

Specialize, prioritize and capitalize: How star performers stay on top

Written by Julie Desmond

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One characteristic common to top performers is an ability to set and reach their goals. They don't have more time than anyone else; they share a clock with the rest of us, a straight-up 24 new hours every day. But they use those hours effectively and that ensures their success. Accomplished professionals know they can't do it all. They learn to specialize, prioritize and then capitalize in order to succeed.

Dr. Anne Moore at Tria keeps my family's aches and pains at bay --no small feat in a household comprised of avid athletes and old people. People trust Dr. Moore because first, they like her, and, importantly, she specializes: she focuses her professional time and energy on sports medicine. She might also have knowledge about music and art and staining a deck, but if she tried to be an authority on each of those topics, it would hinder her from becoming an expert in the area that matters most to her.

By specializing in a specific industry, genre, sport or product, energy and time is invested in developing deeper knowledge, better insights and improved competency in that area. Becoming the go-to-guy for a certain type of information strengthens the capacity to take on greater challenges in that area.

Specialized does not mean single-minded. Michael Jordan never reached the heights in baseball or golf that he was able to achieve in basketball, but that doesn't keep him from playing other sports. Specializing means letting someone else pitch, if you're being paid to catch. It means sometimes you delegate, letting people who specialize differently do their thing for you so that you can do your thing better.

Once a specialty reveals itself, prioritize within it. Arrange tasks according to importance or urgency, and tackle each one in order. A salesperson delays writing a report in order to meet a prospective client for lunch. An analyst, on the other hand, will likely postpone a lunch with his buddies because he has to meet a reporting deadline.

Star Performers realize that no one is perfect. The pros at the Art Institute of Chicago took a high tech look at Picasso's paintings and discovered that he changed his paintings numerous times between initial sketch and finished masterpiece. How long did Michelangelo work on the Sistine Chapel? Was it perfect? Did he think so? The difference between the Star Performer and the Average Guy is only partly a difference in God-given gifts; a bigger differentiator is an ability to work for progress, not perfection.

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