The Power of Solitary Practice

Anders Ericsson is a research psychologist at Florida State University. In a now-famous experiment, he and his colleagues compared three groups of expert violinists at the elite Music Academy in West Berlin. The researchers asked the professors to divide the students into three groups: the "best violinists," the "good violinists," and a third group training to be violin teachers rather than performers.

They found a striking difference among the groups. All three groups spent the same amount of time -- over fifty hours a week -- participating in music-related activities. But the two best groups spent most of their music-related time practicing in solitude. The best violinists rated "practice alone" as the most important of all their music-related activities.

Ericsson and his cohorts found similar effects of solitude when they studied other kinds of expert performers. "Serious study alone" is the strongest predictor of skill for tournament-rated chess players ... College students who tend to study alone learn more over time than those who work in groups. Even elite athletes in team sports often spend unusual amounts of time in solitary practice.

What's so magical about solitude? In many fields ... it's only when you're alone that you can engage in Deliberate Practice, which [Ericsson] has identified as the key to exceptional achievement. When you practice deliberately, you identify the tasks or knowledge that are just out of your reach, strive to upgrade your performance, monitor your progress, and revise accordingly. Practice sessions that fall short of this standard are not only less useful -- they're counterproductive. They reinforce existing cognitive mechanisms instead of improving them.

Deliberate Practice is best conducted alone for several reasons. It takes intense concentration, and other people can be distracting. It requires deep motivation, often self-generated. But most important, it involves working on the task that's most challenging to you personally. Only when you're alone can you go directly to the part that's challenging to you. If you want to improve what you're doing, you have to be the one who generates the move.

Excerpted from *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* by Susan Cain

Please answer the Reading Questions on the back of this sheet.
Reading Questions

1. What is the strongest predictor of skill for tournament-rated chess players?

2. What is the key to exceptional achievement?

3. Name four steps followed in deliberate practice.

4. Why are practice sessions that don't follow these steps counterproductive?

5. Name two reasons why deliberate practice is best conducted alone.