

An Introduction to Deliberate Practice

(from Farnham Street: full article at <https://fs.blog/deliberate-practice-guide/>)

If you want to keep improving at a skill or overcome a plateau, you'll benefit from incorporating the principles of deliberate practice:

- Deliberate practice means practicing with a clear awareness of the specific components of a skill we're aiming to improve and exactly how to improve them.
- The more we engage in deliberate practice, the greater our capabilities become.
- Our minds and bodies are far more malleable than we usually realize.
- Deliberate practice is structured and methodical.
- Deliberate practice is challenging because it involves constantly pushing yourself out of your comfort zone.
- Deliberate practice requires constant feedback and measurement of informative metrics—not vanity metrics.
- Deliberate practice works best with the help of a teacher or coach.
- Continuing deliberate practice requires a great deal of intrinsic motivation.
- Deliberate practice requires constant, intense focus.
- Deliberate practice leverages the spacing effect—meaning a consistent commitment over time is crucial.
- If you're content with your current level of skill or just doing something for fun, you don't necessarily need to engage in deliberate practice
- Deliberate practice is best suited to pursuits where you're actively aiming for a high level of performance or to break beyond some kind of supposed limit.

Deliberate practice is structured and methodical

How to implement this: Take the skill you're aiming to improve and break it down into the smallest possible component parts. Make a plan for working through them in a logical order, beginning with the fundamentals, then building upon them. Decide which parts you'd like to master over the next month. Put your practice sessions in your calendar, then plan precisely which parts of the skill you're going to work on during each session.

Don't expect your plan to be perfect. You'll likely need to keep modifying it as you discover new elements or unexpected weaknesses. The most important thing is to always go into practice with a plan for what you're working on and how. Knowing what you're doing next is the best way to stay on track and avoid aimless time-wasting. That means seeking to keep figuring out what separates you from the next level of performance so you can concentrate on that.

Deliberate practice is challenging and uncomfortable

How to implement this: Each time you practice a component of a skill, aim to make it 10% harder than the level you find comfortable.

Once per month, have a practice session where you set yourself an incredibly ambitious stretch goal—not impossible, just well above your current level. Challenge yourself to see how close you can get to it. You might surprise yourself and find you perform far better than expected.

A common deliberate practice mistake is to plan a long practice session, then adjust the intensity of your practice to allow you to engage in a skill for the whole time. It's far more effective to

engage in “sprints.” Practice with the most intense focus you can manage for short periods of time, then take breaks. Seeing as you learn most when you stretch yourself beyond your current capabilities, shorter, more challenging practice periods are the way to go.

Deliberate practice requires rest and recovery time

How to implement this: Make a list of activities you can engage in without too much conscious thought, letting yourself daydream while you do them. Common examples include going for a walk, washing the dishes, taking a shower, free-writing in a journal, playing with a toy like Lego, driving a familiar route, gardening, cooking, listening to music, or just gazing out the window. When you feel yourself getting tired or hitting a roadblock during deliberate practice, don’t keep pushing for too long. You want to be stretching yourself, not exhausting yourself. Instead, switch to one of those more relaxing activities for at least five minutes. You’ll likely come back to practice with new connections or at last feeling refreshed.

Deliberate practice involves constant feedback and measurement

How to implement this: Identify the most significant metrics related to performance in your chosen skill and keep a record of them each time you practice. It’s easy to fool yourself without a clear record of how you’re doing. You might want to break the skill down into a few different parts to measure it, but make sure you’re not fixating on vanity metrics.

Deliberate practice is most effective with the help of a coach or some kind of teacher

How to implement this: Don’t expect the same teacher to suit you forever. We usually need different teachers as our skill level progresses because we outgrow them. One attribute of a good teacher is that they know when to tell a student to move on. As we reach expert levels of performance, we need teachers who are themselves experts. If they’re always a step ahead, we can learn from their mistakes instead of making our own.

You get the best results from working with a coach if you show yourself to be receptive to constructive criticism, even if it’s uncomfortable to hear. If you respond badly, you disincentivize them from telling you what’s most useful to know. Top performers know the goal is to get better, not just to hear you’re already great.

Deliberate practice requires intrinsic motivation

How to implement this: Make a list of the reasons you want to work on a skill and the benefits getting better at it might bring. Before you begin a deep practice session, reread the list to remind you of why you’re bringing your full focus to something difficult. You could also list some of the benefits you’ve experienced from it in the past or include quotes from top performers in your field you find inspiring. It might feel cheesy, but it can provide a powerful boost during particularly difficult practice moments. Try to focus on intrinsic reasons and benefits, such as feeling fulfilled.

Keep a “motivation diary” for one week (or longer if possible.) Try setting an alarm to go off every fifteen minutes during each practice session. When the alarm sounds, score your motivation level out of ten (or whichever scale you prefer.) At the end of the week, review your notes to look for any patterns. For example, you might find that you begin to feel demotivated once you’ve been practicing for more than an hour, or that you feel more motivated in the

morning, or some other pattern. This information could be enlightening for planning future deliberate practice sessions, even if it may disrupt your focus at the time. Another method is to simply take notes each day, documenting your current level of motivation to work on your chosen skill. Pay attention to any recurring influences. For example, you might feel more motivated to improve your skill after speaking with a more proficient friend, but less motivated after a bad night's sleep.

Deliberate practice requires intense focus

How to implement this: You can do anything, but you can't do everything. Figure out which practice activities have the biggest influence on your performance and plan to engage in those first before you even consider activities that offer marginal gains.

Deliberate practice leverages the spacing effect

How to implement this: Forget about cramming. Each time you're learning a new component of a skill, make a schedule for when you'll review it. Typical systems involve going over information after an hour, then a day, then every other day, then weekly, then fortnightly, then monthly, then every six months, then yearly. Guess correctly and the information moves to the next level and is reviewed less often. Guess incorrectly and it moves down a level and is reviewed more often.