

THE  
ART  
OF

PERFORMANCE

*“A gem—  
evidence-based,  
insightful”*

PROF. COSTAS MARKIDES  
LONDON BUSINESS SCHOOL

*“Inspiring and thought  
provoking”*

BERT STEVENS  
VP NIKE

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!”*

MARSHALL GOLDSMITH – NEW YORK TIMES #1 BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF TRIGGERS, MOJO, AND WHAT GOT YOU HERE WON'T GET YOU THERE

*“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”*

COSTAS MARKIDES – PROFESSOR OF STRATEGY AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP – LONDON BUSINESS SCHOOL

*“Inspiring and thought provoking. The Art of Performance will set you on the path to be the best you can be”*

BERT STEVENS – VICE PRESIDENT NORTH AMERICA OPERATIONS – NIKE

*“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”*

DENIS MACHUEL – GLOBAL CEO – SODEXO

*“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!”*

STEFAN MERCKX – GLOBAL CEO – CARTAMUNDI

*“If success can be the result of hard work, top performance is a work of fine art. An attitude. A lifelong quest. Pole position for all your challenges. Jeroen shows you the way”*

DIXIE DANSERCOER – POLAR EXPLORER, RECORD HOLDER & ULTRA RUNNER

*“One of the best business books I have read in years – data-driven insights from a broad spectrum of detailed research, combined with real-life journeys of transformation”*

NICK TAYLOR – MANAGING DIRECTOR UK & IRELAND CYBER SECURITY – ACCENTURE

## 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

**I**t'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 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



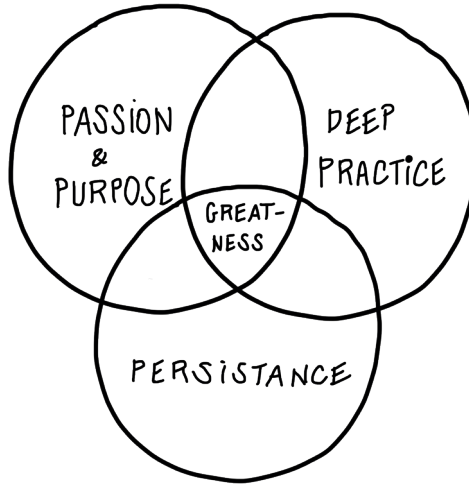
us. Most of us haven't caught up to the underlying elements that drive individual performance and still operate from the assumption that greatness is driven by talent, IQ, and luck. The goal of this book is to change that. In the next 160 pages, I will use inspiring research to show you that greatness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

## THE 3 ENGINES OF GREATNESS



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?

# 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!”

MARSHALL GOLDSMITH | New York Times #1 best-selling author of *Triggers*, *Mojo*, and *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*

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DENIS MACHUEL | Global CEO Sodexo

“Pole position for all your challenges. Jeroen shows you the way”

DIXIE DANSERCOER | Polar Explorer, Record Holder & Ultra Runner

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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.

ISBN 978-908148738-2



business & economics / personal success