



THE “X” FACTOR OF TALENT IN BUSINESS

By John Gatherer

Introduction

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 song-writer 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..!



It is so important to have a future strategy for yourself – and to get into the habit of using 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 true 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. One of the biggest challenges facing people from all walks of life is how well they handle Change.

A prominent futurist, James Canton described in his 2007 publication “The Extreme Future” the five factors of the extreme future 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.



Notwithstanding the impact of change, life is often characterised by winners and losers. I would like to focus on a number of major elements, which the winners' intuitively have built into their own recipes for success. We believe that they are critical for success - unleashing your talent and potential, making successful choices and decisions, and improving yourself in any career pursuit or future endeavour.

The “X” factor for talent

Think about any high flyer that you know and critique them on this list. Think back to your school or student days, your social environment or your experience in the workplace and consider who you would regard as a superstar - there will be individuals that come to mind and they don't just make it by luck or accident!

From all our work internationally in the fields of Leadership Development and Talent Management, we believe that the successful player or the real achiever has a natural ability in combining a number of key components and significant competencies into a winning formula – the “X” factor!

- **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 awareness and 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 ;
- **Mind-set** – 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 effective results and high performance;
- **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, experiences, exposure and opportunities. Set yourself stretch targets and respond to feedback from others on how you can hone your skills and knowledge and achieve better results;
- **Creative thinking and initiative** – change is about difference and difference comes from different thinking. The solution to today’s challenges comes from bold, innovative thinking and an unwavering belief to try new ideas, approaches and experiment with different options from what was applied before.

The “X” Factor phenomenon

The popular television reality shows such as The “X” Factor 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 show gets whittled down from the mass auditions to the 12 finalists and the ultimate winner, audiences at home and in the theatre along with the panel of judges,



are continuously evaluating and comparing the personal qualities and performances of the prospective, highly talented superstars.

It is not just the perfect rendition of the chosen song that does it, but the “X” factor - the consistent, all-round attitude, stage presence, choreography, song interpretation and projection of the full image of the potential superstar that will impress the judges, live audience and home viewers.

So what exactly is this “X” factor in talent? It is often referred to as an edge, a special distinctiveness and a unique flair that catapults us to the front and makes us stand out from the crowd. It is simply your personal brand and we need to exploit these attributes, strengths and potential to our full 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.”

In order to effectively build and promote 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 I come across to people?
- What real promise do I have?
- What do I really enjoy doing in life?

- Where am I going?

You need to build a track record of consistently delivering the results (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 and pressure.

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 in the last year 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 and to create brand-new blueprints for success.



In conclusion, my final quotation is offered as food for thought in your journey of discovery! As you move through the stages of your career, like the stage performers, you will be continuously watched, critically assessed and judged by others. Your most important test is to be true to yourself! Always remember the following adage - “People hear what we say, but see what we do – and seeing is believing....!” Go out there – make it happen and make a difference!



SOURCES: Canton, J. 2007. *The extreme future: Top trends that will shape the world for the next 5, 10 and 20 years.* USA: The Penguin Group.; Gatherer, J and Craig, D. 2010. *I am Talent:* Knowres Publishing, Randburg, South Africa; Peters T. *The Brand called you* 1997 Fast Company Magazine article

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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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