

How to discover and leverage your talent

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People who invest in developing their talent and strengths instead of correcting their deficiencies “have several times more potential for growth” (Rath, 2007).

In this article we explore how to discover and develop your talent and, in turn, what leaders can do to nurture the talent within their team. We discuss:

- What is talent?
- How do we identify it (in ourselves and others)?
- How can we leverage it to raise our performance and enhance our careers?

Talent – what is it?

Let’s start with some (modern) definitions. Talent is:

- A personal gift or skill (Wikipedia.com/2009)
- a person who possesses unusual innate ability in some field or activity (wordnet.princeton.edu)

Such definitions of talent are often applied to great sports people, artists and scientists.

Great managers, according to Buckingham and Coffman (1999), disagree with such definitions calling them “too narrow, too specialized”. Instead, they define a talent as “a recurring pattern of thought, feeling or behavior that can be productively applied”. Your talents, they say, “*are the behaviors you find yourself doing often*”.

Their view also ties in with a historic definition of talent:

- *archaic*: a characteristic feature, aptitude, or disposition of a person or animal (www.merriam-webster.com).

Under these broader definitions, your ability to tell engaging stories, remember names, or do math in your head, are all talents.

How do we identify talent (in ourselves and others)?

According to Sir Ken Robinson, an internationally renowned leader on creativity and innovation, “Each of us has talent, it’s just that many of us don’t discover what ours is” (Robinson, 2009). He argues that it is not natural talent alone that drives personal success, but rather a delicate interplay among talent, passion, attitude and opportunity.

It is often easier to spot the talent in others than to uncover your own. For example:

- I was recently asked by a client if I could recommend experts in the fields of service management and audit. Two individuals stood out, and I had no hesitation in referring them. They were both thought leaders in their respective fields. They had delivered (this expertise) across multiple companies and environments. They also spoke vividly about their subjects and had a genuine desire to help others in these areas – you could see they enjoyed what they did.
- During executive searches, certain people stand out from the pack because they are visible, enthusiastic thought leaders. They can often tell many stories about how they have applied their expertise. If they don't succeed in this hire, you know they will in a similar one - and soon. Such professionals are confident in what they are good at and clear about what they want to do.

Uncovering our own talents requires self exploration and honesty. While it is difficult to observe yourself, you can look for clues to identify your talents:

a) Rapid learning

The speed with which you learn a new skill provides insight into what may be talent. For example, the ease with which you pick up a new software program or the ability to understand and apply unfamiliar language.

b) Situations where you are confident

Reflecting on activities or situations where you feel at home (relative to peers) may be another indicator of talents or strengths e.g. are you more comfortable developing strategic plans or in handling a crisis? Are you good with technical matters or more at home with organizing and leading people?

c) Interests and passions

What you like to do when you have free time (e.g. read/research, cook, build things, plan and coordinate events). Social activities and interests that may be considered as less significant are often telling in terms of your talents.

d) Memorable experiences

“Reflect on your accomplishments, maybe an award, positive feedback from your boss or team, or something back in your school days” (Harvey, 2007). What did you get commended for?

e) Feedback

It's worth reviewing your 360 degree evaluations and seeing where you score highly and have had great feedback from your colleagues.

Another mechanism for identifying potential talents is the *StrengthsFinder* research and assessment tool developed by Donald Clifton and Tom Rath of the Gallup organization (go to www.strengthsfinder.com). Gallup has conducted research over a 40 year period into human talents and strengths. Their research suggests that “people who do have the opportunity to focus on their strengths everyday are six times as likely to be engaged in their jobs” (Rath, 2007). Apparently, around 70% of over 10 million people interviewed are falling short.

Gallup’s on-line assessment tool is one way to discover the areas where you have greater ability and potential. The tool helps you to identify your top 5 “talents”, considering your aptitude in areas such as Problem-Solving, Adaptability, Self Assurance and Ideation. They also provide recommendations (actions) on how to develop your set of talents into “strengths”.

How can we leverage our talent?

The key to excellent performance it seems is finding the match between your talents, your passions and your role.

The research conducted for this article highlighted a number of common threads for turning your talents into strengths:

- a) *Identify your dominant talents and then invest time practicing, developing your skills and building your knowledge base* (Rath, 2009). Investing in areas where you are already strong can have a multiplying effect.
- b) *Review which of your talents excite you.* Unless you have a strong interest (passion) for the areas where your talents lie, your raw talent is unlikely to develop.
- c) *Ensure you have an active, supportive sponsor* for the areas in which you want to develop. “Talented employees need great managers” (Buckingham & Kaufman, 1999).
- d) *Engage an expert teacher or coach to help you accelerate your learning process.* Practice without specific guidance does not make you perfect. “The development of expertise requires coaches who are capable of giving constructive, even painful, feedback” (Anders, 2007).
- e) *Focus on your strengths, not your weaknesses.* Be aware of your limitations but don’t agonize over them. Develop practical strategies for overcoming them (e.g. “Partner with someone who has more talent in the areas you are lacking” (Rath, 2007)).

In turn, what can leaders do to nurture the talent within their team?

Within the organization, talent development and performance objectives need to be aligned. This doesn't mean the organization needs to flex its performance objectives, but leaders should seek the right people for whom to set specific objectives (i.e. those who can best develop to reach that particular goal).

Leaders need to provide carefully chosen assignments to help people develop in areas where they show promise, and provide direct feedback on where team members can improve. In business we don't get feedback often – and even then it is usually weak. Managers should also avoid being too prescriptive in telling staff how to do things. Set goals and provide coaching and encouragement. “The more you free your people to think for themselves, the more they can help you” (Branson, 2008).

Summary:

Uncovering areas where you have a strong aptitude and passion, provides essential data about where you have the greatest opportunity for growth. Investing in building your skills, knowledge and experience in areas where you are (already) strong can lead you down the path to excellence. The right attitude and relevant opportunities are also required to achieve success, but building on your strengths will increase your chances. (“There's more to luck than pure chance” (Robinson, 2009)).

Business leaders can help raise their team's performance and morale by:

- Aligning corporate performance objectives to those best suited to achieve them
- Providing carefully chosen assignments to help people develop
- Allocating an expert coach or teacher to help develop areas of individual strength
- Offering active support and encouragement.

Investing in the talents of your people, particularly when resources are stretched, can go a long way toward taking your organization forward.

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