THE ART OF PERFORMANCE

THE SURPRISING SCIENCE BEHIND GREATNESS

JEROEN DE FLANDER

Advance Praise

"Engaging and provocative. This book will lead you to a level of performance you never considered possible. A game changer!"

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"The Art of Performance is a gem—evidence-based, insightful and full of practical advice. It is a must-read for anybody seeking a leap in their personal or organisational performance"

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"Jeroen De Flander brings us a new book about personal performance and excellence that lets us subtly travel between our personal and professional life. It invites us, through a set of pragmatic frameworks backed by research, to demystify the concept of "natural born talents" and reveals how greatness can be grown and nurtured by anybody. It is a recipe that can be applied for somebody who manages a team, for a parent who raises a child, and for each of us in our day-to-day path to progress"

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"Passionate people are what sets great companies apart. The Art of Performance offers a systematic way to help people excel at what they do. Very inspiring book both in business and everyday life. A must-read for anyone who wants to bring the best out of people around them!"

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About the Author

Jeroen De Flander is one of the world's most influential thinkers on strategy execution and a highly-regarded keynote speaker. He has shared the stage with prominent thinkers like Michael Porter, Costas Markides, Roger Martin, Robert Kaplan, and David Norton, and helped more than 36,000 managers in 40+ countries master the necessary strategy execution skills. His popular leadership blog has 45,000 weekly readers. His books have been translated into 6 languages, reaching the Amazon Best Seller's list in 5 countries. Strategy Execution Heroes was nominated Book of the Year in the Netherlands.

Jeroen is Chairman of the board of The Institute for Strategy Execution, the global accreditation body for strategy execution practitioners, and co-founder of the performance factory – a leading research, training, and advisory firm focused on strategy execution.

He has worked with several business schools including London Business School, IMD, Vlerick, Solvay, and Tias Business School where he is currently Adjunct Professor. For several years, he was the responsible manager worldwide of the Balanced Scorecard product line for Arthur D. Little, a leading strategy consulting firm.

He has advised 100+ companies including Atos Worldline, AXA, Bridgestone, CEMEX, Credit Suisse, ENGIE, Honda, ING, Johnson & Johnson, Komatsu, Microsoft, Nike, and Sony on various strategy and strategy execution topics.

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CHAPTER 1

Only 1 Out of 15,000 Is Lucky

It's the summer of 1763. Seven-year-old Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and his family embark on a European tour. His life will never be the same again. From that moment on, Mozart will be known as a musical genius. Just before they leave, an anonymous letter appears in the local newspaper, the *Augsburgischer Intelligenz-Zettel*, which includes the following passage, "I saw and heard how, when he was made to listen in another room, they would give him notes, now high, now low, not only on the pianoforte but on every other imaginable instrument as well, and he came out with the letter of the name of the note in an instant. Indeed, on hearing a bell toll, or a clock or even a pocket watch strike, he was able at the same moment to name the note of the bell or timepiece."

Around 250 years later, researcher Ayako Sakakibara from the Ichionkai Music School in Tokyo, also embarked on a journey. He wanted to unravel the mysterious talent that had made

Amadeus Mozart so special. Books had been written about Mozart's life and his unique gift called "absolute pitch" or "perfect pitch". It's that amazing ability to recognize, name, and even reproduce a tone, without any context at all. Just hit any note on a piano, a guitar, or even a random object like a glass or bell, and someone with perfect pitch knows instantly what it is. It's extremely rare. Less than 0.1 percent of the population has perfect pitch. Just imagine the advantage to a musician.

For over 2 centuries, Mozart's greatness was linked to this unique gift, a talent he shared with very few others like Frank Sinatra. But the overarching explanation didn't satisfy Sakakibara. There were other great musicians out there who didn't have this unique talent and still reached the top of their field. Convinced that other dynamics—unknown to him at that point—were at play, he set out on a fascinating multi-year study. First, he convinced the parents of 24 ordinary toddlers between the ages of 2 and 6 to join a unique experiment. None of these 24 children had Mozart's unique gift. Next, he exposed these kids to music in many forms for several months. He explored how much they could develop their hearing using a new technique called the "Chord Identification Method."

Once a piano was installed and perfectly tuned at their homes, the toddlers trained daily with a family member. A typical day consisted of 4 to 5 short sessions of 2-5 minutes, each with 20-25 trials. Using small flags with colors corresponding to the chords, the children had to raise the right flag corresponding to the right chord. When someone made a mistake, the trainer told them the correct answer and played the chord again. Sakakibara asked the parents to send him regular recordings of daily practice and a progress report once every 2 weeks. He used the input to suggest an appropriate practice method for the next period. In short, he told the parents when to make the training more complex or not.

The results were amazing. Two children dropped out for personal reasons unrelated to the study. The other 22 all developed perfect pitch after practicing diligently for 14 months and 2 weeks on average. *They all developed the talent that was the*

basis for Mozart's success.

Why are some people so amazingly good at what they do? Anywhere you look, from competitive sports and entrepreneurship to science, music, and leadership, there always seems to be a few extraordinary individuals in a league of their own. When we are confronted with this reality, we think this person is born with something extra—"He is so talented". But is that really so? If we look at Sakakibara's research, we should at least have some doubt.

I have always been fascinated by great performance. As a young boy, I was really into the Olympics Games. I recall when the 1984 Summer Olympics took place in Los Angeles and I convinced my parents to let me watch the 100-meter final at 4am. It was the first time I got to stay awake after midnight. I still remember sitting in the living room watching Carl Lewis win his 100-meter gold medal.

Later in life, I became equally passionate about business performance, wondering what makes one company successful and the other unsuccessful. In my first book, *Strategy Execution Heroes*, I try to answer the question by showing how great companies organize their strategy execution efforts successfully. My second book, *The Execution Shortcut*, looks at people and team dynamics needed in organizations to successfully navigate a strategy to success. With The Art of Performance, I return to my initial passion—individual performance—and try to find the answer to the question: why do some people achieve greatness and others don't? The answer turned out to be something unexpected.

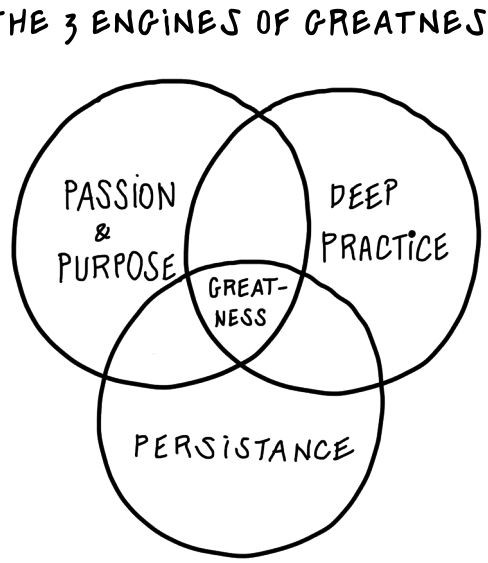
THIS is a book about greatness. I will show you that much of what we believe about the subject just isn't so—and that the insights that researcher Ayako Sakakibara and many others began uncovering a few decades ago come much closer to the truth. Hundreds of scientific studies offer us a new, more accurate view on exceptional performance and the underlying drivers. The problem is that most of these findings aren't known to

us. Most of us haven't caught up to the underlying elements that drive individual performance and still operate from the assumption that greatness is driven by talent, IQ, and luck. The goal of this book is to change that. In the next 160 pages, I will use inspiring research to show you that greatness isn't born, it's grown!

And that's great news. Because if great performance isn't the result of nature but rather nurture, we can all influence it. Great performance gets a different meaning. It isn't a lottery ticket that we didn't win at birth. It becomes an interesting journey. And researchers have found that this journey is governed by principles that are surprisingly similar no matter what field we want to excel in. Whether we want to become a great leader, a successful writer, a top athlete, or a musician, we all travel along the same performance curve—from novice all the way to world-class expert. And we can all take advantage of these performance engines that researchers have uncovered.

So it's no surprise that this book covers a lot of science. You will discover surprising studies from researchers from over 20 countries. But it's also a practical book, inspiring us with stories and insights from ordinary people who did extraordinary things. We are all capable of great things. But sometimes we just need a compass and a little nudge to keep us going when the going gets tough.

This book is divided into 3 parts—The Power of Purpose, The Hidden Logic of Mastery, and The Necessity of Grit—which corresponds to the 3 major engines that drive greatness. The first one covers what you *want* to do, the second what you *can* do, and the third what you *will* do. Each engine is useful on its own, but it's the combination that is the key to superior performance. Remove one and progress slows. Combine them and your performance gets a real boost.



IN SEARCH OF greatness, we are going to travel the world to discover ordinary people who do extraordinary things. We will meet famous rock stars, world-class athletes, brilliant scientists, inspiring business leaders, and successful entrepreneurs, and turn to science to uncover the secrets behind their success.

In Chapter 2, we will discover the drivers behind true passion and learn how we can apply them to become more passionate ourselves. We will visit Benjamin Bloom in Chicago whose team followed world-class pianists, swimmers, mathematicians, tennis champions, neurologists, and sculptors on their way to the top. We will map our passion profile using social roles we find in ancient civilizations and study the Summit Syndrome, a little known phenomenon that stops our growth curve if we don't watch out.

In Chapter 3, we will remove the fluff around the famous 'Why' question—purpose—and offer hands-on insights to find our own. We will meet an amateur photographer who archived 20,000 negatives using a borrowed professional scanner from a friend and a famous rock star who discovered his purpose

while making a video. We will talk with a Wharton professor whose research shows that the "What's in it for me?" question is overrated and needs to be replaced by a much more powerful question. And discover how a short 3-minute video triggered a feeling of purpose for the loneliest profession in the world. And we'll learn the powerful motivational force of primal cues and how to use them to our benefit.

In Chapter 4, we meet László Polgár who busted the talent myth by publicly declaring, before they were even born, that one of his children would become the best chess player in the world. How an obscure research paper from 1929 inspired a young researcher to run an interesting experiment that got his pupil on all popular TV shows, and how Professor Zimmerman can predict with 90 percent accuracy the performance level of any volleyball player just by asking a few questions about their serve. And we will follow Dan, a professional photographer, who wants to become a professional golfer after his first practice run with his brother.

In Chapter 5, we will uncover the little known drivers behind deep practice, the most effective way to develop our skills. We will uncover the mystery behind the fastest table tennis player in the world, why the best chess players don't have a better memory than you or me, and how we can mimic the training dynamics used by superior performers in our field. And we'll follow Josh, a national chess champion who wants to become a martial arts giant without any previous experience.

In Chapter 6, we will explore the effects of failure and success on greatness. We will listen to Professor Dweck who tells the sad story of a top chef who killed himself after losing a Michelin star. We will discover the effect on the brain of individuals who were within 1.5 miles of the World Trade Center on that tragic day, 9/11, and learn that the famous phrase from the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche—what doesn't kill us, makes us stronger—isn't completely true. There needs to be a special ingredient present to rise after failure, as Michael Jordan, one of the best basketball players, knew all too well. And we'll follow Gilles, a great hockey player on his way to the Olympics.

In Chapter 7, we'll jump into a pool and find out why optimists swim faster than pessimists, how a dog experiment that went wrong provided unexpected insights, and be confronted with the irony that what we believe about performance will actually be the basis for our future performance. We will discover what happens when you get kicked out of a famous rock band and why gamers keep gaming even if they lose all the time. We will spend time with Harvard professor Teresa Amabile whose team analyzed 12,000 diary entries and came to a surprising conclusion about motivation. And we'll discover what "being in the zone" really means and learn how we can all benefit from this enlightened state that makes us 5 times more productive and 7 times more creative.

The point of all of this is to answer two simple questions that lie at the heart of what we all would like to accomplish as executives, parents, athletes, musicians, and entrepreneurs: (1) What drives great performance?, and (2) how can we use this knowledge to help us maximize the potential in our own lives and the lives of those around us?

PART 1

THE POWER OF PURPOSE

CHAPTER 2

Cultivate the Interest Spark

We all like passionate people. Just think about the dynamic surgeon who keeps studying new techniques to save lives, the enthusiastic cook who's always looking for different ways to make a classic dish, or the creative musician who can't wait to get into the studio to record the perfect song. Passionate people inspire us. And they make us long to be passionate as well.

But most of us find it hard to be truly passionate about something. And it turns out that's because we have the wrong idea about true passion. I believed, like most of us, that one day I would run into my passion. Or that passion would find me. Almost like this romantic idea when 2 people meet and stay together forever. A destiny.

Unfortunately, that's not how passion works. Passion doesn't just pop up or stick to you forever. That's a stubborn myth. "It might come as a disappointment that passions don't

come to us all at once, as epiphanies," says Professor Angela Duckworth, "but the reality is that our early interests are fragile, vaguely defined and in need of energetic years of long cultivation and refinement."

So if passion doesn't show up at our doorstep, where can we find it? How can we get really passionate about something?

1.
The Bloom Model

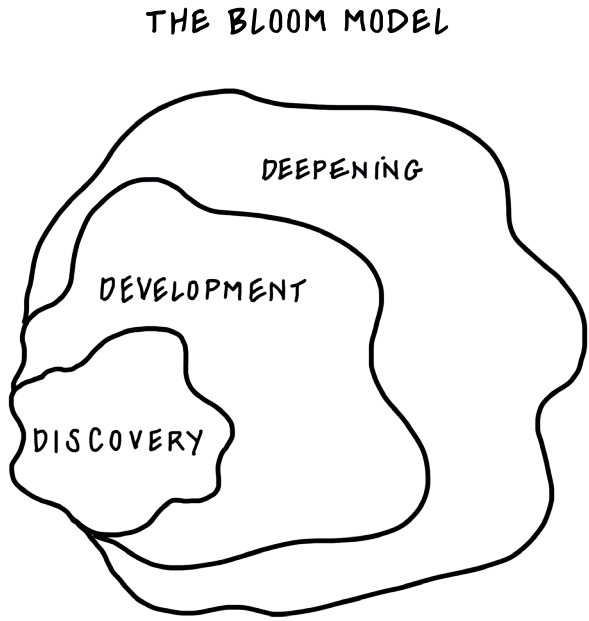
Benjamin Bloom's passion was the science of passion. During his long career, the American psychologist studied passionate people to understand the underlying scientific dynamics. His objective: to find an answer to questions like: "why is one person interested in cooking and the other is not?", "why do passionate people seem to have endless energy to pursue what they like?", and "can we all find a passion or is it genetically defined?" His amazing research shows us what passion really is and how we can cultivate a mindset to grow our own.

One of his famous studies took place at the University of Chicago. To get started, Bloom and his researchers identified 120 passionate, world-class performers in 6 different fields. They included concert pianists, Olympic swimmers, mathematicians, tennis champions, neurologists, and sculptors. All of them elite performers, winning numerous prizes and honors. Each of them considered to be in the top 1 percent in their fields.

Next, over a 4-year period, the researchers got to know these performers intimately. They knew at the start that they would learn a lot about how individuals grow and reach the top of their field. What they didn't know was that their research would stumble upon a new passion model.

Bloom's epic study revealed that passion is born out of interest and develops across 3 distinct stages. And these stages are remarkably common to the development of expert performers

in every area, even beyond the 6 fields they initially picked to study. So whether you are a pianist, a neurologist, a DJ, or a business leader heading for the top, the path you take is pretty much the same. Let's take a closer look:



The first stage is called *Discovery*. At this point, our interest is only vaguely defined. We are probably not even aware we could be onto something. The major activity is *play*. We don't have a specific goal in mind and do the activity mostly because we get praised, not so much because we like it. This is called 'extrinsic motivation.' Just think about a child learning to play an instrument or joining the baseball little league. If you take the regular external motivation away—the parents, the friends, and family offering praise—most will get bored and start something else. To keep going, our interest needs to be triggered over and over again. Our interest needs constant *external activation*.

During the second stage—*Development*—the motivational component shifts from external to internal. It's at this stage we start to invest time, not because others offer us praise, but because we get motivated by the activity itself. We are interested in what we do and start spending time to develop our skills. Play turns into *practice*. And the motivation becomes intrinsic. So where we needed others to keep the interest fire going during the first stage, we now become our own spark. And while the role of parents, friends, and family remains important, the key role is reserved for the coach who helps with practice. To move forward at this stage, our interest needs *dedication*.

The third and final stage is called *Deepening*. At this stage, individuals completely identify themselves with their field of expertise. Interest has turned into passion. Having absorbed and internalized all knowledge readily available, our focus in stage 3 is on adding a unique personal flavor to our repertoire. Our interest needs *inspiration*.

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Before we take a closer look at Discovery, the first stage of the Bloom model, here are 3 crucial things science also has to say about interest.

First, *our interests are one of the most stable psychological constructs in our mind*. In fact, researcher Low and his team discovered in 2005 that our interests are more stable than our personality. Surprising, isn't it? Once our interest profile is developed during our teens, research shows that it doesn't change much after that.

Second, *interest is a better predictor than personality*. Researcher Gundula Stoll and her colleagues launched an ambitious project looking at 1,000 young German adults over a 10-year life span. The objective: to try to answer 2 questions: (1) would our interests predict work, relationship, and health outcomes a decade later? (2) would interests be a better predictor than personality?

The results? Interest beats personality in the work arena. Work outcomes were better predicted by interest profile than by personality characteristics. People with a Realistic (definitions on page 16) or Enterprising interest were more likely to be employed and made more money 10 years later than those with other orientations. People with an Artistic or Social interest were less likely to be employed and made less money 10 years later.

But perhaps even more surprising, interests were better predictors of personal life as well. People with a Social or Conventional interest were more likely to be married and more likely to have had children than those with other interests. People with an Investigative or Enterprising interest were less likely to be married or to have had children than those with other interests.

Why? The short answer: our interests drive our motivation. We go after those goals that fit our interests. Because *we are happier if we find an interest match*. That's the third finding. According to science, we spend our lives seeking the ideal match fit between our interest profile and our environment. If there is a mismatch between the two, we are unhappy and try to make everything fall into place. A fit is key in both mental and physical health. As Steve Jobs once said, "the only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking. Don't settle."

Our interests should be the starting point for reflection on our achievement journey. They should orient our life and work goals and will provide motivation to achieve them. Ultimately, our interests won't tell us what we *can* do, that's ability, something we will look at in Part II of this book, but rather what we *should* do. Our interests are like solar energy in the desert, a reliable energy source. They are the stable motivational component in our mind that we can always depend on, creating happiness along the way. Without interest, we just won't invest the time and energy needed to go all the way to the top.

The good news is that we can all take advantage of this energy source in our mind. We just need to know how. So let's turn

once again to science and discover how we can spark our interest and grow it into a passionate fire.

2.
Find the Spark

To tap into the endless motivational well in our mind, we first have to discover our interest pattern and find a way to activate it. American psychologist and interest pioneer John Holland developed a methodology to help us. It's known as the 'Holland Code' or 'RIASEC interest scales.'

Holland's research shows there are 6 broad types of interests:

1. *Realistic interests:* realistic people are often competitive and prefer to work on concrete tasks rather than to think or talk about them. They are triggered by scientific and mechanical themes rather than cultural and aesthetic.

2. *Investigative interests:* investigative people like to work with 'data' and use their analytical skills to solve problems. They like to think and observe, to organize and understand information.

3. *Artistic interests:* creative, imaginative, inventive people who are disinterested in systematic activities and prefer to work with 'ideas and things.' They dislike structure and rules, preferring people or physical skills. They tend to be more emotional than other types.

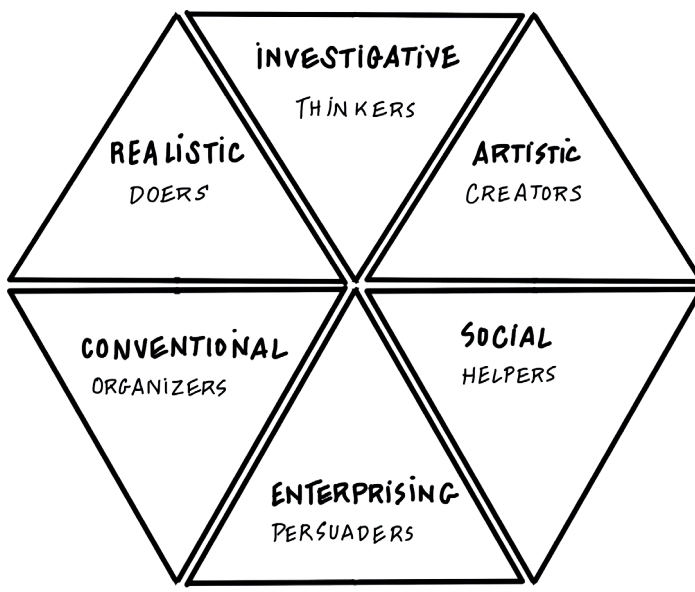
4. *Social interests:* people who prefer interacting with others. They satisfy their needs by teaching or helping and like to work closely with individuals.

5. *Enterprising interests:* people who work towards leadership roles with ambition for a high-powered career and achieving reputation, money, and status. They use their communication skills to lead and persuade others.

6. *Conventional interests:* people who prefer structured tasks. They like rules, regulations, structure, and order. They dislike unstructured work and place value on reputation, power, and status.

We all have a mix of interests but some will be (much) more dominant than others. To help us get a better feeling for the different interest categories, Professor John Johnson of Penn State linked the Holland codes to the social roles we find in ancient civilizations: hunters (Realistic), shamans (Investigative), artisans (Artistic), healers (Social), leaders (Enterprising), and lore keepers (Conventional).

THE ADAPTED HOLLAND MODEL



If you don't know your interest profile today, it's smart to take an online test or find a coach who can work with you on the topic. Having an intimate knowledge about your interest profile is a crucial first step on your achievement journey as it provides fuel for everything else you will discover later in this book.

3.
Interest Activation

Without deliberate effort, our interests don't develop. In fact, as experts Renninger and Hidi from the University of Toronto point out, "it seems likely that without support to develop interest some of the greatest achievements of humans might not have realized, such as Mozart's interest in music, Einstein's interest in physics or Navratilova's interest in tennis." To grow, interest needs activation, like plants need water.

But how can we activate our interests?

In answering this question, the first fact to point out is that *our brain craves novelty*. Unlike animals which have strong instincts to act in a certain way, babies need to learn almost everything from experience. So if the human race did not have this strong craving for novelty, our chances for survival would be minimal. As Paul Silvia, author of *Exploring the Psychology of Interest* points out, "the desire to learn new things, to explore the world, to seek novelty, to be on the lookout for change and variety is a basic drive." So to activate our interest, the first ingredient we need is novelty. We need to be exposed to things in the real world that trigger our interest—what psychologists call 'situational motivation.' Here's how I got exposed to music for example. I grew up in a small village. My mother's family was large. As most lived close by, we met often at my grandmother's. Music was important. I can't remember a get-together where we did not have an impromptu concert. At home, it was the same. We had a piano and a guitar. And I can vividly

remember, while going to sleep and kissing my mother goodnight, she would be pouring over a complex music sheet, studying a classical guitar piece. Regularly, I was dropped at Mick's music store, owned by my mother's youngest brother. He let me roam around and discover all those amazing instruments. So it wasn't long before I picked up my first guitar. My interest got activated.

And our craving for novelty doesn't stop after the Discovery stage, the first step in Bloom's passion model. Subsequent studies show us that our interests keep needing 'novelty' triggers, even in the Development and Deepening stages. More on this when we look at the Summit Syndrome later in this chapter.

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The second activation trigger we have access to is perceived value. *We need to care to raise our interest*. And to make us care, other people play a crucial role, especially during the early phases of the Discovery stage. Consider the following 15-month experiment by researcher Judith Harackiewicz and her colleagues:

The problem: according to the National Science Board, only 29 percent of all students chose an elective physics class during the last 2 years of high school. For math, the numbers are even worse: 12 percent. As you can imagine, by preparing students in mathematics and science, these courses serve as gateways to college majors—and ultimately a career in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). But with such low numbers at the start, very few students will end up with a career in these important disciplines.

The idea: if we can help parents to convey the importance (*the value*) of math and science courses to their high school kids, more children would become interested in—and therefore

take—these courses and, in the end, more would become hooked and follow a STEM career.

To find out, they recruited 188 adolescents and their parents from 108 different high schools. First, in October of 10th grade, the researchers mailed a glossy brochure titled *Making Connections: Helping Your Teen Find Value in School* to each family. The package, addressed to both parents, provided information about the importance of mathematics and science in daily life and for various careers. It also covered guidance for parents about how to talk to adolescents about potential connections between mathematics and science and the adolescents' lives.

Next, in January of 11th grade, the team mailed a brochure titled *Making Connections: Helping Your Teen With the Choices Ahead*, along with a letter giving access to a dedicated, password-protected website called *Choices Ahead*. The second brochure emphasized the same themes, focusing on the relevance of mathematics and science to everyday activities like video games, driving, and cell phone use, and preparation for college and careers. It also included additional guidance for how parents could communicate with their children and personalize the relevance of mathematics and science for them. Parents visiting the site were given the option of emailing specific links to their teens. It offered extensive resources about STEM fields and careers, links to interesting science sites, and interviews with college students who talked about the importance of math and science courses in high school.

The result: this relatively simple intervention led students whose parents were in the experimental group to take, on average, one extra semester of science and mathematics in the last 2 years of high school compared with the control group. "Parents are an untapped resource for increasing STEM motivation in adolescents," Harackiewicz points out, "and the results demonstrate that motivational theory can be applied to this important pipeline problem."

What caused the interest change? The brochures and website all highlighted the value of science *(being a scientist is great!)*

and therefore made the science courses themselves valuable *(if I want to be a scientist, this course will help me)*. As our interest profile in our teens is still in full development, it's hard at that age to imagine how a challenging math course could be important, let alone interesting. That's where others—in this example, the parents—come into the picture. They transfer value. Just like my family did, introducing me to music. It was important to them so it became important for me.

The role of parents, friends, and mentors is crucial to stimulate novelty and value, especially during the Discovery stage. Just take a closer look at the biographies of some of the greatest achievers on the planet and the early family influence becomes clearly visible.

Benjamin Bloom, the man behind the framework, discovered that a warm and supportive style at the Discovery stage is the most effective. "Perhaps the major quality of these teachers was that they made the initial learning very pleasant and rewarding. Much of the introduction to the field was a playful activity and the learning at the beginning of this stage was much like a game."

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As a mentor however, there is a thin line between showing what you find important and becoming overbearing. And research shows that the line is crossed when choice is taken away. Children who are allowed to make their own choices are more likely to develop interests later identified as passion.

In Belgium, where I live, you enter high school at 12. And if all goes well, it takes 6 years to graduate. Simplified, the educational system offers 3 options, each one a little more challenging than the other. It's an unwritten rule that kids who did well in primary school, like my son Jonas, would pick the most challenging educational package to start with and gradually take easier courses if proven too difficult. When Jonas turned 12, his primary teacher explained the options. And as expected, she indicated it

would be best for him to take on the most difficult package. But to everyone's surprise, he was not interested in the most difficult: "I don't want to study Latin. I don't like studying languages and I won't have time for other things I like much more." Even if all his friends picked the most difficult classes and we said it would be a good challenge for him, he was not going to change his mind. After some reflection, we decided not to push him any further and leave the choice up to him. Three years later, he's very happy in school. He has excellent grades and used his free time to play soccer and learn how to DJ. Recently, he decided to take on more challenging math classes as he wants to prepare himself for university. As he owned the choice, he puts in the extra effort to succeed.

4.
The Summit Syndrome

Andrew Thomson is a 36-year-old Ivy Leaguer with a dream career at an elite investment bank. He was quickly promoted from covering individual wealthy clients to managing the largest financial team in the US, overseeing 4 billion in assets. If investment banking was an Olympic sport, Andrew Thomson would be a candidate for the gold medal.

In recent months however, something changed. What started as a slight diminishing in his edge now turned into boredom. The buzz was missing. He wasn't driving himself as hard to find those opportunities that delivered exceptional returns for his clients. He ignored the friction among his fiercely competitive team members and was vulnerable to distractions. He became obsessed with completing *The New York Times* crossword puzzle every day. And much to his surprise, when friends called with a proposal to row the Atlantic, he found himself genuinely interested. He started overeating and cocktail hour became his favorite time of the day, drinking heavily. And although the firm kept treating him like a

star, he knew this couldn't last. "Did I lose my edge?" he wondered.

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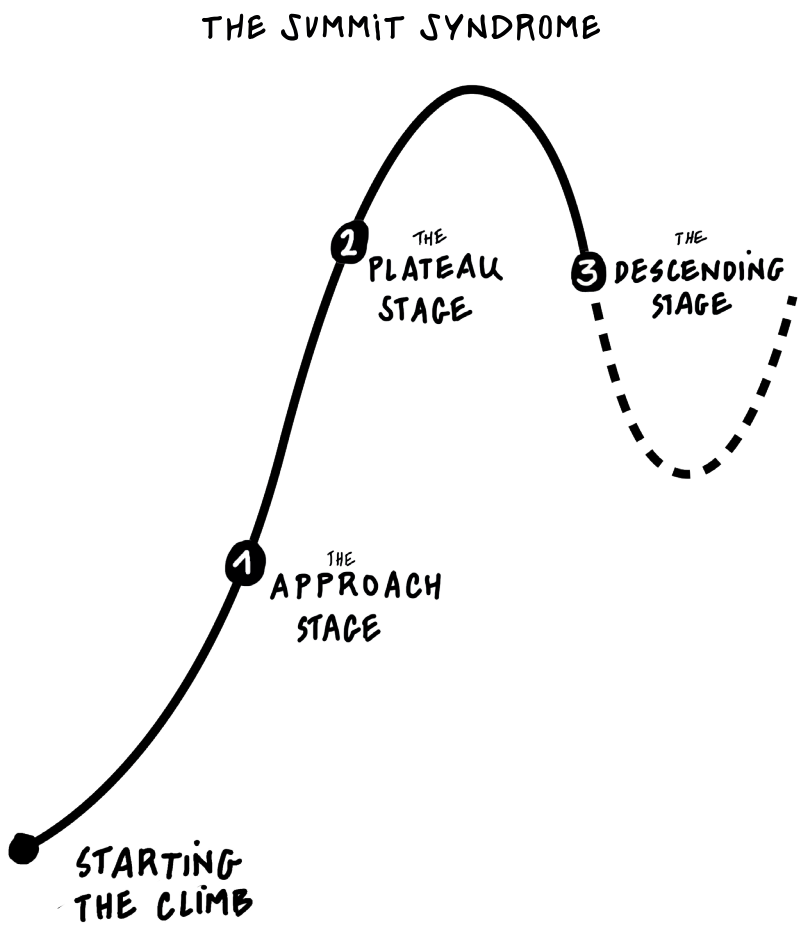
What happened with Andrew Thomson? Why did his achievement journey stop? We all go through life experiencing growth until we get stuck at a plateau. But what is actually happening when this occurs? Have we suddenly reached our limits? Is the pressure too much? Is this the famous 'Peter Principle'—where people have ventured out too far beyond their capabilities?

We learned that activation via novelty is crucial during the initial stages. But it seems we need novelty at later stages of interest development as well. And if we don't, we stop our journey or worse, move backwards and impact our performance negatively. Science calls this phenomenon the 'Summit Syndrome'.



George Parsons and Richard Pascale from Oxford University studied the Summit Syndrome for over 2 decades in companies like GE, Intel, IBM, and McKinsey. Their research reveals 3 distinct phases:

1. *The approach stage:* leaders have mastered most job challenges. Things start to come automatically. The novelty that triggers their interest fades. And so they try harder to get the adrenaline rush of the climb back.

2. *The plateau stage:* the summit has been reached and the job becomes business as usual. While a less ambitious person will start to cruise at this point, high achievers will push the pedal down even more. But the rush is gone. Everyone around them sees their success. They are socially recognized for their skills. But inside they feel empty, anxious, and disoriented. "For seasoned executives who have made a series of s-curve climbs, the dominant concern is a loss of legacy," Parsons and Pascale point out. "Having built a sterling reputation, they now wonder if those can be sustained." At this point, the first negative effects on performance will kick in.

3. *The descending stage:* performance starts to drop significantly and becomes visible for others. The individual becomes interested in meaningless activities and looks for distractions, unconsciously sabotaging further career progress.

It's interesting to point out that this phenomenon has nothing to do with burnout. In fact, it's the opposite. It is not caused by intolerable workloads. The Summit Syndrome is a sneaky passion assassin. As there isn't enough novelty anymore to feed our interest, it kills our interest development. And if things are not corrected, we end up with boreout.

Let's take a closer look at what happens with our brain when we lose interest. A recent study shows that if we repeatedly present a visual stimulus to sensation seekers, the prefrontal cortex—the accountant part of the brain which integrates factual and emotional information prior to action—shows lower involvement. The usual motivation for action is missing. In short, our brain gets numb and our neurons die.

Typically, you see this with high performers. According to research published in the *Harvard Business Review*, the faster people rise to the top, the harder the Summit Syndrome hits home.

The Summit Syndrome isn't a once-in-a-lifetime experience. On our way to the top, we have to navigate several plateaus. It's

like a stair climb in a sky scraper. But the stairs are hidden in a different location on each floor. We need to look for access to the next level. If we don't, we remain on the same floor—a plateau.

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If you feel you have reached a plateau and your interest seems to have disappeared, here are 3 ways to get back on track.

First, *actively look for and appreciate the nuances*. We know now that our brain craves novelty. By learning to look at the nuances, we keep novelty in our daily routine. And while the rush might not be the same as the one we get when starting something new, it does work to keep our interest triggered. Just look at one of my colleagues at *the performance factory*. Lysander Werbrouck is a great coach. And, as a consequence, he's very much in demand. Some days, he has 4 coaching sessions in a row. For some, this might seem like a drag. But not for him. Here's how he describes his work:

> "The days I lose my interest in coaching are rare. But that's because it's always different. Each person is different. And even with the same coachee, no 2 sessions are the same. Here's what I did yesterday for example. My first coachee: a highly-experienced middle manager going through a leadership crisis. She struggled to connect with her team after promotion. We explored different options but, most of all, I energized her to tackle this issue. My second coachee: a newly-promoted senior manager—a rising star—who used to be able to control his environment. His new position did not allow this and he felt lost. Together, we brainstormed on what success would look like and how he could influence it. We are still far from a final version of that document but, by structuring his efforts, his comfort level very much increased. During my third session, I worked with a talented change coach. Her challenge: to create an interactive workshop for a target group of 400+ colleagues. She wanted me to challenge

the quality of the work so far. It turned out to be fantastic. I couldn't add much. When I told her I was surprised she wanted feedback on something that was already top notch, I discovered there was an issue with her boss. We worked on that for the remaining time and she left happy. During the last session of the day, my coachee indicated he wanted a new job. After a recent reorganization, he was able to secure a new role that looked very appealing on paper but turned out to be something he didn't like at all. To get him going, we mapped all of the stakeholders and developed a networking plan. And when I got home, I found a thank you email in my inbox from one of my coachees I worked with a few weeks before. He had found a new senior position in his company. If someone calls my days boring, I don't understand."

Second, *find and ride the next wave*. Thomson understood he had to evolve to the next level. The winning formula that got him there became a handicap to move up. When he only had a few clients, he was able to deliver excellent service. Today, with over 80 clients and 4 billion under management, he hit a wall. After some in-depth reflection and several talks with his family, friends, and coach, Thomson decided to stay on in his current role but re-think it completely. To do so, he needed to overhaul his way of working and broaden his skill set substantially. He needed to grow to succeed. To move to the next level, he would have to become (1) a better team leader. This included learning how to delegate and coach people to maximize their unique skill set. He also needed to be (2) a better internal networker, playing a positive role in company-wide task forces. (3) A better investor by learning new skills to develop innovative solutions for increasingly demanding clients. And, last but not least, he needed to become (4) a better husband and father. Reconnect with his family and take on an active part in the lives of his loved ones.

"Anticipating the Summit Syndrome and dealing with it in its earliest stages can revitalize careers and propel talented leaders to greater heights," experts Parsons and Pascale point out. "[We] must remember that a successful career is not a straight line to the top. It's a series of s-curves, each of which begins with a major promotion or job redefinition."

About a year after I finished my second book, *The Execution Shortcut*, I felt I was losing my interest in writing (and therefore also my motivation). The promotional tour was finished and I had no inspiration to start writing a third book. I reached a plateau and knew I had to find a way to move to the next level or I would soon become frustrated. I decided to study 10 expert speakers who inspired me—who were ahead on the curve—and see what the next level looked like. It didn't take long to see quite a few missing pieces. I had a lot of work to do. But there was one thing that really jumped out: blogging. All of the speakers I admired were enthusiastic bloggers. And I wasn't.

I challenged myself to find out why I didn't write blogs. "It's too superficial" I told myself and "It's only for marketing." But the honest answer was that I had no clue how to do it and was afraid to fail. As boredom is one of the things I dread most, I finally decided to jump in. The first thing I did was to find a coach for the task ahead of me. Jannik, a brilliant young guy, 15 years my junior, knows everything there is to know about websites and blogs. With his help, I started publishing posts every Friday. Today, several years later, I can't believe that I didn't start earlier. I love to blog. It's a fantastic way to write about different topics in different styles (novelty) and testing ideas for a new book (value).

The third and final way to get back on track is to *connect your interest with purpose*. Passion is interest on steroids that needs novelty and perceived value to keep going. Science found there is another motivational engine you can tap into: purpose. Let's go to Chapter 3 and discover why a famous rock star gets emotional about a special project, an amateur photographer digitizes 20,000 photos with a borrowed scanner, and a tomato harvester decides to boost his productivity after

watching a 3-minute video.

UNLOCK THE SCIENTIFIC SECRETS OF WORLD-CLASS PERFORMERS

Most people believe the road to success is paved with passion, talent, and some luck. That's a mistake, says Prof. De Flander. In The Art of Performance, he reveals the extraordinary science behind superior performance and, most importantly, how anyone can achieve it.

In this provocative and persuasive new book, De Flander explores the mindset of the highly successful and uses 6 decades of scientific research to reveal 3 proven performance principles. Drawing on startling statistics and cutting-edge insights, he packages science into a fascinating, readable narrative packed with irresistible and practical takeaways to help readers be more successful in life and work.

"Engaging and provocative. This book will lead you to a level of performance you never considered possible. A game changer!"
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JEROEN DE FLANDER, the #1 bestselling author of *Strategy Execution Heroes* and *The Execution Shortcut*, is one of the world's most influential thinkers on strategy execution and a highly regarded keynote speaker. He has shared the stage with prominent thinkers like Michael Porter, Costas Markides, Roger Martin, Robert Kaplan and David Norton and helped more than 36,000 managers in 40+ countries master the necessary leadership skills. His popular blog has 45,000 weekly readers and his books have been translated into 6 languages, reaching the Amazon bestseller list in 5 countries. *Strategy Execution Heroes* was nominated Book of the Year in the Netherlands.

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