

DEVELOPING MANAGEMENT EXPERTISE THROUGH DELIBERATE PRACTICE: LESSONS FROM BEHIND THE CATCHER'S MASK

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ABSTRACT

An ongoing challenge is how to develop functional experts (e.g., engineers, accountants) in preparation for roles in project, department, or organization leadership. Research suggests that developing expertise in one task domain is not necessarily useful preparation for developing expertise in another task domain. Expertise is specific to the domain, and the primary mechanism for developing expertise is deliberate practice. I present the case of major league baseball managers and players as an example of the factors that could allow a person to perform in a functional position (e.g., catcher) while preparing for a managerial position.

OVERVIEW

In 1982 Patrick L. Borders joined professional baseball as an 18-year-old third baseman, playing in the minor leagues for the Toronto Blue Jays organization. We can imagine that at the time one of his dreams was to eventually play in the major leagues. On April 6, 1988 he accomplished this dream when he made his major league debut as a catcher for the Toronto Blue Jays in a game against the Kansas City Royals. Now, 23 years later, Pat is still playing baseball. This time his dream is to make it back to the major leagues as a manager, once his playing career is over [1] [2].

The current challenge for Pat is similar to the challenge that many organizations face when trying to prepare individuals for future management positions. Specifically, Pat's challenge is how to develop management skills while at the same time performing (and developing skill in) a non-managerial, functional role. In business we visualize the functional expert (e.g., engineer, accountant, human resource specialist) who needs to be prepared for a future role in project, department, or senior management. The extant literature on expertise would suggest that the transition from a functional role to a managerial role is similar to moving from one task domain (e.g., chess playing) to another (e.g., playing a musical instrument).

Ericsson [3] and others [e.g., 4] have worked to develop a model of expertise that provides some help in understanding how expertise develops. A central theme in their model is that deliberate practice is a key factor in the development of expertise in any domain. In particular, the research findings suggest that deliberate practice must include attention by the learner to learning goals, processes, and feedback in order to develop a knowledge structure that contains strong connections. If deliberate practice is a critical factor in developing an individual's knowledge structure within a task domain then management development specialists, and baseball players who want to be managers, should consider how to apply deliberate practice to their specific situations.

Two major concerns become apparent when trying to apply knowledge about the need for deliberate practice to the area of management development. First, cognitive psychologists have concluded that 10 years is a typical duration for deliberate practice to produce expert-level performance. Obviously, universities do not have access to most students for a 10 year time-period, and organizations may not be

able to wait for individuals to pass through lengthy development programs. Second, as discussed already, unlike chess players or musicians, a manager may spend much of his or her initial years working in a task domain different from management. The result is significant hours of practice and experience in a functional area (e.g., accounting, sales), but very little practice or experience in the area of management. An analogy is that of a major league first baseman. A ten-year career as a first baseman, including significant amounts of deliberate practice as a first baseman, may make the athlete an expert in the domain of playing first base, but may have little effect on the individual's ability to become an expert baseball-team manager. John Olerud, a major league first baseman, once described playing first base in the following way: "If the ball is hit to anyone but me, I'm moving to the bag, then turning to take the throw. I'll be almost to the bag and hear a tremendous cheer from the crowd – and by the time I look up the ball is on its way" [5, p. 6].

Mr. Olerud's comments remind us of the nature of work in a functional area. Specifically, the functional worker often has a limited view of the entire operation, and thus, has less opportunity to 'practice' management. In the case of baseball, the radio broadcaster, the benchwarmer, and the season ticket holder sitting in the stands may have better opportunities to practice managing a baseball team than would a first baseman. A bench warmer, for example, has a field of vision that includes the entire baseball field, and, if interested, has the time to play mental simulations consistent with the characteristics of deliberate practice (i.e., set learning goals, attending to the process, and receiving feedback). While Mr. Olerud is considered by many to be an expert first baseman, it is not clear that his experience as a first baseman is sufficient to prepare him to become an expert team-manager.

The word *attention* highlights the behavioral and attitudinal nature of deliberate practice, and places primary responsibility for practicing on the learner. Thus, while a trainer might set goals for a potential learner or give feedback during a learning process, the learning activity is only considered deliberate practice (and therefore, has the effect of improving expertise) if the learner attends to the goals, process, and feedback. In music this means that the viola student who gives more attention to learning goals, processes, and feedback will develop a higher level of viola expertise than will the viola student who gives less attention to learning goals, processes, and feedback. When we think about a baseball player practicing managerial behaviors the player who gives more attention to learning to become a manager will be more successful as a manager than will a player who focuses only on playing. Notice the conundrum. A future manager must attend to learning goals, processes, and feedback related to the domain of managing while performing and attending to learning goals, process, and feedback related to the domain of playing. A qualitative analysis of current baseball managers seems to suggest that some positions may be more suitable for simultaneously playing baseball and practicing to become a manager, and that some players exhibit behaviors and attitudes consistent with deliberate practice.

Playing Position

Current thinking in the popular press suggests that the catching position is one that provides the greatest opportunity for a player to practice management behaviors. Nine of the 29 current managers with major league or minor league playing experience played catcher. Nine played outfield, five played shortstop, and the remainder first base (2), second base (1), or third base (3). None of the current managers played a significant number of games as pitchers. The catching position has been the one to gather the most attention recently because the last six World Series Champions have been managed by former catchers (i.e., Joe Torre, Bob Brenly, Mike Scioscia, Jack McKeon), and a significant amount of former catchers hold positions as bench coaches (i.e., an assistant manager) and baseball operations positions.

By drawing an analogy between developing future baseball managers from baseball players to developing future business managers from functional employees we can conclude that certain positions have more opportunities to perform deliberate practice than others. The catcher position in baseball is one that gives a player the ability to observe the entire field of play and to watch most plays from start to finish. A catcher who wishes to practice managing through mental simulation is in a good position to seek and receive feedback. In addition, the catcher position possesses certain job responsibilities that require the player to think like a manager and to pay attention to what the manager is doing. Therefore, given an interest in learning, a catcher has the ability practice management behaviors and to compare his decisions to those of the manager. Such opportunities may be less available to people playing other positions with a limit view of the field and who aren't given access to the manager's thinking as a requirement for performing their roles.

As with most stories it is important to come back to the beginning of the story as I bring this paper to a close. At the beginning I introduced Patrick Borders and his interest to become a major league manager. Will he reach his goal? The answer is obviously not without uncertainty, but one thing we can say is that Pat is in a position that provides numerous opportunities to practice managing and he appears to exhibit the behaviors and attitudes necessary to successfully practice managing. The following quotes seem to summarize it best. Pat has 22 years experience playing, most of it as a catcher. In addition, he has a strong interest to learn managerial skills and has done so during most of his career.

'He took to catching like a duck to water,' Gillick said. 'I think within two years he was in the big leagues catching. And as it turned out, he was MVP of the 1992 World Series catching. He's just a real baseball rat. He's a real gamer, a guy who loves the game and plays hard. He's a guy that calls a good game and gives a lot of confidence to the pitchers.' [6]

'He's definitely the type,' said Mariners manager Bob Melvin, also a former catcher. 'He is still very well respected for what he does behind the plate. In Toronto, he was the captain of that team. He'd be very well-suited for coaching.' Not yet, though, because Borders still loves to play. He's one of the first on the practice field and among the last to leave. 'You can barely get him out of the ballpark when the day's over,' Melvin said. 'I'd rather not go back to the hotel and watch TV all night,' Borders explained. 'Maybe there's something around here I can do to learn or help out, and it's definitely a more fun atmosphere.' [2]

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