



## DEVELOPING TALENT

*By Debbie Craig & John Gatherer*

***“All of the top achievers I know are life-long learners...looking for new skills, insights and ideas. If they are not learning, they are not growing ... not moving towards excellence.” Dennis Waitley***

### Introduction

Development of talent has always been a challenging endeavour. It takes time, costs money, pulls people out of production and the investment in talent is not always harvested as people move or leave taking their new skills and experience with them. Everyone has talent and potential and everyone requires development. However, it is crucial to differentiate the effort, creativity and investment in the talent that is going to make the significant difference in the business.

Out of all the characteristics that separate achievers from underachievers, there are two distinguishing characteristics: the right attitude and the ability to learn. The people that stand out from the crowd whether in an organisation, their business or the sports field are the people who embrace a curiosity for learning and display the following attitudes:

- The willingness and the humility to ask for and accept any kind of feedback about your performance and behaviour on a regular basis.
- The willingness to do what it takes to get where you want to go including doing the “dirty” jobs.
- The willingness to learn from all types of people and acknowledge that everyone has something to offer your learning journey – including all ages, cultures, genders, qualification level and all levels of the organisation.
- The willingness to try new things, take risks and make a fool of yourself if you don’t get it right straight away.
- The willingness to quickly correct and where necessary apologise for your mistakes.
- The willingness to continuously expand your knowledge and experience through reading, debating, networking, researching and experimenting.
- The willingness to involve other people in your own learning through group learning activities – more heads are better than one.
- The willingness to realistically evaluate your own performance and behaviour against successful role models that you admire and aspire to and establish the gap and develop a plan to close the gap.
- The discipline to follow-through with your plans and learn something new every day.

## Challenges and Opportunities

The challenge for organisations is to find people with these attitudes or to find ways to develop these values, in addition to the technical and leadership competencies required for success. Unfortunately, in the past much of the educational foundation is based on didactic, structured teaching and people have not been taught the value of self-discovery or how to learn using their whole brain and all their faculties. Real learning includes right brain activities such as an ability to explore, discover, imagine, feel, create, test and challenge. Once new ideas, information and experiences are examined, we can then use left brain activities to reason, analyse, memorise, organise and conclude. The skills and education crisis has resulted in organisations needing to bring new, more effective learning and development techniques into their HRD and talent development programs.



### Development vs. Deployment

Talent development must include a combination of development and deployment activities to ensure broad based acquisition of knowledge, skills, experience and behaviours.

**Development** includes the various development actions for the talent pool to address the talent gap, including performance development of talent (i.e. providing opportunities for talent to develop and grow their skills) and career development (i.e. providing opportunities for talent to advance in their career paths). Development activities can include self-study, coaching and mentoring, differentiated development programmes for leaders, technical specialists, key players and high flyers and external management development programs.

**Deployment** includes the various career opportunities available for an individual to develop skills and experience for future roles. These can include new appointments, project roles, acting positions, secondments or exchanges. It is important to align individual career aspirations with organisational needs.

Creative deployment options must be created for High flyers and critical key players such as stretch assignments that enable learning of new skills, functional rotations, role exchanges, talent exposure programs, action learning project teams or internships.

Outside experiences are also important including consortium learning programs, international travel to key organizations for reviewing best practices and exposure to new perspectives.

Compared to development interventions which are often subjective and passive experiences, difficult to evaluate, deployment has the advantage of utilizing the “tried and tested” philosophy as it places employees temporarily in new environments, positions and roles where performance and learning can both be easily assessed. Deployment is also cost effective as the incumbent remains within the group company and is usually involved in an applied on-the-job learning assignment, often where the personal performance enhances a value-adding contribution.

## **Development**

In our experience working with organisations in the field of talent development, we have found a few key principles to be important to optimise investment in talent:

### **1. Strategic talent development plan**

So often we find the “too little too late” syndrome when it comes to developing talent. By the time talent is identified and succession plans are completed, the gap is too wide and the time is too short. Some skills take more than 4 years to build, or require a minimum of 2 years’ experience to understand the organisation’s systems and processes. To avoid being held to ransom by a talent shortage, keep the following in mind:

- Know what you want and what you have got.
- Understand the organisation’s long term vision, values and strategic plans.
- Work out the organisation’s core competencies for success and devolve these in a competency framework and a career opportunities matrix (career ladder or pipeline) for each core function.
- Assess the existing capabilities against what is required and develop a strategic talent development and succession plans.
- Make build or buy decisions.
- Ensure internal training and development capacity, culture and alternatives exist in leaders and support functions to close the gap.
- Commit to annual talent forums to review talent from a strategic vantage point and follow-through on decisions and actions.

### **2. Culture of learning**

Another challenge of learning is to ensure that a culture of learning is encouraged and rewarded and one in which leaders are trained and rewarded to identify, develop and coach talent. Key performance targets must include developing successors for your job but also for the whole organisation. Individuals and leaders must clearly understand their roles and responsibilities in the development cycle and actively manage priorities, expectations, time off and resources for learning. The consistent barriers to learning we find are operational priorities, pressure to meet targets and deadlines, insufficient planning to ensure time and resources are available for learning and lack of reward and skills for leaders to make it happen.

### **3. Identify and develop talent early**

The earlier you can identify talent in the business, the greater the opportunity to test, develop and hone inherent potential and skills. Beliefs and attitudes are difficult to change, but still easier at an earlier age to shape. There is also more flexibility and less risk in developing and moving young talent around. Investment in early development enhances engagement, builds loyalty and reduces retention risk.

#### **4. Build on inherent potential**

An individual's inherent potential is the strength or skill or characteristic that will make a person shine and achieve extraordinary results. Too often in development planning, the focus is on the areas of weaknesses, not on the areas of strength. In their book, "Now discover your strengths", Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton describe how focussing on our weaknesses only closes the gap from weak to average (some people will never be good at time management). They suggest that whilst it is important to manage your areas that result in ineffectiveness, it is more important to focus on the areas that make you shine and stand out from the crowd (i.e. You will be recognised a lot more for your networking and relationship building than for your lack of time management).

##### **Example from Now discover your strengths: Bill Gates**

When Bill Gates originally founded Microsoft his strength was his ability at taking innovations and transforming them into user friendly applications, however, running and managing an enterprise the size of Microsoft was not. Whilst Bill was quite competent at developing and implementing Microsoft's strategy, by his own admission Bill found it draining, so whilst he had the ability it wasn't a particular strength. To overcome this Bill selected a partner Steve Balmer, to run the company. This allowed Bill to return to software development and focus on his strength.

Ensure individuals have access to tools and experiences that help them understand their inherent potential, their personality factors, their passion, what they value and the areas that will make them shine or derail them from success.

#### **5. Focus on personal mastery and core competencies**

Developing talent is about helping people be the best they can be. If individuals can gain the awareness and skills of personal effectiveness, including awareness of their impact, choices, consequences, attitudes and ability to take action to achieve results, their chances of success are dramatically enhanced. Foundation or core competencies can catapult a person to achieve a lot more than just knowledge or skills. These may include competencies such awareness, confidence, courage, integrity, accountability, resilience, drive, influence and impact. A whole person approach to life also distinguishes consistently successful people from those that seem to rollercoaster through life. Individuals need to learn the power of their mind and the impact of their thoughts and internal chatter. Emotional intelligence is important for managing self and building relationships and can be developed, but requires openness to feedback and reality testing. Physical intelligence is required for managing energy, stress, time and health. Even spiritual intelligence is developing a higher profile in the business world as it affects personal values, energy and motivation in a major way.

#### **6. Realistic gap analysis and development planning**

Having comprehensive tools for accurate gap analysis can assist the learning and development planning process. Self-assessments are always a good place to start, especially if there are well developed competency frameworks which link to career opportunities and levels. Constructive discussions, feedback and reality testing is the next step, based on clear standards of performance and competence, whilst multi-rater feedback and assessment centre tools can add that extra detail where required. Individuals and their managers must distinguish between knowledge, skills, experience and behaviours when planning development (see summary below) and know which sources are available to develop each of these.

<b>Knowledge</b>	<b>Experience</b>	<b>Skills</b>	<b>Behaviours</b>
What needs to be known about a topic. It's conceptual framework and theoretical underpinnings	The process of developing "know how" Getting hands on appreciation of how theories are applied in practice	The acquisition of skills Learning the step by step approach to attaining a specific outcome The ability to demonstrate the skill to achieve a result	The assessment of personal values, belief systems, style and behaviour patterns. The conscious attempt to develop insight in these areas and align them with the company's values.
<b>Key sources</b> Books, articles, Internet, lectures, formal education events and courses, conferences, knowledge database	<b>Key sources</b> Experience in roles or on projects, visits to other departments or projects, Networking, job/project rotation, seminars, conferences, travel.	<b>Key sources</b> Short courses, role-plays, learnerships, working on projects – with focused setting of expectations and performance feedback	<b>Key sources</b> Short courses with relevant objectives. Personal reflection and assessment Manager and peer feedback and coaching

Once the competence gap has been established, it is important to prioritise focus areas and priorities. One of the major principles of the execution quotient in Stephen Covey's book the 8th Habit is that the human mind can only focus on 3-4 wildly important goals at any one time. Choosing the right method of learning is also critical to the effectiveness of the learning. Experiential learning with feedback, coaching and application is more effective than self-study or just attending a program. Some people learn more effectively by reading, some by reflecting, some by doing, and some with visual aids. Most adults prefer to learn through a process of experience, reflection, learning, adjustment, new experience. Available resources need to be taken into consideration such as trainers, coaches, time and budgets. Lastly, make the most of whole-brain learning using a variety of techniques to utilise right and left brain thinking and use of the very powerful subconscious mind. We recommend that the final choices are documented in a Personal Development Plan, agreed to and signed off and where the individual and the manager are jointly accountable for action.


## 7. Regular reviews and coaching

Learning is a continuous process of assessment, planning, experience, reflection and further improvement. It is important that leaders make the time for regular one-on-ones with their direct reports for feedback on performance, competence and behaviours. Having someone to talk to, to reflect with and to assist with feedback, insight and action is critical for accelerated development. A system of coaches and mentors that are held accountable and rewarded for development of talent is essential. Mentors who have experience in the industry and the organisation can smooth the way for high flyers during on-boarding, new role integration and with career choices. Coaches with specific technical skills or strengths in coaching personal and leadership effectiveness can assist high flyers or key players to develop the required competencies for success much faster than if left to their own devices. The real high flyers are naturally inquisitive and continuously push the boundaries to broaden their experience and knowledge, but may not have the insight or emotional intelligence to seek feedback and test their view of reality. Coaching can help provide the balance.

## 8. Choosing appropriate learning methods

Methods of learning include some of the following starting with the least impact on behaviour change to the highest impact on behaviour change:

Self-study	Formal Programs	Group Learning	Coaching	Action Learning
Reading Reflection Internet Discovery Trial & Error Assessment Soliciting feedback	Business School Program Public courses Seminars Conferences Company Training Programs External Supplier Programs	Strategy Sessions Team Development Leadership Programs with peers Networking forums Just In Time learning	External coach Mentor Coach Manager Peers  Setting goals, creating learning opportunities, sharing information, experience and tools, feedback	Special Projects (full time or part time) Secondment Job Rotation Acting role Graduate Development Programs Talent Programs Leadership assignments
Behaviour change = lowest	Behaviour change = low	Behaviour change = medium	Behaviour change = high	Behaviour change = highest



Feedback from leaders in research by Paul Taffinder in The New Leaders indicate that the following activities had a different impact on their long-term development as a leader

- Formal Interventions (10% impact)
- Coaching (20% impact)
- On-the-job (70% impact)

The most effective method of learning seems to be new information or techniques gained through self-study or training programs, combined with on-the-job or action learning to apply and practice the new techniques, and working with a coach to set realistic goals and provide regular feedback and reflection opportunities. Action learning has become very popular by creating real-life business opportunities for learning by combining learning sessions with project work. This results in mutual benefits to the organisation (problem solving) and the learners (new skills and knowledge).

## 9. High flyer programs

The success of your talent development program hinges to a large extent on your selection, content, process and coaching of your high flyer programs. A number of multinational organisations still run programs specially for their high flyer talent pool (from across group divisions and regions) consisting of a 1-2 year planned program of development activities. These can include executive development programs, assessments, coaching, action learning, best practice visits and exposure to different parts of the business. A key indicator of success is ensuring a balance of inputs such as personal mastery, team mastery, change mastery and

business mastery for a well-rounded future leader. Another critical success factor is buy-in and commitment at all levels to the time and support required to complete the program and perform in their current role.

## Deployment

Whilst development is key to building foundation skills, deployment is essential for application and experience which cannot be gained in the classroom or one-on-one discussions. The nature of the high flyer is to be actively engaged and stimulated in new challenges. Deployment activities increase talent mobility and opportunities and help to evaluate accurately individual performance and readiness for key positions. The commonly used deployment approaches are briefly covered below.

### 10. Acting Experience

A familiar and extremely useful practice is to expose a high potential talent to the realities of managing at a higher level position, when the current incumbent has a leave of absence. This could apply within any level of the company structure, from first line impact to acting in an Executive role. Acting appointments provide the mutual benefits of the individual getting into “the deep end” and doing the job for a period of time and the company evaluating how well the team, section or division was run, during the acting spell.

As with any developmental activity, it is important to manage the arrangement effectively with a professional pre-briefing, post-performance review, feedback on any critical areas requiring improvement and support to the individual throughout.

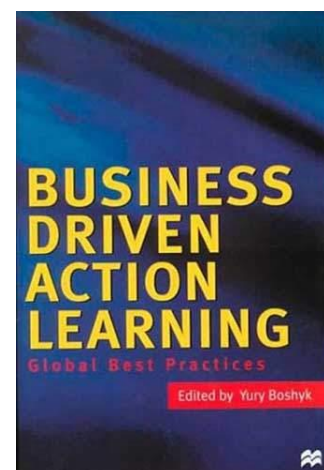
### 11. Business Driven Action Learning

As a philosophy, business driven action learning is based on the belief and practice that learning should be tied to business realities, and that some of the best business solutions can and should come from fellow team members and employees.

Many companies have introduced business driven action learning and project immersion initiatives, where groups of identified high flyers assemble as a group, are briefed on a critical challenge or opportunity within the company and embark on a journey of discovery where both the solution or proposal is developed to the company's benefit, but the individual group members have significant accelerated growth and development during the evolution of the project. The vital ingredient within the dynamics of the team is the appreciation that learning often comes from the sharing of experiences in an open exchange, which in turn encourages reflection and practical application.

Business driven action learning as practiced in some of the best companies worldwide involves a number of key elements:

- The active involvement and support of senior executives;
- Participants working in teams on real business issues and exploring new strategic business opportunities;
- Action research and learning focused on internal and external company experiences and thinking that can help resolve business issues;



- Leadership development through teamwork and coaching; and
- Follow up on the business issues and leadership development, thus enhancing positive business results and ensuring that learning is greater than the rate of change.
- Learning is from reflections on actions taken
- Facilitators and coaches are used

A key resource in implementing action learning programs is the book Business Driven Action Learning by Yury Boshyk

## 12. Secondments and Exchanges

The majority of global and national organizations, not only resource their operations in their different locations with the right person, in the right job, at the right time, but continuously deploy their talent to special assignments as part of the development and succession strategy. Secondment and exchanges provide the true stretch goals of assessing a high level appointment contender in a totally new country or regional environment, where culture differences, skills availability and socio-economic conditions need to be appreciated and management and leadership challenges are the order of the work-day! Compared to the traditional development interventions such as attending a business school programme, secondments and exchanges involve the full spectrum of real life, new world realities and provide the fastest and most graphic personal growth for the assigned individual.

Importantly, monitoring and review processes need to be well established and the time period carefully assessed so that the individual does not languish unnecessarily for a long period in the “test waters” but moves into a substantive appointment at the right time, to apply his skills and expertise.

## 13. Internships

Internships is rapidly developing into an effective practice where it blends the training and development ethos of the craftsman and apprentice with resourcing opportunities of qualified young talent meeting the global skills crisis.

There are numerous companies marketing their websites to organizations and job seekers alike where they facilitate the coming together of a new prospect in a field of speciality such as medicine, law, accountancy, architecture, Logistics, IT, teaching etc. They manage the internship programme with the organization against agreed criteria and conditions and deploy international interns into global markets.





**SOURCES:** *Now discover your strengths* – Marcus and Buckingham (check); Taffinder, P. 1997. *The new leaders*. London: Kogan Page Ltd.; *Gallup Organization*. <http://www.gallup.com>. ; Yury Boshyk. *Business Driven Action Learning*, 2000. MacMillan; Corporate Leadership Council. *Driving Performance and Retention through Employee Engagement*. 2004. Executive Summary

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



### DEBBIE CRAIG

Debbie has over 18 years' experience in the field of strategy, leadership development, change management, talent management, high performance teams and organisational development. She has worked and consulted at leading local and global organisations in the private and public sector throughout Southern Africa and internationally in the UK, Australia, South East Asia, China, South America and the USA. Debbie is a skilled strategist, design architect, team builder, a powerful facilitator, change agent and executive coach. Her passion is transformation and empowerment which she facilitates through individual coaching and empowerment workshops, team-development workshops, corporate training and consulting assignments and organisation wide strategic change interventions. Debbie is the founder and Managing Director of Catalyst Consulting which she has grown into a successful consulting company with her business partner, John Gatherer.

Debbie has published a book, "I am Talent", on optimising potential and career aspirations, has written numerous articles, appeared on radio talk shows and presented at conferences.



### JOHN GATHERER

John has over 38 years' experience in the fields of HR, labour relations, training and development, leadership and strategic change management, having held senior and executive positions in Anglo American plc. and the De Beers Groups. John joined Debbie Craig at Catalyst Consulting as Principal Consultant, specialising in strategic change, leadership development, talent management and executive coaching, working locally and internationally. John brings a deep and practical knowledge and expertise to his roles as facilitator, consultant and organization development specialist as well his ability to think strategically and design innovative solutions. John has managed large scale people management projects and transformation journeys in Africa, Asia, China, the UK, India, Kuwait, Australia and the USA.

John has co-authored a book, "I am Talent" with Debbie Craig, on optimising potential and career aspirations, has written numerous journal articles and contributing chapters to Management education publications and presented at conferences and workshops. John's other passions include photography and travel and he has written and published a number of photographic "coffee table" books on African Wildlife and Adventure Travel.

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