

PREFACE

They make it look so easy. Whether it's Alex Rodriguez playing baseball, Maya Angelou reciting poetry, Donald Trump closing a deal, Warren Buffett investing in a promising venture, or Bono on stage, their actions appear elegant and effortless. So natural are experts that it seems impossible that they ever struggled to achieve their signature greatness. These elite performers seem to exude a talent few others are privileged to possess. Or, so I thought.

Like most people, I always wanted to be good at what I did. The truth? I wasn't. But the realization that I wasn't very good at most things I tried never deterred me from the belief that I could be. I watched others who were good and thought, *I could do that*. But how? What was it they were doing that I was not? Therein began my journey to discover what it takes to be an expert.

For the record, I'm still on that journey and still far from completing it. There has been some progress, however. In fact, one writer has described me as an "expert on expertise."¹ While such remarks are flattering, much remains to be explored and discovered despite

5 STEPS TO EXPERT

nearly twenty years of studying experts and helping professional athletes and business professionals develop their expertise.

As a professor at a major research university, my investigation into expertise allows me the privilege of studying many successful and interesting people. By sharing with others what I've learned about becoming expert, I have been richly rewarded. Experts in many diverse fields have shown their kindness by describing to me what has helped them on their journey. The feedback I've received from speaking to professional, business, and sports organizations around the world has convinced me that many people are not only seeking to become more expert in what they do but also succeeding in their quest for excellence. From organizations such as the American Society for Training and Development, corporations such as BASF, and professional athletes such as European PGA star Niclas Fasth, I have discovered that understanding the steps to expert helps people become better at what they do. This book was written to help you on your journey. It is a journey we obviously share, or you wouldn't be reading these words. Let's get started.

I thought I'd be a great teacher. I had no doubt. I loved children, loved my subject, and—bottom line—it didn't look all that hard. I had a wake-up call, however, during my senior year in college while I was student teaching. I felt fortunate to be placed with John Hichwa at John Read Middle School in Redding, Connecticut. Almost immediately I realized that there was magic to his teaching. John had a way of touching lives as he taught children. I couldn't put my finger on it because he made teaching look easy, natural—as if it required no effort at all. John got extraordinary results, while my attempts resulted in a collection of confused looks on my students' faces and chaos in the classroom. Clearly, I was not ready to teach, so I decided to pursue graduate school to better study teachers and how they achieved

P R E F A C E

great things. There, I learned to be a researcher. I studied great teachers and then great coaches. Now I study experts of any kind.

By studying experts, I have discovered that becoming expert is not innate behavior. The more experts I interview in more and more fields, this becomes increasingly clear: Experts are not born; they are self-made—they earn it. They earn it by gaining experience, by acquiring knowledge, and by developing skills. Jeff Thull makes this point clearly in his book *Exceptional Selling* when he writes about expert sales professionals: “Contrary to the popular image of salespeople as ‘born communicators,’ most people, and that includes salespeople, are not naturally effective communicators.”²

Experts develop in specific, predictable steps—five to be exact. No matter how great people become in their field, they all start as a beginner. Alex Rodriguez, Maya Angelou, Donald Trump, Warren Buffett, and Bono were all beginners at one time.

Because of my work on experts and the development of expertise, I was invited to serve as a performance consultant for the Swedish Golf Federation. I was challenged to discover through theory and research which expertise skills, if any, would produce results in a sport. Swedish golf is a bit of an unexpected phenomenon. Sweden is known more for snow and ice than lush, green golf courses. You would expect to find outstanding skiers and hockey players in Sweden, not golfers. But, with innovative coaches, open-minded athletes, and the support of a dedicated federation, much is possible. The record of success gained by Swedish golfers, both men and women, is rivaled by very few countries. By way of example, in the 2002 Open Golf Championship in Muirfield, Scotland, only the United States, with a significantly larger population and more conducive golf climate, had more players in the field than Sweden. And while it would be overly simplistic and a mistake to think that the principles of expertise

5 STEPS TO EXPERT

development alone accounted for this success, success followed when these principles were applied.

Sports is not the only domain that has sought out and applied the principles of developing expertise—that is, moving people along the journey from beginner to expert. Corporations and professional associations are increasing their search for additional information about how their leaders, employees, and members can become consistently outstanding performers. The point is this: If you are willing to learn what it takes to become expert and are willing to apply these principles in practice, you will elevate your level of expertise and success.

While experts represent only a small percentage of the top performers in a field, everyone can become *more* expert in what they do. And that brings us to this book, which was written to share what I and other researchers have discovered about becoming expert. In this book, you can read about the research and hear the stories of those who have committed themselves to the journey toward becoming expert. By knowing the keys and steps to developing expertise, you too can become more expert in your trade, business, or profession.