

## Do the Best Performers Also Provide the Best Advice?

### Description

Whether in music, sports, fitness, or in business, there's often a tendency for us to assume that the best performers in any domain have the most valuable advice to offer.

Of course, there's a common counter-narrative which suggests that sometimes the [best athletes](#), the [top performers at work](#), and the [most shredded folks at the gym](#), don't necessarily make the best teachers.

So...which is it? Is a person's performance a pretty good predictor of the quality of their advice? Or are performance and advice-giving two very different things?

### A series of studies

A trio of researchers ([Levari et al., 2022](#)) conducted a series of studies to explore this further.

#### Study #1: Do we look to the best performers for advice?

The first order of business was to find out if we do in fact have a tendency to value the best performers' advice over that of others. And instead of asking people this directly (because, in the words of Gregory House, M.D., "[everybody lies](#)"), the researchers put together a study where participants had to play a game, and could choose whose advice they wanted to receive.

And as expected, when given a choice of players (e.g. the player with the best score, the player with the worst score, players with scores slightly better or worse than them, or players with about the same score, or players anywhere from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile), most – though by no means all – participants' choices suggested that they expected the best advice to come from either the single best-scoring person, or someone who performed at the upper range of scores.

So...do top performers actually provide the best advice?

#### Study #2: Do top performers give the best advice?

To answer this question, a group of 100 participants were recruited to play a “Word Scramble” game. Which involved finding as many words as possible in a grid of letters. Kind of like the sort of word search game you’d find on the back of a cereal box, except that these folks were only allowed 60 seconds per round to search.

After six rounds, they were asked to write down any advice that they thought would help future participants “do as well as possible in the game.” Advice that included tips like “Look for an ‘s’ or an ‘ed’ to be able to attach onto words to make them plural or the past tense” or “Look for short words, at least three letters, as longer words don’t give you more points.”

These advice-giving participants (or “advisors”) were also asked to estimate how much they thought their advice would help a future participant’s performance (0=0% or not at all; 100=100% or a lot).<sup>1</sup>

## Time to play

The researchers then recruited 2100 participants to play the Word Scramble game. Everyone played one round, and were then randomly assigned to either a **no-advice group** (where they received no advice), or an **advice group** (where they received advice from one of the past participants).

After completing five more rounds, the participants rated the **quality** of the advice they received, and also estimated how much it **improved** their performance.

So...did the advisors’ advice help participants improve their scores?

## Who improved the most?

To find out, the researchers compared the participants’ scores in round one, with the average of their scores in rounds 2-6. They also compared the average improvement of the advice group (which received advice after round one) to the average improvement of the group that received no advice at all.

Not surprisingly, the group that received advice did improve more than the group that received no advice.

But was there any difference in improvement amongst those in the advice group, depending on the source of the advice? Like, did the best players’ advice lead to greater improvements than the advice of other players?

## Wait...what?

Well...no.

Turns out there was **no relationship** between how well an advisor did on the game, and how well their advisees did. In other words, participants who received advice from the best performers didn’t improve

any more than those who received advice from worse performers.

Surprised? Well, just wait until you hear the next bit...

## What?!

Advisees were asked to rate how helpful they found the advice they received, and to what degree they believed it improved their performance. And what's fascinating, is that even though the best players' advice was no more helpful in improving performance than the worse players' advice, that is not how the advisees *perceived* it.

In fact, they rated the best players' advice as being *more* helpful and performance-enhancing than the advice provided by worse performers! Even if it actually wasn't!

What's crazy about this, is that the advisees *were never told* how well the person who gave them advice performed on the game. So what was it about the best players' advice that made the advisees overvalue the helpfulness of the advice?

Was it something about the language or the way the advice *sounded*? Like, maybe the best players sounded more confident or authoritative in their advice?

Or was it related more to the *implementation* of the advice, like how easy it felt to put into action? Perhaps the best players gave clearer, or more concrete and specific tips?

## What made the advice seem so good?

Well, the researchers put together a couple more studies to try to find out. And ultimately, they found that the main thing that made the best players' advice seem higher-quality was related to neither the language or implementation of the advice.

The biggest factor was the *number of suggestions*. The greater the number of specific suggestions provided, the more highly the participants seemed to value the advice. Even if there was no relationship between this advice and their actual improvement on the game.

Which begs the question...why the heck wasn't the best performers' advice more helpful?

## Three reasons

The researchers provide three potential reasons.

### Reason #1: Lack of explicit knowledge

A lot of top performers may not have a lot of explicit knowledge about the skills they're performing. For instance, once you learn how to do vibrato, or if you learned it at a young age and haven't thought about it for years, you may be hard pressed to describe what exactly your fingers/hand/wrist/arm are doing.

### **Reason #2: Communication skills**

Even if you do know exactly what your body is doing, you might have difficulty verbalizing or articulating the steps involved, in a way that is easy for the beginner to grasp or implement.

### **Reason #3: Overwhelm?**

Another possibility is that the advisees may not have been capable of using all of the best performers' advice all at once. And that those who successfully used just one or two pieces of advice from worse performers ended up doing better than those who unsuccessfully tried to use all of the advice provided by the best performers.

So what are we to make of all of this?

## **Takeaways**

Well, as fascinating as I found the set of studies to be, it's tricky to try to draw definite conclusions from the findings as related to high-level skill.

Because the big sticking point here – as the authors of the studies acknowledge – is that the advice-givers in this study were not world-class experts in Word Scramble. And given that the best performers really only had 6 minutes of Word Scramble practice or experience under their belt, it's likely that they achieved top scores not through hard-won expertise and a deep understanding of the game through extensive practice, but through intuition or natural ability. Which might be hard for them to pass on or share, in a way that the advisees could apply to their own efforts to learn, grow, and improve.

So I don't think the study is saying that it's not worth seeking advice from the best musicians, athletes, entrepreneurs, or chefs we can. But more that their performance ability is not a guarantee of the quality of their advice.

So whether it's the musical prodigy who effortlessly plays circles around everyone else, or the genetic lottery winner at the gym lifting insane amounts of weight, sure, their advice *might* be really useful. But it's also possible that you'd get even more valuable advice from the late bloomer who may not yet be performing at quite the same level, but is quietly working diligently and thoughtfully to get there someday.

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## **References**

Levari, D. E., Gilbert, D. T., & Wilson, T. D. (2022). Tips From the Top: Do the Best Performers Really Give the Best Advice? *Psychological Science*, 33(5), 685–698.  
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