The Psychology of Talent
Exploring and Exploding the Myths

Robert Edenborough and Marion Edenborough
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About the Authors

**Robert Edenborough** has worked in assessment and development for much of his 44 year career. A chartered psychologist and registered occupational psychologist, he has experience of a wide range of private, public and third sector organisations. The appointment and development of senior staff have been major points of focus and he has utilised a range of psychometric tools as well as assessment and development centres in this work. He has written four books on assessment matters.

**Marion Edenborough** spent twenty-five years with the Gallup Organization, researching and applying the links between the natural talent of individuals and their performance. She led a team helping companies and public bodies make hiring and development decisions by studying the strengths of individuals and applying systematic processes to harness those strengths that lead to capability advantages and business growth.
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Preface

The idea of a book on the psychology of talent arose from a chance discussion as we compared notes on our work over the past 30+ years. We had both been involved in assessing candidates against various talent models, in developing tools in connection with that assessment, and often in training others in the use of those tools. Although talent has sometimes proved elusive to us and our colleagues, and although our findings about what really contributes to talent in certain roles has sometimes been surprising, its study has always seemed to us to be susceptible to systematic enquiry. Hence, one element inclining us to write about talent has been to lay some of the understanding gleaned from systematic approaches before others.

But, as we advanced with our subject, it became evident that there were other elements, too. One of these was the acceptance or otherwise of talent and the importance, in turn, of that acceptance for the success of organisations and the fulfilment of those working in them. The field of talent management should, in principle, underpin an identification with talent and all of its implications. Yet, in its practice, that field has sometimes seemed to us to be “scarcely half made up.” And so we thought it worthwhile to point up some of the common gaps in managerial engagement with talent, and to look at some of the ways in which talent-centred approaches are misunderstood or simply ignored.

A final element in leading us to take on this task has been the experience of studying and working with talented people in a variety of occupations. These experiences have been for us some of the most stimulating and satisfying of our careers.

Robert Edenborough, Marion Edenborough
October 2010
Acknowledgements

A number of people have contributed to our thinking as we have gone about writing this book. Doug Prior provided comments on parts of the text and suggested some additional sources. Wendy Lord and James Edenborough contributed to the references, as did Professors Adrian Furnham and Clive Fletcher. Major Peter Watson, Penelope Schmidt-Uili, Ian Florance, and Professor Hugh Brogan provided information on some of the highly talented people to whom we have referred. Paula Wilson, Gareth Jones, and Jackie Switzer all provided information and ideas.
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Introduction

In this book we shall explore the psychology of talent from a number of angles, but with two dominant themes. First is the question of what talent is and how we can better understand it. Second is the issue of attitudes to talent and how it is used or misused. In exploring these themes we shall look at movements including positive psychology and the field of talent management. Both themes are important for optimising the contribution of talent to business performance and results. In this first chapter we look at various definitions and approaches to talent and consider why it sometimes seems a difficult concept to grasp.

Much of the book is focused on talent as expressed through the individual, but in Chapter 2 we examine how the ideas of talent can be applied to teams. In Chapter 3 we examine how barriers to understanding and working with talent arise, setting that in the context of the sense of intrusion and mistrust that can so often accompany the use of psychological processes. Chapter 4 is concerned with the various methodologies that can be applied to assess and capture talent, and this is extended in Chapter 6 where the issue of relevant comparisons for talent is explored.

Talent in the context of recruitment and some of the attendant myths and misapprehensions are examined in Chapter 5, while Chapter 7 looks at the positive psychology movement as it bears on talent. The important field of talent in terms of potential is the subject of Chapter 8, while the last chapter looks at the future in terms of the practicalities of understanding and harnessing talent.
What Is Talent?

A Variety of Definitions

*Talent* is a widely used term, but like others such as *leadership*, it is not understood to mean the same thing by everyone. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) gives the early definition of talent as “an ancient weight, a money of account” and goes on to note that it “varied greatly with time,” interestingly but probably coincidently reflecting some of the variations in modern usage and understanding.

The OED gives as a later key definition, “a special natural ability, usually for something expressed or implied; a natural capacity for success in some department of mental or physical ability.” Our focus is on the relationship between talent and performance in an organisation or business. That is, how that natural capacity can be applied for enhanced results. Our work in assessing and developing people has consistently shown that certain relevant talents are key to excellent performance and that without high levels of these talents, excellent outcomes are much less likely whatever the experience and qualifications of the appointee, and that this will be the case in roles from call centre operator to CEO. We believe that the focus on talent should be applied at the recruitment stage and as the most productive focus for development.

Is Motivation Part of Talent?

Some people separate out talent from motivation, while to others, motivation is a key part of talent. Colvin (2008) cites a study in which a key differentiator of later success amongst a group of young “talented” musicians was the amount of practice they put in. (A similar message was given to one of us in a first undergraduate tutorial, where the professor stated that our degree outcomes would be determined by our intellect and by our work habits.) The OED definition above would seem to follow the former, but that dictionary provides as a separate definition, being “naturally inclined or disposed to something,” suggesting a motivational element too. The motivation–talent separation is clearly recognised in the Saville Consulting’s Wave profiling instrument. This is a self-completion questionnaire, in which respondents are asked to indicate how well they do various things and also their liking for the same things. The output for the user flags when there is a discrepancy of more than 3 points on a standardised (sten) scale.
When used in a recruitment or selection context, the notion is that a talent that is not well supported by a corresponding motivation is unlikely to be routinely available to an employer. Conversely, if someone is motivated to perform in an area where they have limited talent, that may be of interest for two reasons. First is the possibility that the person concerned will have at least worked out how to manage around the area of limitation, including consciously delegating to those with more talent in the area in question. Then there is the possibility that they will wish to develop in such an area, a topic which we refer to at several points, notably in Chapter 8. There is, of course, the other possibility: that someone motivated in a particular area, but not talented in it will have learnt some ways of presenting a heightened view of their talent on the surface. This could enable them to pull the wool over the eyes of an interviewer in a conventional interview situation. The flag from Wave would therefore usefully raise the issue.

Motivation does seem worth consideration in the context of talent in a further sense. That is, if one is aware of a person’s specific motivations, then, as an employer or manager, you have the scope to construct an environment to satisfy those and so give the talents the opportunity to flourish untrammelled by feelings of frustration. These ideas are illustrated in Figure 1.

The idea of talent in contexts such as the performing and graphic arts is, of course, well embedded in our thinking and discourse. Although we are concerned in this book chiefly with talent in relation to work, interestingly some have held that the talent from these fields might bear on managerial capability. Thus in Rodger’s seven-point plan (National Institute for Industrial Psychology [NIIP], 1952), one of the early attempts to codify structured interviewing, interviewers were advised to consider whether candidates had “talent for drawing or music.”

Sometimes talent is characterised rather broadly, with terms such as “a heightened capacity for promoting business growth” being described as a talent. (Breadth is also rather neatly captured in the self-descriptive phrase “a talent to amuse,” which the great 20th-century man of the theatre Noel Coward pronounced and which was taken up by one of his biographers; Morley, 1969). In other cases, a particular talent would be seen as a singular entity, such as “being able to work at a fast pace” or “able to switch attention between two tasks.”

This question of single or multiple elements in one talent is of interest. The single elements may be helpful for purposes of definition and precision of measurement, but when we talk of talent in a particular
sphere we are typically thinking of something broader. The important thing is, perhaps, to consider what is useful for the particular discourse or enquiry in which we are engaged. Consider the case of Vincent Van Gogh. Few would dispute that he was a highly talented artist, but authoritative sources – for example, the (British) Royal Academy of Arts (2010) – contend that he had little talent for drawing. The well-spring of his talent lay perhaps in his creativity, with motivation playing its part, as revealed in his correspondence, where the “iron discipline” he applied to mastering technique is evident.

Other definitions that we have come across and tend to favour are:

- Capacity for excellent, outstanding, competitively advantageous performance;
- The ability and personality attributes leading to excellent performance.

Figure 1. Talent and motivation. In the top circle, these are separated in keeping with, e.g., Colvin (2008). In the bottom circle, motivation is seen as integral to talent. The whole of the performance space is not filled, as other factors such as management style intervene.
Some writers – for example, Clifton and Nelson (1992) – have identified talent with the absolute topmost performance, possibly going beyond the definitions above. Their definition is “a capacity for almost perfect performance.” Others have stopped somewhat short of the world class category that this implies as necessary for inclusion in the ranks of the talented, echoing at least two 19th-century literary figures: Thus, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle: “Mediocrity knows nothing higher than itself, but talent instantly recognises genius.” And, again, the Earl of Lytton: “Genius does what it must and talent does what it can.” In all cases there seems to be agreement that talent is something special; how special is something that we shall explore in this book. Some of the ways of looking at what talent is are indicated diagrammatically in Figure 2.
Our comments on talent so far have reflected the focus of the book on the individual, and his or her talent. But there is a large area of endeavour in which the emphasis is on numbers of individuals, whether in teams or not, and the processes for putting their talents to use; this is known as “talent management.” The UK’s Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD) is one of a number of bodies active in this field. They define talent in the following terms: “Talent consists of those individuals who can make a difference to organisational performance, either through their immediate contribution or in the longer-term by demonstrating the highest levels of potential” (CIPD, 2010). Talent then, on this view, is an organisational asset or resource, and talent management is then a form of asset or resource management. Armstrong (2003) captures this in giving the following as the definition of talent management: “providing for the attraction, retention, development and reward of high quality people.” This field arose in the 1990s, and it is interesting and perhaps salutary that it is so new as a specific area of endeavour.

Talent management may be seen as having some links to the earlier field of “human resource accounting” (see, e.g., Blau, 1978). This looked at an organisation’s investment in employees, including recruitment and training costs and the time scale over which returns on these investments might be realised. Using established accountancy methods, human resource accounting provided models for questions such as “what is the cost of replacing an employee?” Although behavioural aspects such as employee absenteeism were addressed in some of this work, it tended to have little if anything to say about talent.

Talents and Competencies

The most useful definition of a competency that we have come across is the one formulated by Evarts (1987), which states, “A competency is an underlying characteristic of a person which is causally related to effective or superior performance in a job or role.” An earlier definition, by Boyatzis (1982) who is seen as a seminal worker in the competency movement runs, “a capacity that exists in a person that leads to behaviour that meets the job demands within the organizational environment and that, in turn, brings about the desired results.” Evarts’ definition includes superior performance rather than just “desired” results, so at least admit-
tinting the shine of excellence that seems to be part and parcel of talent. However, it also admits of “effective” performance, which would appear to be a lesser standard. And in common parlance if we describe someone as “being competent,” we are not generally seeking to convey that they will perform to a very high standard.

Certainly the concepts of competencies and talents are not wholly distinct, but it is perhaps in the reference to particular jobs in the case of the former that they diverge. Although talent can be applied to a particular job and, indeed, is generally of interest for that reason, it also carries with it the notion of functioning independently of any particular job context. These ideas are illustrated in Table 1.

### Table 1. Some Distinctions Between Competency and Talent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Competency</th>
<th>Talent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus on excellence</td>
<td>Not necessarily</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on specific job</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Demonstrations of Talent

One of the ways in which talent is recognised is in early signs of performance that would normally be associated with a fully accomplished practitioner. This might be seen, for instance, in the child precociously learning to walk and talk or picking up a musical instrument and getting a tune out of it. The very early musical accomplishments of the prodigy Mozart are well known and were, of course, recognised in his own time, with performances before the Elector of Bavaria at the age of 6 following his commencement on the path of composition at the age of 5. (Interestingly, it has been speculated – e.g., by Blom, 1944 – that Bach’s extreme talents were not identified so very early because his whole extended family were all highly musical, so that the young Johann Sebastian was not identified as being as exceptional as he really was.)

Very early indications from the arts do not quite have their equivalents in the mainstream world of work, but there will be some parallels. There are, for instance, many young entrepreneurs demonstrating clear and perhaps surprisingly rounded talents for business. Opportunities for operating at a senior level temporarily – for example, in covering for a
manager’s sickness absence – can also provide a chance for relatively young talent to show through. Such people grasp such opportunities actively too. An example is given below.

**Early Successes**

Jon House joined the Metropolitan Police in London at the age of 23, working in the vice squad in the notorious King’s Cross area. Moving to neighbouring Hertfordshire as a sergeant at the age of 27, he was one of a three-man team which came up with a plan to reorganise the force drastically, reducing nine separate command units down to three. The other two members were much more senior, being a superintendent and an assistant chief constable. Following these varied experiences he was promoted to inspector, working as a hostage negotiator and on suicide interventions. He found this time one of the most valuable in gaining skills in management and leadership, noting the need to build a working relationship in 30 seconds. He came to understand significant lessons in motivation and influence, such as the importance of gaining agreement in grey areas. Moving on again, first as detective chief inspector and then as superintendent, he was involved in another large force, South Yorkshire, and another major reorganisation. He then took on the responsibility of being a firearms commander – a position of particular significance in a British Police Force, where most officers are not authorised to carry firearms. There he learnt the value of relying on experts and this underpinned his view of the importance of setting a vision and delegating the “how” of implementation to others. At the phenomenally young age of 34 he was promoted to the rank of chief superintendent and commander in Sheffield. Still honing his leadership and management skills he then moved to the city of Bristol, becoming a local government officer in the position of deputy chief executive. He identifies the third strand of his development, alongside negotiation and focusing on setting the vision for others, as building teams of people with the right attitudes, which can be problematic in fields where promotion has traditionally been within a specialism. Since we started writing this book he has moved on to become Chief Executive of Cardiff City Council, one of only two CEO’s of UK capital cities.
The mindset of developing strengths is common in the performing arts and in sports. In business it has been far less commonplace; witness the use of the term *development need* to indicate an area of poor performance. (We shall have more to say about strengths, in relation to the strengths movement, discussed in Chapter 7.)

Clifton and Nelson (1992) begin their book about talent with a rather charming allegory concerning a school for animals. The rabbit, which excels at and enjoys running, fares less well at swimming. The ill-advised curriculum adjustment is to give him extra swimming lessons and cut out the running practice, to the bunny’s extreme discomfiture. In fact the term *development need* suggests a discourse that is not just about bringing certain areas up to a bare minimum. That the focus on “fixing” weaknesses may well represent something of a triumph of hope over experience is represented in the situation depicted in Figure 3.

Person A is assessed as being at a lower performance level than person B. How much effort is likely to be needed to move person A to level...
10, compared with person B, and – as important – will A ever make it at all? Such an illustration seems stark and obvious, but the practice of development often seems to go on as if it were not so.

Formulating an approach that sums up what we see as the most likely to be effective, the guru Peter Drucker in one of his many quoted phrases says, “concentrate on the strengths and you make the weaknesses irrelevant.”

And yet, there do seem to be some areas in which worthwhile changes of behaviour that are remedially inspired can take place, as in the example below.

**A Worthwhile Change**

The CEO of a leading international company was holding his weekly meeting with his executive team. With his reputation for being very clever, very impatient, and very aggressive, these gatherings of his could be a trial for some. On this occasion the subject of his ire was the human resources (HR) director, Jim, a tough operator himself with a history of successful engagement in confrontational situations with the trades unions. The CEO let fly at him, blaspheming and displaying a rich vocabulary of vituperation. Jim sat there stolidly, making his responses briefly but calmly. After the meeting, Jim followed his boss into his office. “If you ever do that to me again,” he said, “you will get a similar response back, but with interest.” Then he turned away and left.

Two executive meetings later it was again an occasion for HR to come under the spotlight. The CEO made his points rationally and clearly, without recourse to any of the cuss words that had characterised the earlier occasion. Later in the meeting as he was in the course of pacing the room – another of his disconcerting habits – he paused by Jim’s seat. Leaning over to him, he whispered in his ear, “How am I doing?” and received an approving thumbs up. Jim was never again the subject of a tirade from that source.

It could be questioned as to whether such a change has anything to do with talent, but the behavioural change was certainly a positive one. We shall return to this issue at various points throughout the book, particularly in Chapters 7 and 8.
Peer Pressure

Such a case as that just outlined is rather similar to those to do with peer pressure, a powerful force as witnessed by some of the early experiments in which people were persuaded not to believe the evidence of their own eyes. A classic piece of research was that by Asch (1956), in which people were asked to state which of three lines was the same length as the standard one. Accomplices of the researcher, who were in the majority, gave the wrong answer and the solo real subject of the experiment followed suit.

Other, field-based work demonstrated the effectiveness of peer pressure in a more apparently talent-related context. For example, Krech, Crutchfield, and Ballochy (1962) reported a study in which through cooperation with the researcher, a group of young men in a US college treated a shy girl student as a social favourite. She was invited to all the important college social events and generally made a fuss of. She developed an easy and confident social manner, which was sustained when the contrived social support had ceased.

Coaching

There are, perhaps, some interesting lessons to be drawn from the world of coaching, and indeed, the example of the CEO and Jim might be seen as a very short-cut form of coaching. Again in sports the coach is positioned as a key developer of “natural” talent, not a remedial specialist. In other fields, such as business, the picture was for a long time less clear. For a top manager or director to have a coach was seen as an admission of failings rather than an attempt to bring about the realisation of the capacity for top-level performance. This situation has changed somewhat, with coaches more freely admitted in every sense. The use of coaching in situations such as “on-boarding” and “first 90 days” coaching still have something of a ring of novelty about them, although such occasions and other employment rites of passage, such as a promotion, are now more commonly seen as providing accepted opportunities for coaching.

Focusing on talents is nothing new, in principle, but it is not by any means routinely done. The earliest, or at least best known early, conceptualisation of this is in the Christian New Testament in the parable of the talents where the two “good and faithful servants” double their master’s wealth through trade.
Can Talents Be Overplayed?

There appear to be two distinct strands of thinking on the question as to whether or not talents can be overplayed. First is the somewhat confused one of those situations in which a “talented” person is pointed out as having one or more areas of weakness, meaning at an extreme that they cannot function normally without substantial support. The absent-minded professor is one stereotype here, and the reality of this type of pattern is shown in the autistic savants with little or no social skills and massive intellectual abilities in areas such as the recall of events and numbers. Along the way are people like the professional tenor soloist due to sing at a performance of a new requiem. He turned up for his one rehearsal on the Saturday afternoon with a performance due that evening and asked the composer to get his performance trousers and shirt cleaned for him, not having managed to organise that himself since his last performance.

That the areas of ability and lack of ability are correlated in these cases seems to be beyond doubt. What is not clear is that, say, the professor’s expertise in and preoccupation with his science causes the absence of mind. Also, if he – or she, though it is undoubtedly a male stereotype – were less adept in his science, but equally absent-minded, would he be more or less effective, that is, more or less talented altogether? The answer is surely less.

The second strand is represented by those situations in which one area is seen as so extreme as to become a liability. Examples would be a level of energy that leaves colleagues exhausted or an analytical ability that means others have difficulty following the intricacies of an argument.

These ideas are embodied in a number of personality and other measures. For example, with the Hogan Personality Inventory (see, e.g., Hogan, Hogan, & Warrenfeltz, 2007), there are warnings of negative consequences that can be associated with high scores on each of its 7 scales. With Strengthscope, which we shall discuss further in Chapter 7, it is argued by the authors that if collaboration is very strong, it could lead to a tendency to consult even when the urgency of a situation means that it is inappropriate to do so. However, other dimensions within the whole picture, such as results focus in this case, could well mitigate this effect. Thus, although there may be a risk associated with high levels of a talent, we would argue that holding out for high levels and taking note of the total pattern of talent is likely to produce the best results.