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I am Talent - Unleashing potential, differentiating oneself and making a difference – John Gatherer

Someone once said ‘What’s money? A man is a success if he gets up in the morning and goes to bed at night and in between does what he wants to do.’ That someone was Bob Dylan, singer songwriter and poet, who has been a major and profoundly influential figure in popular music and culture for five decades.

Everyone has talent – we all have something special to offer to make a difference. Regardless of your upbringing, family and community environment and education, we all have specific and unique qualities, abilities and learning that have been forged in the white-water of life experience.

I accept that not everyone can be the president, a billionaire, an Olympic athlete or a CEO, but the key to unleashing potential is having an insatiable appetite to explore, learn, and discover what suitable range of work can be matched to your strengths, interests and abilities. This pursuit often takes many years and can involve experiences based on trial and error, frustrations and setbacks. But when you eventually find the type of job or work that turns you on and stimulates your passion, enthusiasm and imagination – then you have lift off..!

This presentation focuses on the importance of having a future strategy for yourself – and the use of critical questions that continuously shape both your thinking and actions around your personal improvement and self management goals. One of life’s challenging journeys is to build on our DNA that we have been born with, channel our accomplishments and failures, mould our experiences and influences and reach our potential. We want to explore and create a unique identity that we feel good about. We want to stand out from the crowd and be the best we can be. Dream more, learn more, and become more – the theme of the conference is highly appropriate!

I have a special interest in strategic change management, Leadership development and Talent management. From my corporate experience in the mining industry as well as currently consulting across a wide diversity of local and international organizations we have identified a number of common themes and lessons learnt that I would like to share with you relating to performance effectiveness, potential development, self-mastery and career management.

I would like to leave you with some provocative questions and key pointers that hopefully will act as a guide and stimulant in evaluating your own talent and personal mastery. My challenge to you this morning is to not only think about this from your own leadership perspective but consider what takeaways and insights you can apply to the people you lead and influence. Let me outline the questions:

The world of work - What are the drivers of success in the work that you do?

The world of me - How can you find out who you are, what you want and how to optimise your personal effectiveness?

Managing yourself within organizations - What are organisations looking for when they search for talent?

How do I differentiate myself - How can you build your distinctive value and personal brand?

Leveraging my performance - How can you raise the bar in your personal performance and results?

Fast-tracking my development - How can you fast-track your development?

Exploiting my meta-competencies - What competencies or attributes are core to becoming the best you can be?

I will work through each of these in turn.

The world of work and education

I was intrigued by your theme and focus for the conference (Dream more...Learn more...Become more) and believe that what I am going to cover over the next 40 minutes has relevance to you as the leadership within education as well as your ultimate responsibility and commitment to the teaching staff and the many thousands of learners that you coach, develop and influence on a daily basis. You've heard this all before but from a simple standpoint you are the suppliers and pipeline of the future skills and talent that the private, public and informal sectors require.

For countless years the debate has raged between education and business about the importance of developing young school leavers not only in terms of their academic results but also nurturing well rounded, adaptable individuals with entrepreneurial flair who will be able to cope and compete in the face of relentless change in their future work and daily life. Considering the turbulent times that we live in and how this impacts the learners lives after school, I believe that this imperative has become even more urgent and necessary. I applaud the role and contribution that you play in education and the commitment to broaden the debate around strategic challenges facing education in the near future. Your special calling within education and your contribution in preparing learners for life after school is a vital responsibility to society.

In addition to the provision of high quality education, I believe that your focus and direction, as leaders in education, is incredibly important to inspire and influence teaching structures to build capability in the personal skills and attitudes of learners and cultivate appropriate values and behaviours. This will significantly help learners transition to tertiary education, the entry level of employment and subsequent advancement through the tough and competitive world of work in later years.

The perfect talent storm

There is a perfect talent storm that continues to build. The turbulent global business environment and increasing talent crisis requires innovative and pragmatic approaches to finding, developing, engaging and retaining talent. The famous report from Mckinsey in 1998 that rocked the corporate world on the War for Talent and all the actions since then has still not been enough to win the war.

Talent management covers a broad array of topics such as retention, skills development and succession planning and typically remains one of the top three strategic challenges in most organizations worldwide. It has certainly earned a huge amount of exposure over the last 10 years. Companies are investing huge amounts of time and money in this area but there hasn't been a noticeable success story or step-change yet.

Young talent are increasingly demanding to be treated as a whole person with needs, values, aspirations and a life beyond work. But to succeed in their goals, they also need to understand the world of work and how they can match their own talents, skills, needs and expectations to that world.

We have run workshops and provided consulting to thousands of managers and technical specialists from different companies, industries, countries and cultures around the world. From this experience, my business partner and I have written a number of articles on Leadership development, talent management and published a book – I am Talent outlining philosophies, processes and toolkits to help graduates, team leaders, managers and leaders on their personal journeys of discovery to achieve their personal and career aspirations.

Managing and coping with Change

One of the biggest challenges facing people from all walks of life is how well they handle Change.

Let's refer to the context of change by reflecting on a quotation from Alvin Toffler, the world renowned futurist – "Change is avalanching on us and we are grotesquely unprepared for it!" The reason for my choice of this quote, as a symbol of change, is not so much for the dramatic words and imagery expressed, but the fact that this quote came from his best-selling book "Future Shock" that was published in 1970!! The rate of change that the futurist Alvin Toffler anticipated in the early 1970's has accelerated exponentially beyond all our imagination and expectations.

A more current futurist, James Canton describes in his 2007 publication "The Extreme Future" the five factors of the extreme future as being the following:

Speed - The rate of change will be blinding, comprehensive in scope and will touch every aspect of your life.

Complexity - A quantum leap in the number of seemingly unrelated forces that will have a direct bearing on everything – from lifestyles, to work, to personal and national security.

Risk – New and greater risks and more threats from terror, to crime, to global economic upheaval will alter every aspect of your life.

Change - Drastic adjustments in your work, community and relationships will force you to adapt quickly to radical changes.

Surprise - Sometimes good, sometimes difficult to imagine, surprise will become a daily feature of your life, often challenging your sensibility and logic.

Life is often characterised by winners and losers and I would like to focus on a number of major themes, which the winner's intuitively have built into their own recipes for success. We believe they

are critical for unleashing your talent and potential, making successful choices and decisions, and improving yourself – in any career pursuit or future endeavour.

Themes for success

Think about any high flyer that you know and critique them on this list. Think back to last week's great world cup rugby contests and consider the twenty year old superstars – Frans Steyn, James O'Conner and Johnny Sexton - they don't just perform well by luck or accident!

We believe that the successful player or the real achiever has a natural ability in combining a number of key challenges and significant skills into a winning formula:

- Purpose – you need to push yourself relentlessly as to what you want in life, what specific goals you set, what milestones you have identified on the path to getting there, and the end goal which you envisage or picture for yourself.
- Self-mastery – in the end it is all about self: the insights you need in order to take action, the accountability you require to keep to the plan you have chosen, the discipline necessary to execute your skills, and the confidence to build on the belief that you will succeed ;
- Mindset – attitude is the glue that holds all this together; the difference between impossible and possible is a state of mind; if you cultivate the correct positive thoughts, possibility thinking and appropriate inner conversations, you will be surprised at what a difference this makes in your approach to any challenge or threat;
- Action – you need to commit and be proactive to ideas and possibilities, and should be persistent and determined in your quest for change;
- Change – you need to understand the changes occurring in the world, organisations, the workplace and at a local level. Stay informed, so that you are positioned to respond and cope with change. In particular, be willing and able to move out of your comfort zone and personal 'view' of the world, by making that shift towards what really works in the current and new context;
- Continuous learning – cultivate an attitude of curiosity and openness to new information, ideas, opportunities and especially feedback from others on how you can hone your skills and knowledge and achieve better results.

Breaking news

To be more effective in your job and your career, you also need to understand the bigger context within which you are working by asking what is happening in the world, your country, your industry, your organisation, your department. This will help you gain perspective and meaning, and give you some idea of where you fit into the bigger picture! When you understand the broader context of an issue, activity or role, the choices you make and the decisions you take will be more effective. It is important that you always view your performance and impact in the context of global events, national and regional influences, school strategies and team project goals. It is vital that you have the tendency to “zoom in and out” and align the way you think and act with the bigger picture in your world of work.

The changing workplace

What is the bigger picture of work today? The business environment, workplace and job market are in constant flux, changing at a staggering pace. In this information age, the workplace has been characterised by leaner and flatter structures, the advent of the knowledge worker and work teams that form and reform to meet organisational needs, multiple roles and technological innovation.

The changing nature of work also demands greater flexibility and mobility from workers, in a greater variety of workplaces, with greater use of contract labour, the emergence of small business and a greater reliance on social networks.

The employee's social environment has changed significantly with more system support for virtual work, more integration of learning into everyday work experiences and an increased focus on connectedness, delivery and high performance.

The future is not what it used to be.

The world of me

Aspects of me, myself, I

When planning and shaping your future and how you define yourself through what you do, it is important to know as much as possible about yourself. Do you know who you are, what you really want, what you value, what motivates you, what your definition of success is and, what you have to offer? Do you know how to maximise your personal effectiveness through understanding and practising a 'whole person' approach to life, i.e. working with all those aspects which make you unique: your mind and emotions, your physical and spiritual sides. Knowing and working with these unique traits will help you find the right role, at the right time, for greatest job satisfaction.

The power of purpose

You need to have a sense of purpose with your life. Ask yourself a series of questions about where you want to go, what difference you want to make, how balanced is your life, what short term goals have you set and what are your values. Take ownership of your future and be pro-active in investing in the wide array of self- rating tools, books and assessments that can provide valuable information and insights on your personality preferences, thinking and learning styles, your emotional intelligence and tolerance for stress.

Perform a regular swot analysis on yourself, validate the factors with significant others and develop a plan of action to systematically address any shortcomings or weaknesses. In short, you need a plan for yourself! The crazy thing is that we're involved in planning sessions all the time – strategic plans, curriculum design, financial budgets, project plans and even family holidays. Yet we seldom take time out to create personal action plans, development plans for ourselves – we just do what we've always done and wonder why that's not good enough. A plan is also only a plan until you commit to making it happen....!

The Noah principle

Think about the message in the Noah principle – “No prizes for predicting rain, prizes only for building arks.”

To be a really effective leader (of yourself, your family, or in the workplace), you need to be effective as an individual. You need to master the art of self-leadership or personal mastery, and to be able to choose the most appropriate response and behaviour in any situation, to get what you want.

People are often faced with defining moments or turning points in their lives, where they step up and face their fears, make big decisions or hesitate and miss important opportunities. It is these moments that can shape the future, and it is at these times that people need awareness and mental and emotional intelligence to make wise choices.

The difference between effective and ineffective people is their awareness of their choices in any given situation, and then being able to choose the BEST option. You are either in VICTIM mode, where you defend, blame and complain, or in VICTOR mode, where you realise that you have options and choices on how to respond and tackle a problem positively.

All about attitude

You cannot always choose what happens to you in life, but you can choose how to respond to what happens to you. A significant influence in your armoury of life skills is attitude:

“There is little difference in people, but that little difference makes a big difference. The little difference is attitude. The big difference is whether it is positive or negative.”

W. Clement Stone

I am sure you all prefer to work with people who have a positive outlook on life, are enthusiastic in the tasks that they perform and have a can-do mindset to any challenge or difficulty.

What are organizations looking for?

Today’s work environment has become extremely demanding and competitive and can be broadly characterized as driven by performance results. As a new entrant or someone who is currently in the job market, or as a talented employee wishing to transition to a new opportunity, it is important to understand how an organization views and manages talent.

The right people, with the right skills, in the right jobs ...doing the right things

Organizations are all about people. It was Jim Collins, who wrote the classical business best-seller “Good to Great” who stated - first who, then what. Simply stated, he argued “get the right people on the bus, the right people in the right seats and the wrong people off the bus” The role of any Organisation is to pull ideas, expertise, people and systems together to provide products or services that satisfy a need. Yet it is the people – the employees, staff, teams - who inspire a vision, set goals, develop a strategy and implement the plan – and make things happen.

What organisations need is to find the right people, with the right skills, to do the right things, at the right time, to achieve business results. In essence that is the definition of Talent management.

Talent management frameworks

Organizations have implemented comprehensive strategies, frameworks, processes and tools that seek to identify, resource, develop, retain and review their talent across its structures. The people who are noticed and considered for future investment are those that consistently meet their performance standards, display initiative and potential for further development and demonstrate a high degree of engagement in their work.

Generation gap

The role of the leader in all of this is paramount as he or she needs to engage with the typical work team that is highly diversified, multi-cultural and spanning many generations across all ages - from baby boomers, generation X and Y to generation net – the new thumb tribe!

The leader - the lion in the grass

In our leadership workshops we often use the picture of the lion in the grass – symbolizing how staff is continuously watching, discussing, analysing and dissecting their bosses – desperately looking for cues and signals of encouragement or approval. That is why engagement has become such a big focus in leadership today – the ability of the leader to connect on a one to one basis, provide meaningful feedback, hold crucial conversations and take a special interest in the challenges and accomplishments of each member of his team.

How do we differentiate ourselves?

Images of self

Have you ever stopped to think how you would draw yourself? It's just a quick and simple exercise – how you see yourself, how you come across in the world, the symbols that represent you, who and what is important to you – in short, how you believe you really are. You don't have to be an artist and you don't need to go into any great detail – just put pen to paper! We often use this exercise in workshops that we facilitate on self-leadership and personal mastery, to provoke people to express themselves visually, and to describe and share their self-portrait – or, rather, their self-image –with members of their groups. It is always an animated and fun assignment, which normally has a similar outcome in that it is usually only a small minority of people who are clear and confident about drawing and displaying their image, characteristics and symbolic representation of themselves.

In life, we spend a great deal of time interacting and socialising with others (friends, family, colleagues and also strangers) and we tend to be perceptive and aware of other people's expressions, behaviours, quirks and personality traits. Apart from our inner thoughts, feelings and personal reactions, we are generally not in tune with our self-image, and rarely stop to consider how we come across to others.

Pop idols

The popular television reality shows such as Pop Idol and its associated franchises worldwide draws its appeal and popularity from a weekly elimination process of talented young singers and musicians, all competing against each other and chasing their dream of stardom and a guaranteed career launch in the music industry. The real fascination lies in the fact that, as the group gets whittled

down from 12 to the finalists and the ultimate winner, audiences at home and in the theatre along with the panel of judges, are looking for the superstar.

It is not just the perfect rendition of the chosen song that does it, but the full package of attributes - the all-round attitude, personality, stage management, song interpretation and the projection of the full image of the potential superstar that will swing the votes and bring success.

Me Inc.

This edge, this distinctiveness and this unique flair is called your personal brand and we need to exploit our best qualities and strengths to our advantage. Think about the following quotation from Tom Peters:

‘Regardless of age, regardless of position, regardless of the business we happen to be in, all of us need to understand the importance of branding. We are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc. To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You.’

Building my personal brand

In order to build your personal brand, you need to be regularly exploring the following questions:

How do I sell myself? How authentic do people see me? What is it that I have to sell? How do others judge my character? What real promise do I have? How visible am I in the eyes of people that matter?

You need to build a track record of consistently delivering the goods (whatever that means in your particular line of work), but also to be an individual who impresses others with your passion and enthusiasm for the tasks in which you are involved, with your drive and energy, your integrity and personal values, the ideas and initiative you display, and your balanced temperament when dealing with people.

Re-invention

As you move through your chapters of life, with new environments, opportunities and challenges that impact on you, there is often a need to re-invent and renew yourself to what is relevant to the new era. One of the best examples of re-invention is Madonna. Love her or hate her, you have to admire the ability that Madonna displays in continuously reinventing herself, her image, her music.

After three decades in the cut-throat music industry, she is still topping the album charts and recently completed her Confessions world concert tour with two hour dance extravaganzas every night for months on end - all at the age of 53! Her ability to constantly evaluate the evolving music industry, and adapt and market her personal brand is a great example of how someone can let go of winning recipes that have reached their sell-by date, to create brand-new blueprints for success.

Managing my performance

Managing your performance is probably the most important aspect of your career development. One of the best analogies to high performance is in international sport.

Soccer world cup

Take the soccer world cup that was held in this country last year. Behind all the huge crowds of colourful supporters, the drama and the ceremony, was the serious business of scoring goals and winning games – and remember how upstaged the favourites were. Professional and national sports teams spend an enormous amount of time and money, and apply tactics and resources to enhance their performance. They have a barrage of specialist coaches, outline visions and goals, draw up training programmes and are provided with fitness conditioning support. They study their competition, watch video replays and get feedback and technical coaching after every game or event.

Can you say you invest this much effort in maximising your performance? How do organizations compare to sport regarding high performance – unfortunately the answer lies between grave limitations and limited success. Most organizations have an established annual performance management cycle where individuals are assessed and rated by their managers across a range of defined critical performance areas and measures. Any gaps in performance become agreed areas of improvement and development that needs to be addressed. However this Performance evaluation process of assessing an employee's recent successes, failures, strengths and weaknesses has never enjoyed a high degree of credibility and organizations need to “up their game” in this arena.

It has been our experience that high performance people realise the importance of achieving consistently high results and take ownership of their performance by continuously seeking our relevant feedback about how they're doing and pushing themselves to improve themselves to stretch targets and superior results – like an athlete's personal best. Transformational leaders also focus on high performance and practice regular feedback and engagement with their team members as a way to address and review progress on development areas and provide reinforcement, recognition and motivation in areas that are working well.

Factors influencing performance

The following are the benefits of constructively managing your own performance in relationship to the changing environment, the organization, your team and yourself as well as your required development:

- You understand your role and how your contribution fits into the strategic goals of the organisation;
- You receive regular feedback and coaching to identify strengths and on-going development areas and opportunities;
- You understand the knowledge, skills, experience and behaviours you need to develop for the next possible role/s;
- You have an opportunity to optimise your talents, grow as a person and strive to be the best you can be;

Accelerating my learning and development

Changing behaviour

Accelerated learning is a continuous process of understanding and closing the gap between what you want and what you have in terms of knowledge, experience, skills and behaviour. You need to have the awareness you need to improve, the insights and understanding to effect this change, the willingness and commitment to develop yourself and an action plan in making it happen. Once you understand the gap, it is important to prioritise learning into a few focus areas at a time, and to choose the best learning methods for your style and for the time available to you. As with any journey it helps to have a plan, a coach and to receive regular feedback, to ensure that learning is on-going and effective.

The art of learning

Learning is a continuous process of assessment, planning, experience, reflection and further improvement. It is good to take stock at least once a year, and assess where you are and where you want to be in terms of the different competencies, and to plan ahead for the future. The real high-flyers are naturally inquisitive and continuously push the boundaries to broaden their experience and knowledge. Learning never really stops. Any time when you are learning, you need to go through the process of taking what works into the future, learning something new ... and, importantly, letting go of what does not work.

The learning and development field is colossal with traditional and pioneering approaches for skills development and personal growth. These range from e-learning, reading, classroom training, workshops, seminars, group learning, formal programmes, project immersion, action learning and coaching.

Different Coaching roles

One of the most effective accelerated learning methods is Coaching and Mentoring which is also practical and cost effective. An intensive one-on-one relationship with a coach or mentor from any walk of life can provide specific information, advice, skills, experience and feedback, to assist your growth and performance. Coaching and mentoring can also play an important role in assisting your integration into the organisation's culture and systems.

People who stand out from the crowd – whether in a school, in business or on the sports field – demonstrate very specific attitudes to learning:

They have the willingness

- to do what it takes to get where they want to go;
- to ask for and accept any kind of feedback about their performance and behaviour on a regular basis;
- to learn from all types of people, and to acknowledge that everyone has something to offer them on their learning journey – people of all ages, cultures, genders, qualification levels;
- to try new things, take risks and make a fool of themselves if they don't succeed straight away;
- to continuously expand their knowledge and experience through reading, networking, researching and experimenting;

- to critique their own performance and behaviour against successful role models whom they admire and aspire to
- the discipline to follow through with their plans and achieve something

Core abilities for success

In Chinese philosophy "yin and yang", is used to describe how polar opposites or contrary forces are interconnected and interdependent in the natural world, and how they impact on each other.

One of the greatest challenges to individuals navigating the rapidly changing, uncertain white waters of life, is to become adept at 'riding the waves', staying on top and finding a balance between the many paradoxes and conflicts that we face in day-to-day life. Jim Collins the author of Good to Great came up with an interesting phrase called the "genius of AND and the tyranny of OR." It is often not about making a choice between two opposing paths of action, but about finding a balance between two different ends of the same continuum.

We have seen this in many of the highly effective people with which we have worked who have a good understanding of yin and yang – they can be shy and fearless, be highly conceptual as well as attending to detail, display empathy and be tough, be strategic and operational.

Meta-competencies

Successful individuals also have a strong set of core competencies (meta-competencies) in their personality that characterize their effectiveness in all that they do. They have a unique understanding of their impact on others and are able to adapt their behaviour to people and situations without compromising their principles and who they are. From our experience in training, coaching and developing thousands of leaders and talented individuals over the past 20 years, the following have emerged as the key differentiating core competencies:

Awareness is the insight of both internal and external stimuli, events and behaviours impacting you – what we pay attention to

Authenticity – being true to yourself, feeling and expressing your emotions, acting on your intuitions and following your dreams

Courage is not the absence of fear, but feeling the fear and taking action anyway

Decisiveness is the willingness to act on your intuition and accept the risk and consequences

Resilience is the internal strength and determination necessary to persevere with setbacks and obstacles

Humility is being unpretentious – not believing you are better or more important than others

Drive is the relentless pursuit of goals, the courage of your convictions and the belief in succeeding

Energy is the amount of internal resources you have to initiate create, and perform work and to go the extra mile

Derailing behaviours

As important as it is to develop and hone core competencies such as the selected list, is the ability to cope with and address those dysfunctional qualities known as derailing behaviours (the dark side of our character).

Derailing behaviours are unfortunately entrenched in a number of people as personality traits – they are caused by a variety of factors, such as an individual's behavioural tendencies, a lack of personal awareness, personal 'blind spots', lack of emotional intelligence or stressful workplace triggers.

Derailers are those abrasive mannerisms and fatal flaws that we have all seen countless times in certain individuals and devalue contributions as they are inappropriate to achieving results, building relationships and trust. People are often competent at what they do but keep letting themselves down with their negative attitude and inappropriate personality traits.

Some of the examples of derailing behaviours are passive - aggression, arrogance, volatility, cynicism, distrust, cautious etc. We all have them but the trick is to be aware of their impact and restrain or eliminate them. Remember the yin and the yang of life - derailers can be the shadow side of our bright personality!

Conclusion

I hope that this overview and list of perspectives and practical ideas has been useful to you because I believe that there are lots of similarities between managing a school to managing a business. The true survivors and achievers in both the world of education and the world of work within our relentless changing environments are those individuals who differentiate themselves from others by offering a consistent, high-quality, value-adding contribution. There is a saying: 'If you're good, you're good', that can ensure your climb up the ladder of success - but under the pressures of economic pressures, competitive skills, stakeholder expectations and challenging realities, there is no room for complacency. There is a continuous requirement to deliver the goods and build and manage your credibility, personal brand and reputation.

My final quotation is offered as food for thought! It is a wonderful saying to which people always relate positively - "People hear what we say, but see what we do – and seeing is believing....!" All the very best in your journey of discovery. Go out there – make it happen and make a difference!