

*PERSONAL BEST: *Top athletes and singers have coaches. Should you?*
by Atul Gawande New Yorker, October, 2011 * excerpted from...

Élite performers, researchers say, must engage in “deliberate practice”—sustained, mindful efforts to develop the full range of abilities that success requires. You have to work at what you’re not good at. In theory, people can do this themselves. But most people do not know where to start or how to proceed. Expertise, as the formula goes, requires going from unconscious incompetence to conscious incompetence to conscious competence and finally to unconscious competence. The coach provides the outside eyes and ears, and makes you aware of where you’re falling short. This is tricky. Human beings resist exposure and critique; our brains are well defended. So coaches use a variety of approaches—showing what other, respected colleagues do, for instance, or reviewing videos of the subject’s performance. The most common, however, is just conversation...

The sort of coaching that fosters effective innovation and judgment, not merely the replication of technique, may not be so easy to cultivate. Yet modern society increasingly depends on ordinary people taking responsibility for doing extraordinary things: operating inside people’s bodies, teaching eighth graders algebraic concepts that Euclid would have struggled with, building a highway through a mountain, constructing a wireless computer network across a state, running a factory, reducing a city’s crime rate. In the absence of guidance, how many people can do such complex tasks at the level we require? With a diploma, a few will achieve sustained mastery; with a good coach, many could. We treat guidance for professionals as a luxury—you can guess what gets cut first when school-district budgets are slashed. But coaching may prove essential to the success of modern society...

There was a moment in sports when employing a coach was unimaginable—and then came a time when not doing so was unimaginable. We care about results in sports, and if we care half as much about results in schools and in hospitals we may reach the same conclusion. Local health systems may need to go the way of the Albemarle school district. We could create coaching programs not only for surgeons but for other doctors, too—internists aiming to sharpen their diagnostic skills, cardiologists aiming to improve their heart-attack outcomes, and all of us who have to figure out ways to use our resources more efficiently...

For society, too, there are uncomfortable difficulties: we may not be ready to accept—or pay for—a cadre of people who identify the flaws in the professionals upon whom we rely, and yet hold in confidence what they see. Coaching done well may be the most effective intervention designed for human performance. Yet the allegiance of coaches is to the people they work with; their success depends on it. And the existence of a coach requires an acknowledgment that even expert practitioners have significant room for improvement. Are we ready to confront this fact when we’re in their care?