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## Debunking the Talent Myth

Everyone's talking about ways to find opportunity amid economic chaos. Yet there's something right under our noses that's being overlooked: Times of crisis present unprecedented opportunities to stretch and develop real leadership capabilities.

### What's needed, specifically?

Hire more executive coaches, step up sessions, and implement more training and development programs.

In tough times, you cannot rely on talent and luck. Even when you have a talented team at the top, people need help in stretching their capabilities to meet the economy's overwhelming demands. Your leaders can't go it alone. You can't, either.

Scientific research on great performance has persuasively shown that key abilities are developed. They don't occur naturally. In fact, there may be no such thing as natural talent. It's certainly not something you want to rely upon to help solve current problems.

Great leaders aren't born; they're made—and the research to support this is overwhelming. What we previously thought of as innate can often be taught. Leadership capabilities are acquired through constructive practice and developmental opportunities, and today's business volatility calls for both.

"The key to this development is pushing people—or people pushing themselves—just beyond their current abilities, forcing them to do things that they can't quite do," according to Fortune Senior Editor Geoff Colvin, author of *Talent Is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers From Everybody Else* (Portfolio, 2008).

### Crisis or Opportunity?

The upside of a financial crisis and recession is that they offer all of us the opportunity to stretch our skills in our current jobs—and I mean everyone. That means you. But you already know you're being stretched, don't you? You feel it. The question is, how are you going to welcome your own particular crises and use them to benefit your personal and professional development?

According to Colvin, managers often redirect people's careers based on slender evidence that they have talent (or lack thereof). Unfortunately, we don't give ourselves the same opportunity. We'll try something new, and if it doesn't come naturally or we don't immediately excel, we conclude we have no talent for it.



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We abandon pursuit. We never give ourselves the chance to practice and make progress. We don't like the feeling of discomfort that comes from doing something poorly, so we don't hang in there. Scientific evidence, however, is beginning to show that our definition of talent is wrong. In fact, "talent" may not mean anything at all.

In studies of accomplished individuals, researchers have found few signs of precocious achievement before their subjects began intensive training. Similar findings have turned up in studies of musicians, tennis players, artists, swimmers, mathematicians and chess players.

### *Is Talent Irrelevant?*

Such findings do not prove that talent doesn't exist, but they do suggest it may be irrelevant.

The concept of talent is especially troublesome in business. We label people and then assign expectations, some of which are unrealistic. When people are fast-tracked or deemed executive material, we assume they have special gifts. Worse, we fail to adequately emphasize the importance of continuous training and coaching. Instead, we rely on their "natural gifts."

Identifying these gifts has been extremely elusive. In fact, some business giants actually gave little early indication that they would become great.

Jack Welch, named by Fortune as the 20th century's manager of the century, showed no particular passion for business, even into his mid-20s.

Steve Ballmer and Jeffrey Immelt were average employees at Procter & Gamble in the 1970s, with little evidence they would go on to become CEOs of Microsoft and GE before age 50.

In this age of genomic research, there should no longer be any question as to what is—and isn't—innate. If a talent is innate, scientists should be able to identify the gene for it, and no progress has been made on this front.

### **Talent or Hard Work?**

We can safely draw the conclusion that there's plenty of opportunity for everyone. Many high-performing executives will tell you they don't rely on their innate talents as much as their hard-earned skills.



CEOs like A.G. Lafley of P&G and GE's Immelt have said that being forced to manage through crises early in their careers enhanced their abilities in ways that were critical to becoming CEOs. They wouldn't have achieved their status without surviving the storms that gave them hands-on practice.

Certain practices can make our experiences especially productive:

- ▶ Coaching helps.
- ▶ Receiving feedback allows us to fine-tune our skills.
- ▶ Working in a safe learning environment is essential.

Workplaces encourage practice and development, and mistakes should be viewed as learning opportunities. You also need to clearly define and develop a plan for achieving the abilities you wish to hone, including a measurable time frame. This will turbocharge your performance and improve your chances of success.

### **10,000 Hours or 10 Years**

Malcolm Gladwell makes the case for 10,000 hours of practice to attain expertise in his book *Outliers* (Little, Brown & Co., 2008):

"The 10,000-hours rule says that if you look at any kind of cognitively complex field, from playing chess to being a neurosurgeon, we see this incredibly consistent pattern that you cannot be good at that unless you practice for 10,000 hours, which is roughly 10 years, if you think about four hours a day."

Almost all child prodigies in music, sports, chess and the arts seem to put in 10,000 hours before they attain expertise and produce significant results.

The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance, edited by Anders Ericsson, Charness and Feltovich, et al, compiles scientific studies to prove the point in a wide variety of fields. The trait we commonly call talent is highly overrated. Or, put another way, expert performers "whether in memory or surgery, ballet or computer programming" are nearly always made, not born.

Many of us have already put in more than a decade of doing what we do. The question is whether we're practicing the right things, in the right way. Are we designing deliberate practice that actually develops the specific skills we need to make progress toward specific results? Or, to use a golf analogy, are you going to the driving range and hitting a bucket of balls the wrong way, for hours at a time?

### **What Is Deliberate Practice?**

Anders Ericsson and his scientific colleagues emphasize the importance of deliberate practice, which isn't what most of us

think of when applying the term to sports or music education. In fact, our habitual use of the term in these domains may prevent us from applying it correctly to the business realm.

Deliberate practice is characterized by several elements:

- ▶ It is an activity designed specifically to improve performance, often with the help of a teacher, coach or expert.
- ▶ It can be repeated frequently.
- ▶ Feedback on results is continuously available.
- ▶ It's highly demanding mentally.
- ▶ It isn't much fun and entails hard work.

If you think you've outgrown the need for a teacher or coach, it's time to challenge this assumption. A business coach can see things a manager cannot and is trained to deliver feedback in a way that's inaccessible to most managers.

Without a clear, unbiased view of your performance, you cannot choose the best practice activities. Most of us lack the knowledge we need to design our own practice programs, and we cannot realistically provide objective observations and feedback to ourselves. As stunt people like to say, "don't try this at home." Hire a coach who can properly stretch you beyond your current abilities and help you move out of your comfort zones. Otherwise, human nature dictates that you're likely to spend your time practicing what you already know how to do.

According to Noel Tichy, PhD, a professor of organizational behavior and human resources management at the University of Michigan School of Business, our progress depends on leaving our comfort zone to enter the learning zone, where skills and abilities are just out of reach. We must force ourselves to stay in the latter, even as we make changes.

## Why We Avoid Hard Work

Deliberate practice is, above all else, an effort to focus and concentrate. Recognizing unsatisfactory elements of performance is difficult and uncomfortable. When you try your hardest to perform better, you place enormous strain on your mental abilities.

Deliberate practice, in fact, can be viewed as an antonym to fun. Instead of doing something at which we excel, we intentionally work on areas where we have deficits—over and over again. After each repetition, a coach can tell us exactly where to focus so we can repeat these skills yet again.

Obviously, if the activities that require practice were easy and fun, everyone would do them. But in reality, most people won't practice or persist long enough to improve. This is good news if you're willing to do what most people won't. It's the reason you're more likely to keep your job and thrive in this recession.

## What About Passion?

Talent is not what determines success at developing high-level capacities. Rather, those who care the most will rise to the top. Exceptional performance depends on what we decide to do with our lives and the passion that drives us.

One of the most purchased articles from the Harvard Business Review is a 1968 piece on motivation that explains our three main drives:

- ▶ **1.** Achievement
- ▶ **2.** Power
- ▶ **3.** A sense of community and desire to help others

No matter your driving force, you have to care deeply enough to work hard to become exceptional.

Nothing can make you endure the pain and sacrifice of deliberate practice for decades unless you're carried by an intrinsic compulsion to do so.

But allowing people to follow their intrinsic drives and work on projects of their own choosing is not something most organizations tolerate. In their fervent application of solely extrinsic motivations, organizations may actually prevent people from developing their passionate abilities.



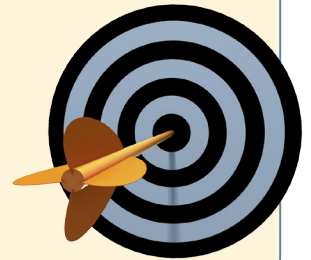
*Is your business giving you  
the results you've always  
dreamed about?*

## *Talent Is Never Enough*

In *Talent Is Never Enough: Discover the Choices That Will Take You Beyond Your Talent*, (Thomas Nelson, 2007), leadership expert John C. Maxwell suggests talent is “often overrated and frequently misunderstood.” He advises readers to build their strengths to become a “talent-plus person,” defined by the following tenets:

- ▶ Belief lifts your talent.
- ▶ Initiative activates your talent.
- ▶ Focus directs your talent.
- ▶ Preparation positions your talent.
- ▶ Practice sharpens your talent.
- ▶ Perseverance sustains your talent.
- ▶ Character protects your talent.

Even if you hold onto the notion that you’ll always survive because of your innate talent, you must still prepare, practice and persist. The scientific research is in, and it’s conclusive. Hard work—not talent—contributes to high performance.



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