

The medical profession is not an easy one to excel within. This is fully evident by the reference in Alex William's article to the scores of doctors contemplating a change in career because of increased pressures to learn and adapt. So, how does one maintain a high level of performance in a field where there is a constant pressure for growth and betterment? In his novel *Better*, successful surgeon Atul Gawande outlines the "three core requirements for success in medicine." These pillars include: diligence, doing right, and ingenuity. Each of these elements guide a person along the path to becoming a positive deviant which Gawande believes is the key to superior performance. The beauty of this theory is that these requirements for excellent performance are applicable to how professionals in any field should continue to learn throughout the life of their career.

Gawande is passionate about the fact that diligence is the first means of ensuring performance. Diligence, Gawande stresses, is being firmly committed to something no matter what obstacles appear. His example about hand-washing demonstrates that even something as small as hand-washing can be an opportunity to strive for better performance. Hand-washing is viewed as annoying and time-consuming by many medical professionals, but studies show that those who are diligent in their attempts to follow a hand-washing regimen have a profound impact on reducing the number of infections in patients. The diligence in the Gawande's example is two-fold. Professionals must be diligent about not only implementing practices shown to improve performance, but also must demonstrate a diligence to learning about learning how small details might improve their practices. It is only through this stubborn attention to detail and openness to learning new things that one can become the top performer in their field.

Secondly, Gawande explains how doing right is a key to performance. The chapter entitled "On Fighting" shares the importance of finding a balance between a willingness to fight and the recognition that there are limits to one's abilities. In summation of this challenging requirement, Gawande states, "The hardest part of being a doctor, I have found, is to know what you have power over and what you don't." Knowing one's abilities and limitations is a learning process that workers in every field must go through to become better. As a perfect example for doing right, "The Education of a Knife" describes Gawande's learning process for inserting central lines into patients. He wasn't successful every time and even had to ask his superior to step in on several occasions, but despite this, he remained willing to fight and eventually learned the appropriate technique. To perform well, professionals must trust in the learning process even when the outcome looks bleak, but also maintain humility and the ability to ask for help along the way. This is how professionals can "do right" by themselves and those around them.

The third core component to performance is ingenuity. As Gawande describes it, “[Ingenuity] arises from deliberate, even obsessive, reflection on failure and a constant searching for new solutions.” The three chapters focused on this core element discuss the necessity of monitoring your performance, determining where improvements can be made, and remaining committed to betterment. In other words, high performing workers are those who are committed to continual learning through re-evaluation of their actions in order to determine where improvement can be made. A great example of ingenuity was discussed within Gawande’s article “The Checklist.” Here, Gawande explains how after studying hospital protocols, Peter Pronovost saw a need for more continuity in catheter line insertions. As a result, he developed a checklist to ensure medical staff remembered all of the steps necessary for perfect patient care. Even in the face of complaints, Pronovost fought to implement this and other checklists in hospitals, tracked the results and found his proposed changes made large impacts on patient care. Ingenuity demands this sort of continual self-evaluation, learning from mistakes, and implementation of new ideas as key to being a top-performer.

Even though Gawande writes about the medical field, his three core elements to achieving betterment apply to anyone seeking improved performance. The common thread through all of these elements is that one might embrace each success and failure as a learning opportunity and never become complacent in one’s abilities. This easily resonates with the aspect of a learning society which describes learning as a process which continues long after leaving a structured school system. It further dictates that the learning which takes place on the job is just as valuable, if not more valuable than that which takes place inside a classroom. Gawande’s three elements support this by suggesting that one must be open and committed to learning at any point in a career. Workers who can embrace learning throughout their career become “positive deviants” and these workers out-perform others because of their diligence, commitment to doing the right thing, and ingenuity.

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Jaimee,

This second unit begins to discuss in more depth the scenes of the learning society with Gawande providing a wonderful illustration of learning at work. Many professions have the idea of “professional development” where learning is often presented in the form of attending seminars, conferences, webinars, or reading the latest industry-expert blog post. What Gawande presents here is a richer and more meaningful idea of learning at work.

This assignment asks you to consider how Gawande’s views on performance contribute to our understanding of learning at work. In your opening paragraph you present the main elements that will provide shape to your paper. You outline the three “pillars” of Gawande’s approach and mention their wider relevance for professionals in any field. The point that you articulate regarding Gawande’s work having broader importance beyond the medical profession is well made and you return to it in your final

paragraph. This provides a nice balance to your paper by connecting the introduction and the conclusion. You also frame your entire analysis within the larger theme of “growth and betterment”, the need for greater performance, within the pressures of professional life.

Gawande’s concept of diligence provides much for us to consider in improving performance. You reference his attention to the example of hand-washing as you recount his commitment to becoming a better doctor, even if it means focusing on a small and routine detail. Your paragraph on diligence also points out that Gawande is explaining that we must be open to learning new things. It’s important to also note that within this section of *Better* he also explains the idea of “positive deviance” using the story of Jon Lloyd. “Positive deviance” is a concept that builds upon what people already know rather than looking for a new idea from outside. It is not just that we do things differently but rather we look for solutions that may already lie within the system. Gawande also points out that diligence can seem easy at first yet it is an incredibly difficult “prerequisite of great accomplishment”. He also describes diligence as “simplistic relentlessness”, a phrase that is rich with purpose for improving performance.

Gawande introduces the concept of “doing right” which leads him to talk about knowing the limits of our professional knowledge and ability. As you describe, this is all part of the learning process and often causes a level of humility as we are forced to ask for help or learn from our mistakes. The idea of “doing right” also includes considering the professional standards, norms, and practices that make up our working lives. There is also an ethical dimension that can sometimes be involved in what you rightly describe as a “challenging requirement”. The section on ingenuity continues Gawande’s theme of focusing on small yet deliberate improvements. The idea of the checklist, of continual evaluation, and looking at results are steps that make becoming better possible. This directs us back to the title of the book; *Better* is a word that evokes the idea of continual change, but not perfection, of heading in the right direction, but not yet arriving at the destination. Underlying this is the willingness to try to find meaningful solutions.

Your final paragraph summarizes your paper in a helpful way and you draw some connections between Gawande’s work in the medical field and the wider realm of work. You also highlight the importance of learning in each success and failure (Gawande shares examples of both) and how learning takes place after our formal education ends. This was a nice connection back to the previous unit.

One detail to note: you refer to *Better* as a “novel” however this is not a work of fiction. In future assignments take care not to refer to a factual book as a novel. Overall, this paper presents a very good presentation of Gawande’s views on performance and learning at work. The structure and style meant that your paper was clearly articulated and you did a nice job of referencing Gawande and others from Unit 2 in your work. Good work!

Grade: 4.0/4.

- Graham