ones to adopt new ideas. Warren Warwick is a great example of positive deviance and is the culmination of diligence, ingenuity, and moral clarity. “He thinks hard about his patients, he pushes them, and he does not hesitate to improvise” (223). The results are undeniable—he headed the most successful Cystic Fibrosis Center in the nation.

Acquisition of knowledge goes far beyond the traditional classroom. Through diligence, morality, and innovation we can continue that acquisition of knowledge in the workplace. In an ideal world, we could potentially be a positive deviant and bring others along with us in that journey of lifelong learning.