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The Secret of Great Performances

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The secret of a great performance, in any field, is seeing yourself as the audience sees you, not as you want to be seen. It sounds easy but it's not.

Any of us can sit in an audience and accurately evaluate the person on stage. One comedian is funny; another is not. If we don't know the performer, it's easy to be dispassionate about the performance and see it for what it is.

This detachment evaporates when it's *you* on stage. Then your ego and your familiarity with the material distort your perception and keep you from accurately seeing the performance. You may start obsessing over details and miss the big picture. You may see your performance as better or worse than it really is and be drawn into fatal mistakes as a result.

Almost everything we do for others is a "performance". This includes every art form but also most business and social interactions. We are presenting a product to an audience and hoping they will buy it. The audience can be six million viewers on TV or just one potential customer in front of you. If you are the customer, you know what you want, but when you become the seller, your vision of what the customer wants is clouded by your own emotional needs.

It's a fact of life: Most performers are not very good. They make the audience cringe with what they think is a great performance, but everyone else knows it isn't. Diplomacy may require that the audience applaud anyway—in public at least. In private, though, they turn their attention elsewhere and don't come back to that performer again.

Why does the audience lie? We all do it because we don't want to hurt the performer's feelings. We know instinctively that if the performer knew how we

really felt, he would get upset. In all likelihood, he would become either depressed or angry, maybe even vengeful and violent, so we all learn to hold our tongues. We'll talk freely to others about the performance we just saw, but we will be honest to the performer only if it was spectacularly good.

We might want to offer "constructive criticism" to the performer, but this is risky and costly. The great irony of performance is that the people who are most in need of advice are those least capable of accepting it. Their ego requires a positive evaluation, because otherwise they'll be crushed by shame. It's a self-defeating cycle: The fear of humiliation on stage drives people into delusions and denial which eventually result in their humiliation on stage.

The process can also work in the other direction. Someone can put on a fantastic performance, as seen by the audience, but then discard it as worthless. They dwell on microscopic imperfections in the show, while neglecting the fact that the audience loved the whole package.

Accurately evaluating your own performance is one of the hardest tasks on Earth. It's easy to do if you have no stake in the outcome, but as soon as you become invested in something, your perception gets skewed. Emotions instead of facts start dictating your evaluation.

In some cases, your audience will give you immediate hard feedback on how you are doing. Stand-up comedians operate in this environment. Either the audience laughs or it doesn't, and it's pretty easy to tell polite laughter from the uncontrollable kind. Making people laugh is a brutal business, but at least you know where you stand.

Most other kinds of performance

don't provide such reliable feedback. When you lose a sale, you usually don't know exactly why. As soon as something valuable is at stake (money, a job, love, etc.), a wall goes up between the buyer and seller. The buyer holds his cards close to his chest and the seller can only guess what they are. Rarely are the cards laid on the table, even after the fact, so the seller can see what he did wrong.

If you ask most people what makes a great performance, they'll probably say "practice, practice, practice". Wrong! Practice often means just repeating the same dumb mistakes over and over. The key to success in any field is aggressively honing and fine-tuning your performance, seeking out accurate feedback and responding to it.

When no audience member is available to supply that feedback, you have to do it yourself. The great performers are able to sit in their own audience and view their performance with detachment. They radio their observations to the guy on stage, who adjusts his performance accordingly.

Most people are just too narcissistic and self-centered to pull it off. They can't step outside of themselves to see their behavior as others see it. They may succeed by dumb luck but not by skill.

There is no easy remedy for this. You can't make detachment happen in others, only in yourself. No matter how much may be at stake in your performance, you have to be able to release yourself from it, drift to the ceiling and see it from afar. If it wasn't you on stage but someone else, what would you be thinking?

It's both easy and incredibly hard.

—G.C.

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