

## Want to get great at something? Get a coach! Atul Gawande TED 2017

It presses on a fundamental question. How do professionals get better at what they do? How do they get great? And there are two views about this. One is the traditional pedagogical view. That is that you go to school, you study, you practice, you learn, you graduate, and then you go out into the world and you make your way on your own.

A professional is someone who is capable of managing their own improvement. That is the approach that virtually all professionals have learned by. That's how doctors learn, that's how lawyers do, scientists ... musicians. And the thing is, it works. Consider for example legendary Juilliard violin instructor Dorothy DeLay. She trained an amazing roster of violin virtuosos: Midori, Sarah Chang, Itzhak Perlman. Each of them came to her as young talents, and they worked with her over years. What she worked on most, she said, was inculcating in them habits of thinking and of learning so that they could make their way in the world without her when they were done.

Now, the contrasting view comes out of sports. And they say "You are never done, everybody needs a coach." Everyone. The greatest in the world needs a coach.

So I tried to think about this as a surgeon. Pay someone to come into my operating room, observe me and critique me. That seems absurd. Expertise means not needing to be coached.

So then which view is right? I learned that coaching came into sports as a very American idea. In 1875, Harvard and Yale played one of the very first American-rules football games. Yale hired a head coach; Harvard did not. The results? Over the next three decades, Harvard won just four times. Harvard hired a coach.

And it became the way that sports works. But is it necessary then? Does it transfer into other fields?

I decided to ask, of all people, Itzhak Perlman. He had trained the Dorothy DeLay way and became arguably the greatest violinist of his generation. One of the beautiful things about getting to write for "The New Yorker" is I call people up, and they return my phone calls.

And Perlman returned my phone call. So we ended up having an almost two-hour conversation about how he got to where he got in his career.

And I asked him, I said, "Why don't violinists have coaches?" And he said, "I don't know, but I always had a coach." "You always had a coach?" "Oh yeah, my wife, Toby."

They had graduated together from Juilliard, and she had given up her job as a concert violinist to be his coach, sitting in the audience, observing him and giving him feedback.

"Itzhak, in that middle section, you know you sounded a little bit mechanical. What can you do differently next time?" It was crucial to everything he became, he said.

Turns out there are numerous problems in making it on your own. You don't recognize the issues that are standing in your way or if you do, you don't necessarily know how to fix them. And the result is that somewhere along the way, you stop improving. And I thought about that, and I realized that was exactly what had happened to me as a surgeon.

I'd entered practice in 2003, and for the first several years, it was just this steady, upward improvement in my learning curve. I watched my complication rates drop from one year to the next. And after about five years, they leveled out. And a few more years after that, I realized I wasn't getting any better anymore. And I thought: "Is this as good as I'm going to get?"

So I thought a little more and I said ... "OK, I'll try a coach." So I asked a former professor of mine who had retired, his name is Bob Osteen, and he agreed to come to my operating room and observe me. The case -- I remember that first case. It went beautifully. I didn't think there would be anything much he'd have to say when we were done. Instead, he had a whole page dense with notes.

"Just small things," he said. But it's the small things that matter. "Did you notice that the light had swung out of the wound during the case? You spent about half an hour just operating off the light from reflected surfaces." "Another thing I noticed," he said, "Your elbow goes up in the air every once in a while. That means you're not in full control. A surgeon's elbows should be down at their sides resting comfortably. So that means if you feel your elbow going in the air, you should get a different instrument, or just move your feet." It was a whole other level of awareness.

And I had to think, you know, there was something fundamentally profound about this. He was describing what great coaches do, and what they do is they are your external eyes and ears, providing a more accurate picture of your reality. They're recognizing the fundamentals. They're breaking your actions down and then helping you build them back up again.

After two months of coaching, I felt myself getting better again. And after a year, I saw my complications drop down even further. It was painful. I didn't like being observed, and at times I didn't want to have to work on things. I also felt there were periods where I would get worse before I got better. But it made me realize that the coaches were onto something profoundly important.