



Talent is overrated: exposing the talent myth

Talent is overrated. Yes, you heard right – talent is a myth and we are about to debunk it. In the western world, the narrow focus on talent leaves us vulnerable to disappointment, unfulfilled expectations and rotting potential.

I think talent is a good thing, but I think peak performance is even better. This position might go against the grain and be contrarian, but hey that is what funky thinking is all about, isn't it? The reason that talent is overrated is often at the back of our minds – because who does not know of a person who either is highly talented or highly intelligent in the left brain sense of the term – and who keeps self-sabotaging themselves, and excelling at being their own worst enemy?

Picture the inspirational and highly revealing movie 'Good Will Hunting', where the protagonist and boy genius Will Hunting (Matt Damon) is prepared to waste his unique abilities and gifts because he does not feel a duty to himself to leverage and utilize them. It is not until his best friend (Ben Affleck) and colleague confronts him that Will realizes that he has an obligation to fully tap his own potential, not only to himself, but to those around him who are less endowed. This is an illustrious piece of the 'great-promise-gone-wrong' scenario which is corrected as the events unfold in the movie. How many times do we hear of talent wasted, 'she had so much potential', 'if only he had been able to use his talent' and other exclamations of disappointment in the face of potential left unpolished and unnurtured?

Yet, in Australia and in many other Western countries, there is still a determined focus on talent – whether we are talking sports, human resource management, creativity and innovation, or modelling. It may be a remnant of our gold-rushing past, and narrow-minded passion for fast profits and results, but in view of what I term the 'talent myth' I believe it is time we embrace peak performance as the new yardstick. Talent and performance are not necessarily the same, see. We all love the under-dog because it is easy to identify with a seemingly humane competitor who against all odds beats the highly talented and resource-rich Goliath. Yet the discourse is still pre-disposed toward favouring the naturally endowed.

Peak Performance is talent applied at its best. It is talent coupled with the right mental acuity or emotional intelligence. When the two intermingle in the right proportions you have a Roger Federer – high talent, high emotional intelligence, high performance. Yet on the other end of the scale we have the 'could've beens'. The 'athletes formerly known as promising' who had high talent, low emotional intelligence, and scattered/disappointing results. In the Australian sports media, Mark Philippousis is frequently named as such as example. Plenty of flair, innate ability and athleticism, but frequently quoted as of a different mental DNA than one required



THINQUE

for sustained peak performance. In the middle sit a band of athletes who are reasonably talented, emotionally intelligent, hard working, and sustained performers. One of the toughest contenders over the past 10 years on the ATP tour has been Lleyton Hewitt – despite injury set-backs, huge domestic criticism and media exposés, he has been a consistent and hard-fighting sportsman who has achieved huge successes and continuously punched above his weight.

Psychologically these underdogs extend the wonderful gift to each and every one of us that success is within our reach. With combined mental acuity/emotional intelligence and some smart/hard work it is possible to overcome huge odds and to frequently surpass those competitors who are seemingly more endowed with the natural ingredient of talent.

Think of the old Aesop fable of the tortoise and the hare. Too often in our fast-paced world is the hare's approach to life and the race unconsciously endorsed – whether in the form of the yearly sports draft, the corporate obsession with talent, the governmental concerns around Australia's brain drain, and even in political discussion around immigration.

In my mind the only talent crisis we have is that we are not tapping each individual's strengths and that we do not yet have enough faith in each person's ability to punch above his or her weight. We love being bystanders at a sports event and view the equivalent to the 1980 'Miracle on Ice' when the US beat the seemingly insurmountable Soviet Union Ice Hockey team, but when it comes to entering the arena ourselves, we frequently have doubts.

Malcolm Gladwell (author of *Blink* and *The Tipping Point*) examines talent in the context of corporate disasters such as Enron. At a time when most commentators were asking themselves how Enron could collapse despite hiring all the best talent from the most prestigious American business schools, Gladwell shone his questioning laser from a different angle and asked 'what if Enron collapsed, not in spite of, but because of its bigoted focus on talent'. Revealing don't you think? Carol Dweck, a Columbia University psychologist, correspondingly argues that students who are labeled 'talented' and 'smart' tend to begin to identify with these labels, leaving them more vulnerable and weaker in the face of criticism and adversity.

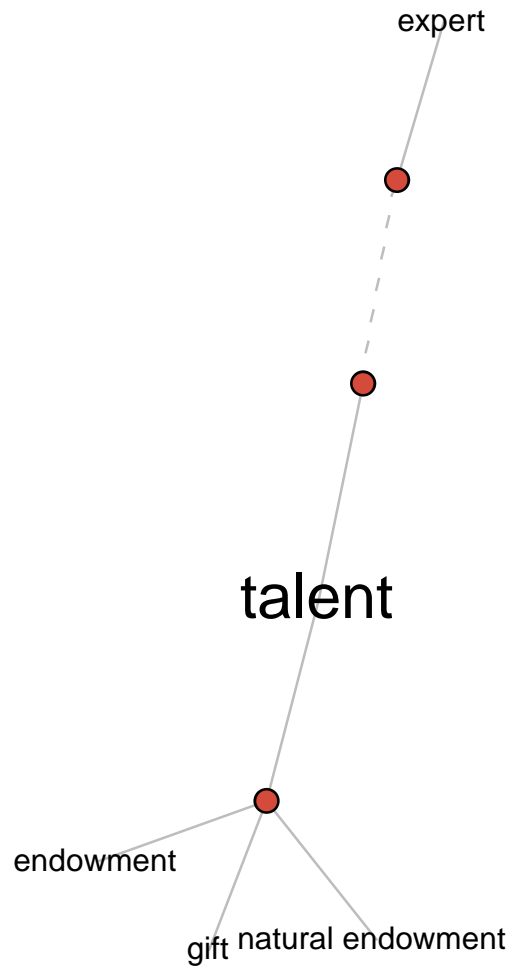
Therefore, talent in and of itself is overrated. Talent is sexy, juicy, and we as human beings are frequently in awe of it. What we tend to be able to see though through our filters of reality and sound-bite culture, might in fact be peak performance, which is talent compounded by mental acuity/emotional intelligence and smart/hard work. Peak performance can also be a result of lower levels of talent, and higher levels of mental acuity/emotional intelligence and smart/hard work.



T H I N Q U E

It is perhaps attitude, not aptitude, that gives us altitude in life. In fact, motivation often beats inherent skills – think Rocky, think Michael Chang, think Gandhi, think Mother Theresa. And this is great news because it means that whether we are talented or not, the opportunity rests squarely on our shoulders to make a difference in our lives and to those around us on this planet.

talent



NOUNS

- **talent, endowment, gift, natural endowment**
natural qualities or talents

● **talent**

a person who possesses unusual
innate ability in some field or activity