Chapter 2  
Talent as Precursor for Performance

Abstract  Giving direction to your life is only possible when you work towards high, authentic objectives with complete dedication. By doing those things where your unique talents and interests intersect. Live an engaged life and you will live a happy life, according to the Work Engagement Theory which I had studied all those years. I realized that after fifteen years of practical experience this is easier said than done.

Keywords  Talent · Work engagement theory · Sustainable performance

2.1  Introduction

You cannot expect performance without talent. That seems obvious. The main question that had kept nagging at me all those years became the first research question for a three-year study: “To what extent is talent important and responsible for actual performance?” This was my first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1
Having talent leads to (better) performance (Fig. 2.1).

2.2  The Concept of “Talent”

But what exactly is talent? No matter how many books on the talent you read, none provide a clear scientific definition of this ubiquitous concept. According to some, it is about the smartest people, or the ones with the best educations, or people with the
most relevant experience. Some organizations even apply the word “talent” to their entire workforce, making the term essentially meaningless.

“Talent” is also used to describe certain phenomena, like: “The War on Talent has begun.” According to the Dutch dictionary, the Dikkevan Dale talent is “The natural giftedness to excel at something.” This definition has also been used in this study, the natural giftedness and innate aptitude that allow a professional to excel in his or her job.

### 2.3 Talent Is Overrated

*Talent Is Overrated* is the title of Geoff Colvin’s best seller (2010), in which he demonstrates how we have been looking at the concept of talent in the wrong way for years. In recent decades, more and more research has become available that unequivocally proves that talent is seriously ‘overrated’. In fact, some even claim that it does not matter at all. The concept of talent remains important, however. After all, how we view talent determines our actions, how we stimulate our children, and it is the basis for how we apply ourselves or our employees. Therefore, a clear understanding of and research into the importance of talent remains extremely valuable.

An example is the psychologist Ericsson (2014, 2016). He has been studying the exceptional performance by chess champions, athletes, child prodigies, and musical geniuses. Together with a science journalist, he wrote an overview of his findings. The book, titled *Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise* (2016), shows that if you want to excel at something, you need the dedication to keep trying and practicing. What is most surprising about Ericsson’s study is that, according to him, talent does not actually exist. He says that what we generally refer to as talent, is nothing more than everything we have learned. According to the professor of psychology at Florida State University, the only true talent is something that we all have, the ability to learn.

But does that mean that there is no such thing as aptitude or innate talent? Ericsson is clear: “As a scientist, you cannot just say that something does not exist. But I have yet to meet someone who could do something special right away without any practice. In all those years, I never came across a single case of exceptional talent that could not be plausibly explained by practice (Meijers 2016).” My first hypothesis is, “having talent leads to (better) performance.” But to what extent does that apply? And what do Dutch CEOs and supervisors think about the issue? The conclusion of this chapter will provide the most important results of my research.

### 2.4 Individuals Who Excel

Thousands of studies on talent, including the one by Galton (2018)—a distant cousin to the thirteen years older Charles Darwin—show that performance by excelling individuals, who at first glance appeared very talented, was not so much the result
of talent, but rather of other factors. Factors such as personal focus and training. Children who were able to read at a very young age had not inherited that talent from their parents, but rather from their personal dedication to wanting to read at a young age. Studies showed that the same was true for “gifted” musicians, tennis players, swimmers, and mathematicians. Time after time, environmental influences turned out to determine success, not some impressive talent (Colvin 2010)!

But what about Mozart? How could his achievements not be viewed as the result of a major talent? After all, he wrote his first compositions when he was five and his first symphony when he was just eighteen! A child prodigy, people said. But as research has shown, even in the case of Mozart, his talent—if that even exists—only became valuable when he was given a lot of time to receive instruction and practice for developing his skills. Children of parents who do not play any instruments can still develop their musical skills, but few reach the top, other studies show (Colvin 2010; Syed 2011). Many musicians, who did reach the top, did so by studying and practicing music from an early age.

The same was true for Mozart. His father, Leopold Mozart, was already an accomplished composer in his own day. In addition, he turned out to be a very domineering parent, who started his son on an intensive program of composing and playing at just three years old. Leopold was a renowned pedagogue and published his handbook for violin teaching in the same year that Mozart was born. His most important student had arrived. From a very young age, Wolfgang Mozart received intensive guidance from an expert, who even lived in the same house. Even so, his performances were out of this world, right? Isn’t he is known as a child prodigy for a reason? Still, the old adage is true here as well; nothing is what it seems!

Many of young Wolfgang’s manuscripts eventually turned out not to actually be his own. His father had corrected them over and over again and added to them long before anyone else got to see them, later studies showed. Father Leopold even stopped composing his own works from the time he started guiding young Mozart.

Many of young Mozart works turned out not to be his own. At best, they can be considered the result of a team effort. His first masterpiece that has been recognized as truly his, is his piano concerto no.9 (KV271). But by then “little Mozart” was already 21 years of age and could hardly be considered a child (prodigy). A genius, however, yes, that he was (Colvin 2010).

And what about Tiger Woods? Some people who have studied performance excellence have called him “the Mozart of golf.” The backgrounds of both these “child prodigies” show surprising parallels. Tiger Woods’ father, Earl, was an educator who taught young children and had a passion for sports. Earl Woods wrote a generally unknown book titled, *Training a Tiger* (1997).

During his own childhood, Earl had been a pretty good baseball player. In the years before Tiger was born, however, he left baseball after discovering golf, or rather embracing golf. The many hours he spent training meant that he could lower his handicap to that of the best 10% of all players in his region.

On December 30, 1975 in Cypress, California, the “child prodigy” Tiger Woods was born. And once again he was born to a passionate and domineering teacher. Earl and his second wife—who had no other children—decided to make little Tiger their
number one priority. At just seven months old, Earl gave his son his first golf club and positioned Tiger on a special chair that allowed him to hit the ball without ever falling over. Little Tiger’s training had begun! When the “child prodigy” joined the national American team at just nineteen years old, he had already been training hard for eighteen years and over thirty thousand hours! Time spent on deliberate practice, as Ericsson (2014) might have said.

So, does talent play no role at all then? That seems difficult to accept. When Dutch Formula 1 driver Max Verstappen recently became the youngest Grand Prix winner ever, everyone praised his unique gifts. Former Formula 1 world champion and racing legend Mario Andretti called Verstappen “a rare talent.” Former racing driver Robert Doornbos said, “There is a certain aura around him.” Might that be a family trait, since both his parents are racing drivers? Max Verstappen might be the next Mozart. Or Tiger Woods if you prefer. A young man that was trained to become an excellent racing driver by his father from a very young age. By the time he was seventeen—when many of us are still getting our drivers’ licenses—little Max had already been deliberately practicing for fourteen years.

2.5 Winner DNA or Dedication?

As I see it, much of the confusion has come—and still comes—from the word “mainly.” Their performance is mainly a matter of having access to certain means. Without talent, I figured, you cannot perform and continue performing. Talent is, therefore, a requirement for performance that can be positively affected by certain personality traits and the right fit with the environment.

Both Ericsson (2014, 2016) and myself (Kodden 2011, 2014) argue that, in addition to talent, the aspect of dedication and spending many hours doing something are most crucial when it comes to sustainable performance. But does that still apply to professionals today? Or are there perhaps other personality traits or performance criteria that might even be of much greater importance?

In 2012, Danish scientist Rasmus Ankersen published his book The Gold Mine Effect. Ankersen delved into the secrets of high performance and became the only expert to have actually lived amongst and trained with the best athletes in the world. The Gold Mine Effect (2012) was published in over 40 countries.

As a young soccer coach, Ankersen had once helped the Danish team FC Midtjylland and set up Denmark’s first soccer academy. His goal was simply to scout the best talents Denmark had to offer and then train them in order to transfer them to teams such as AC Milan, Inter, Barcelona et cetera for the highest fees possible. Most people felt that such a strategy was the only reason for a small team like FC Midtjylland and to even exist.

Of all the talents Ankersen saw over the years as coach, one in particular stuck with him: Simon Kjaer. A not particularly talented soccer player who everyone had ignored, became the biggest success in the history of the team. How was it possible
that Kjaer had gone unnoticed for so long? How many other Simon Kjaers might be out there? Ankersen couldn’t get rid of the thought of so many talents simply going unnoticed. Was talent even the deciding factor?

2.6 Gold Mines

Rasmus Ankersen contemplated: “How is it possible, that a few small villages like Iten in Kenya and Bekoji in Ethiopia, keep delivering miracle runners? And why do Jamaicans always win the sprinting events at world championships and the Olympics? Why do 35% of the best female golfers in the world come from South Korea? How has Russia managed to produce 25% of the world’s top 40 female tennis players in recent years? Why did most of the world’s recent soccer greats come from Brazil?” Ankersen’s quest for the answer to the question of what makes someone outperform anyone else in the world, led him to six, as he calls it, “goldmines” that produced one great after another.

In Kenya, Ethiopia, Jamaica (running), Russia (tennis), South Korea (golf), and Brazil (soccer), he spent six months training and trying to keep up with upcoming talents and established athletes.

If there was one thing that all of these goldmines had in common, Ankersen thought, it would be that they all provided an environment of practice and improvement. An environment where competitors serve to provide inspiration. “In Kenya, nobody runs alone, they do it together. Talents and the world’s greats, running side by side.” Just think of how inspiring that is. The person who wins the training run in Kenya on some Tuesday morning is likely to be the fastest person on the planet in that event. “Moreover, those talents see how hard their heroes have to work for their success. They see that the best in the world choose to continue training for another hour while the rest gives up. From a young age, they learn that the one who ends up winning is the one who wants it the most.” Talent is good, character is better, it turned out. A conducive and inspiring environment appears to be crucial to fully developing talent.

Or as Ankersen puts it: “Talent exists, but it exists everywhere. It is about uncovering that talent.” His most important conclusion and recommendation: “Not pushing your children to perform is the most irresponsible thing you can do as a parent. There is no DNA of a winner, the difference is made through dedication and practice!”

2.7 Deliberate Practice

Scientists from all over the world have been working for 150 years now to discover the secret of sustainable performance. Mountains of data are available from researchers who studied how top performers from, for instance, music, sports, and science, were able to do and achieve what they did. The general results of their studies,
as well as those of my own, contradict what we have always thought. Namely, that
talent and experience were the most important predictors for a sustainable, excellent
performance. Talent does turn out to be a prerequisite—no talent, no performance—
but talent and experience alone are wholly insufficient. As has been proven again
and again, past performance is no guarantee for future results (Sengupta et al. 2008).

Still, many organizations value and use talent, experience, and past performance
as the most important selection criteria when it comes to hiring, promoting, and
rewarding their employees. Studies have indicated that the opposite is true. There
is no evidence that experience is a reliable indicator for performance. On the con-
trary, in fact. Our knowledge about sustainable performance seems utterly inadequate
(Kodden and Hupkes 2019; Kodden and Van Ingen 2019).

Anders Ericsson also concluded that it was not the quantity of practice that was
important, but the quality. He made it his life’s work to further study this quality
of practice. Based on all the studies he had consulted, he came up with his theory
of deliberate practice. It is not about practicing as much as you can, but about the
quality of practice (Bandura 1977).

Deliberate practice means constantly confronting the limitations to your strongest
aspects. Past performance should always be surpassed. It is not about just doing the
bare minimum, it is about excelling. The Netherlands has too much of a culture of
mediocrity, we practice all kinds of things and are not focused enough. Only when
Daphne Schippers left combined events and specialized in sprint events, did she
become a world-famous top athlete.

So much more can be said about talent and talent management. So many more
books and studies can be quoted. Where to begin, where to end? That was my biggest
challenge for this chapter. Eventually, I chose this one question: “To what extent is
having talent truly important for sustainable performance?”

2.8 Results of the Study

In order to answer my main research question, I asked managers to answer two
questions about the estimated talent of a random employee on a scale of one to five,
varying from “completely agree” to “completely disagree.”

This way, I charted the talent of over 1100 professionals and established the first
variable related to the performance of these professionals.

My study on the importance of talent shows that having talent can only be con-
sidered conditionally important to performance. ‘No performance without talent’ is
the tentative conclusion that can be drawn from the answers given by the supervisors
and senior colleagues of over 1100 professionals. But in the end, the level of talent
present showed very little significant correlation to performance. The aspect of talent
ended up as number 9 on the list of all the performance criteria that had been
suggested!

However, asked about the performance criterion they would use to hire new
employees, the majority of CEOs said the following was the most important: The
level of talent present for performing the job (see Appendix B: Most important results of the study on performance indicators). Asked how they considered or estimated this talent to be present in advance, most would say: “Well, based on diplomas, work experience, promotions, and the references they provided.” In other words, based on past performance and the personal view that the talent deemed to be present in the candidate, would lead to further positive results in the future.

This was all wrong, which is not only demonstrated by my own study. For instance, a study by the University of Amsterdam together with temp agency Randstad from 2008 and a comprehensive international and longitudinal study by Schmidt and Hunter (1998) show that past performance as well as past references provide no guarantee at all for future results.

My study appears to fully confirm the theories by, among others, Billy Beane, Anders Ericsson, Daniel Pink, Malcolm Gladwell, Geoff Colvin, and Rasmus Ankersen: Talent is good, character is better! But which personal and character traits are to be considered crucial when it comes to sustainable performance? My quest continued.

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