Most of us go through life trying to do our best at whatever we do, whether it's our job, family, school or anything else. I feel that way. I try my best. But some time ago, I came to a realization that I wasn't getting much better at the things I cared most about, whether it was being a husband or a friend or a professional or teammate, and I wasn't improving much at those things even though I was spending a lot of time working hard at them. I've since realized from conversations I've had and from research that this stagnation, despite hard work, turns out to be pretty common.

So I'd like to share with you some insights into why that is and what we can all do about it. What I've learned is that the most effective people and teams in any domain do something we can all emulate. They go through life deliberately alternating between two zones: the learning zone and the performance zone.

The learning zone is when our goal is to improve. Then we do activities designed for improvement, concentrating on what we haven't mastered yet, which means we have to expect to make mistakes, knowing that we will learn from them. That is very different from what we do when we're in our performance zone, which is when our goal is to do something as best as we can, to execute. Then we concentrate on what we have already mastered and we try to minimize mistakes.

Both of these zones should be part of our lives, but being clear about when we want to be in each of them, with what goal, focus and expectations, helps us better perform and better improve. The performance zone maximizes our immediate performance, while the learning zone maximizes our growth and our future performance. The reason many of us don't improve much despite our hard work is that we tend to spend almost all of our time in the performance zone. This hinders our growth, and ironically, over the long term, also our performance.

So what does the learning zone look like? Take Demosthenes, a political leader and the greatest orator and lawyer in ancient Greece. To become great, he didn't spend all his time just being an orator or a lawyer, which would be his performance zone. But instead, he did activities designed for improvement. Of course, he studied a lot. He studied law and philosophy with guidance from mentors, but he also realized that being a lawyer involved persuading other people, so he also studied great speeches and acting. To get rid of an odd habit he had of involuntarily lifting his shoulder, he practiced his speeches in front of a mirror, and he suspended a sword from the ceiling so that if he raised his shoulder, it would hurt.

To speak more clearly despite a lisp, he went through his speeches with stones in his mouth. He built an underground room where he could practice without interruptions and not disturb other people. And since courts at the time were very noisy, he also practiced by the ocean, projecting his voice above the roar of the waves.

His activities in the learning zone were very different from his activities in court, his performance zone. In the learning zone, he did what Dr. Anders Ericsson calls deliberate practice. This involves breaking down abilities into component skills, being clear about what subskill we're working to improve, like keeping our shoulders down, giving full concentration to a high level of challenge outside our comfort zone, just beyond what we can currently do, using frequent feedback with repetition and adjustments, and ideally engaging the guidance of a skilled coach, because activities designed for improvement are domain-specific, and great teachers and coaches know what those activities are and can also give us expert feedback. It is this type of practice in the learning zone which leads to substantial improvement, not just time on task performing. For example, research shows that after the first couple of years working in a profession, performance usually plateaus. This

has been shown to be true in teaching, general medicine, nursing and other fields, and it happens because once we think we have become good enough, adequate, then we stop spending time in the learning zone. We focus all our time on just doing our job, performing, which turns out not to be a great way to improve. But the people who continue to spend time in the learning zone do continue to always improve. The best salespeople at least once a week do activities with the goal of improvement. They read to extend their knowledge, consult with colleagues or domain experts, try out new strategies, solicit feedback and reflect. The best chess players spend a lot of time not playing games of chess, which would be their performance zone, but trying to predict the moves grand masters made and analyzing them. Each of us has probably spent many, many, many hours typing on a computer without getting faster, but if we spent 10 to 20 minutes each day fully concentrating on typing 10 to 20 percent faster than our current reliable speed, we would get faster, especially if we also identified what mistakes we're making and practiced typing those words. That's deliberate practice.

In what other parts of our lives, perhaps that we care more about, are we working hard but not improving much because we're always in the performance zone? Now, this is not to say that the performance zone has no value. It very much does. When I needed a knee surgery, I didn't tell the surgeon, "Poke around in there and focus on what you don't know."

"We'll learn from your mistakes!" I looked for a surgeon who I felt would do a good job, and I wanted her to do a good job. Being in the performance zone allows us to get things done as best as we can. It can also be motivating, and it provides us with information to identify what to focus on next when we go back to the learning zone. So the way to high performance is to alternate between the learning zone and the performance zone, purposefully building our skills in the learning zone, then applying those skills in the performance zone.

When Beyoncé is on tour, during the concert, she's in her performance zone, but every night when she gets back to the hotel room, she goes right back into her learning zone. She watches a video of the show that just ended. She identifies opportunities for improvement, for herself, her dancers and her camera staff. And the next morning, everyone receives pages of notes with what to adjust, which they then work on during the day before the next performance. It's a spiral to ever-increasing capabilities, but we need to know when we seek to learn, and when we seek to perform, and while we want to spend time doing both, the more time we spend in the learning zone, the more we'll improve.

So how can we spend more time in the learning zone? First, we must believe and understand that we can improve, what we call a growth mindset. Second, we must want to improve at that particular skill. There has to be a purpose we care about, because it takes time and effort. Third, we must have an idea about how to improve, what we can do to improve, not how I used to practice the guitar as a teenager, performing songs over and over again, but doing deliberate practice. And fourth, we must be in a low-stakes situation, because if mistakes are to be expected, then the consequence of making them must not be catastrophic, or even very significant. A tightrope walker doesn't practice new tricks without a net underneath, and an athlete wouldn't set out to first try a new move during a championship match.

One reason that in our lives we spend so much time in the performance zone is that our environments often are, unnecessarily, high stakes. We create social risks for one another, even in schools which are supposed to be all about learning, and I'm not talking about standardized tests. I mean that every minute of every day, many students in elementary schools through colleges feel that if they make a mistake, others will think less of them. No wonder they're always stressed out

and not taking the risks necessary for learning. But they learn that mistakes are undesirable inadvertently when teachers or parents are eager to hear just correct answers and reject mistakes rather than welcome and examine them to learn from them, or when we look for narrow responses rather than encourage more exploratory thinking that we can all learn from. When all homework or student work has a number or a letter on it, and counts towards a final grade, rather than being used for practice, mistakes, feedback and revision, we send the message that school is a performance zone.

The same is true in our workplaces. In the companies I consult with, I often see flawless execution cultures which leaders foster to encourage great work. But that leads employees to stay within what they know and not try new things, so companies struggle to innovate and improve, and they fall behind.

We can create more spaces for growth by starting conversations with one another about when we want to be in each zone. What do we want to get better at and how? And when do we want to execute and minimize mistakes? That way, we gain clarity about what success is, when, and how to best support one another.

But what if we find ourselves in a chronic high-stakes setting and we feel we can't start those conversations yet? Then here are three things that we can still do as individuals. First, we can create low-stakes islands in an otherwise high-stakes sea. These are spaces where mistakes have little consequence. For example, we might find a mentor or a trusted colleague with whom we can exchange ideas or have vulnerable conversations or even role-play. Or we can ask for feedback-oriented meetings as projects progress. Or we can set aside time to read or watch videos or take online courses. Those are just some examples. Second, we can execute and perform as we're expected, but then reflect on what we could do better next time, like Beyoncé does, and we can observe and emulate experts. The observation, reflection and adjustment is a learning zone. And finally, we can lead and lower the stakes for others by sharing what we want to get better at, by asking questions about what we don't know, by soliciting feedback and by sharing our mistakes and what we've learned from them, so that others can feel safe to do the same.

Real confidence is about modelling ongoing learning. What if, instead of spending our lives doing, doing, doing, performing, performing, performing, we spent more time exploring, asking, listening, experimenting, reflecting, striving and becoming? What if we each always had something we were working to improve? What if we created more low-stakes islands and waters? And what if we got clear, within ourselves and with our teammates, about when we seek to learn and when we seek to perform, so that our efforts can become more consequential, our improvement never-ending and our best even better?