nextgenforensic
A community blog for the nextgen in the field of sexual offending research and treatment

Going from good to great

David Prescott

This blog results from a year or so of conversations with a very patient Kelly Babchishin. Since the emergence of the *NextGenForensic* blog, I have come to think of myself increasingly as the older generation. This is not just bemused self-deprecation; the existence of a next generation raises questions for the rest of us. How do we make the most of career transitions? How do we succeed and fail the most effectively that we can? And for some of us, how do we become elders in the field without simply becoming cranky oldsters? As an emerging professional, I sometimes experienced cruel undermining by those who should have mentored me. Michael Seto's message to newer forensic psychologists on this blog last year was an outstanding start to many of these conversations.

So what should professionals know as we move from being one generation to the next? For me, one of the greatest surprises has been that professionals often do not improve in their abilities nearly as much as they think they do. When we stop to examine our competencies, have we become more effective at our outcomes or more effective at negotiating workplace challenges? Have we gained more in the acquisition of competence or simply built confidence?

"Decades of research has shown that there can be more variability among therapists than there is between treatment models."

These are important questions, especially in psychology. For example, decades of research has shown that there can be more variability among therapists than there is between treatment models (Wampold, 2015;Wampold & Brown, 2005). How can that be? One

possible answer is in therapist self-assessment bias. Indeed, in 2012 Steven Walfish and his colleagues surveyed therapists in all 50 of the United States and found that, in common with other professions, the average clinician rates their performance and clinical skills at the 80th percentile. 25% rate themselves at the 90th percentile, and none rated themselves as below average. The authors also found that "clinicians tended to overestimate their rates of client improvement and underestimate their rates of client deterioration" (p. 632). The good news in this study is that therapists want to excel at their work. The bad news may be what other studies have found; that the least competent professionals often believe themselves to be among the most competent (Hiatt & Hargrave, 1995).

Clearly, the above findings have implications for one's long-term professional trajectory. Indeed, those great elders of our field, Quinsey, Harris, Rice, and Cormier summarized their perspective succinctly in 2005: "People are not now as smart as they think; people used to be smarter than we now think they were." (2005). The same authors offered a devastating review of methods commonly thought to improve professional practice (e.g., certification processes, continuing education requirements, which all too often fail to ensure the competence for which they are designed). Our education and training are only as good as our efforts to implement what we learn fully and deliberately. Too often, it seems that confidence improves throughout our career while competence does not. Perhaps the key to effective professional development, and the prevention of confidence outpacing competence, lies as much in humility as in hard work.

"Often, our best accomplishments aren't in performing tasks, but how we think and prepare for those tasks, and then reflect on our actions after the fact."

A fascinating debate has raged in some quarters of society, most recently brought to the foreground by Malcolm Gladwell. In his book, Outliers, Gladwell introduced the oft-quoted "10,000-hour rule," which holds that the most effective professionals ("experts") have practiced their craft for 10,000 hours or more. An entertaining work, many have argued that it missed the point. For example, K. Anders Ericsson has argued persuasively that it is not

simply the hours, but the deliberateness of one's practice that matters most (defined as engagement in structured activities created specifically to improve performance in a domain). In a recent chapter, Scott Miller and I provided data showing the importance of deliberate, solitary practice aimed at producing better client outcomes. Often, our best accomplishments aren't in performing tasks, but how we think and prepare for those tasks, and then reflect on our actions after the fact.

Most recently, a meta-analysis by Brooke Macnamara and her colleagues (2014) has examined this very issue. They found considerable variability in the contribution of deliberate practice to expertise across various endeavors and concluded that deliberate practice is important, but that its contribution to expert performance has been over-rated. This should come as no surprise when one considers the many ways that deliberate practice occurs. Medical research shows surgeons improve with practice (known as the surgeon volume effect). Sadly, no one has been able to find a "forensic volume effect." The nearest research (in my view) might be the fascinating research on adversarial bias, which has found that evaluators' findings on measures such as Hare's Psychopathy Checklist – Revised are often biased in the direction most sympathetic to the party who hired them.

So what should we do? It seems to me that going from good to great involves:

1. Adding getting feedback from other professionals (and in many cases, our clients themselves) in addition to deliberate practice; we need to know how much we are hitting our mark.

2. Studying how others go about their practices, for better or worse

3. Staying abreast of trends in as many areas of forensic practice as possible.

4. Most importantly, never, ever overestimating or even being entirely satisfied with our performance.

"Professional improvement comes neither naturally nor easily, and often involves having to rethink what we believe we know."

How can we elders best help the next generation? In keeping with the above recommendations, I don't entirely know and wouldn't presume to guess. I often hope that those starting out in the field will move beyond attempting to make a name for themselves to making a genuine and lasting contribution to the field (noting that sometimes the latter can come at the expense of the former). More importantly, though, I hope that all professionals of all ages — including the elders among us — will take to heart that professional improvement comes neither naturally nor easily, and often involves having to rethink what we believe we know.

David Prescott is the Director of Professional Development and Quality Improvement for the Becket Family of Services located across northern New England. He has worked in and around inpatient settings for three decades and specializes in working with individuals who have sexually abused as well as those who have experienced trauma. David has produced 13 book projects and numerous articles and chapters in the areas of assessing and treating sexual violence and trauma. He is a past president of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers, the largest professional organization of its kind in the world. He is also the 2014 recipient of that organization's Distinguished Contribution award.

Suggested citation:
Prescott, D. (2015, May 10). *Going From Good to Great* [Weblog post]. Retrieved from http://wp.me/p2RS15-9R.