

Gawande, Atul – The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right

Picador, 2009, [Surrounding Knowledge] Grade ★★★★★

In all professions experts face a rise in complexity due to increased domain knowledge. The traditional answer has been to specialize into an ever-smaller niche to be able to keep the expert status. Besides creating the undesirable second order consequence that too few have the ability to overview larger areas, this strategy is also running out of steam when it comes to avoiding mistakes. However, there is a way to improve performance without any increase in skill – checklists.

Atul Gawande, MD, MPH, is one of those persons that make you wonder if they somehow have discovered a parallel universe with more hours than your own. He is a practicing surgeon, a professor, public-health researcher and sits on various boards. Gawande has been a staff writer for *The New Yorker* magazine since 1998, has written three *New York Times* bestsellers including this book and – yes – he’s got a family.

Over the last few decades progress in the medical profession has been spectacular. Yet, there is a huge amount of unnecessary suffering and casualties due to complications caused by oversights and mistakes. In this book we get to follow the author’s own journey to find a way to handle this frustrating situation and along the way he finds a tool that can be of use in areas outside his own. In some cases people fail because they don’t have the knowledge or skill. Other failures occur as the knowledge and skill is not applied or is not applied correctly. In the second case an ever-increasing complexity of the task at hand meets the fallibility of human memory and attention. Further, out of convenience we often lull our-selves into skipping steps: “this hasn’t caused any problems before”. Checklists increase performance not because they teach us something we didn’t know but because they make steps explicit, helps wandering minds and brings discipline.

In the Checklist Manifesto Gawande lets us follow his learning process on how, when and where checklists work. It’s a journey where he meets with

professionals in aviation, equity investing, in restaurants and high-rise construction. Pilots are obviously the classic users of checklists but constructing buildings also turns out to be the process of following a large number of checklists. Interestingly, constructors have two types of lists. One for the routine construction tasks, making sure there are no stupid mistakes. Then another set of lists used for complex situations outside the normal. These lists turn out to be for communication tasks. There might be no manual to follow and the best is to let the professionals use their judgment and experience. But to yield the best result they must communicate with each other to harness the wisdom of the crowd. Checklists turn out to come in various shapes. Some constitute the task as a recipe; you check them off as you go through the process. Others work as a circuit breaker where you now and then take a moment to control that everything has been thought of, in a process otherwise ungoverned by a checklist.

Gawande ends up doing a number of tests with checklists in surgeries worldwide together with the WHO. After a shaky start the outcome is a massive success. Infections plummet, death rates do the same, millions of dollars are saved both when patients can return home quicker and due to less law suites and lowered staff turnover. Still, despite the results a large number of surgeons turn out to be opposing any reforms. They see checklists as something that challenge their status in the theater and that implies that they don’t know their job. However, when asked if they would want a checklist to be used if they themselves were having an operation, 93 percent said yes.

Investing is another high stress, high complexity area that should benefit from using checklists. Still, very few do. Is the same type of misguided professional vanity the reason? This book should help to persuade the more intelligent forerunners. The others will have to try to catch up later.

Mats Larsson, February 20, 2015