

## PAMPHLET 75

### TALENT AND SO MUCH MORE

By

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Everyone has talent. What is rare is the courage  
to follow the talent to the dark place where it leads.

Erica Jong

Novelist

In the book *Now Discover Your Strengths* authors Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton, Ph.D. call for a talent revolution. Citing a Gallup Organization data base of 1.7 million employees, they assert that only 20% of employees feel their strengths are used on the job every day.

Buckingham and Clifton call on organizations to reverse the historical focus on the improvement of weaknesses and instead identify and develop talents by adding knowledge and skills to their definition of talent: Naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied.

Additional Gallup data shows that people who work in organizations where they have the opportunity to do what they do best every day were 50% more likely to work in business units with lower employee turnover, 38% more likely to work in more productive business units, and 44% more likely to work in business units with higher customer satisfaction scores.

As I read this book I reflected back on my management career with some satisfaction. I remember the seven years I worked for Chuck Freeman (see Pamphlet 11) as the best of my almost 18 years at the newspaper where I worked. These were the best years because Chuck saw my talents and the talents of others and nurtured them fearlessly. I was happy, creative, and productive during those years, and the newspaper and its customers benefited greatly.

Some less positive memories also came to mind. I recalled a vice president who did not nurture talent and rarely made talent-driven decisions. A cowardly, compliant, conforming, and untalented man, he always did exactly what he was told and most often did it poorly and alienated others in the process. He didn't hire, promote, or assign people based on merit or talent; he made choices that did not threaten him. Only when forced by crisis did he make correct choices, and after the danger passed he sabotaged those who rescued him so they would not be threats to his position.

He was the ultimate and subtle political player and survivor who steadfastly supported systemic deceptions and dishonesties. In more than a decade of incompetence demonstrated daily, he was never held accountable by denial-ridden executives who passed him around from one to another and avoided their responsibilities. They had their own insidious dynamics that consumed them as they played at leadership.

Eventually the vice president betrayed his last rescuer who left the organization. All his rescuers were gone, and he failed quickly. Talented people will not work for incompetent people nor respect those who do not hold such people accountable.

I also recalled my worst choice—one made when I selected talent over character. A person in a staff position offered talents that I did not have. I brought this person into my management team despite warnings from others of shortcomings of character. The manager was intelligent, had skills that could translate my visions to dollars and cents, and I enjoyed intellectual engagement with this bright person.

I came to learn that this manager lacked loyalty, used others from blind ambition, and lied and manipulated to gain personal and selfish ends. Eventually this person left the company. My experience with the staff person emphasized an important point: character comes before talent.

My best choices were always people of character whose unique talents best fit the situation. I wanted the talented people who worked for me to be caring, responsible, and accountable people of integrity with high standards and a deep respect for the spirit of others. I wanted them to be people of depth and idealism who imagine how life could be. People like Ray, Mary, Elsie, and Maggie who still work at the Star Tribune Newspaper in Minneapolis, Minnesota—people who nurture the talents of others. I hope each of them leads today as I remember them a decade ago. What kind of leader does your organization nurture—the givers or the takers?

Good leaders have always led from their talents and developed the talents of others—more from the informal and often underground world of organizations than from the formal human resource systems. The elevation of talent to a more conscious focus personally and organizationally takes a step in the right direction.

To identify our personal talents is necessary but not enough. Each of us has a responsibility to pay attention and expand our own self-knowledge, to craft a sense of purpose and meaning for our lives, to articulate a set of values to guide our behavior, and to create ever-expanding visions for our lives. We are also

responsible to establish noble goals and make choices that express the totality of our selves.

We need to answer two difficult questions: What do I need to do to claim my personal freedom and live my uniqueness in all areas of my life and what noble goals that further humanity will I pursue to find happiness in my life? The answers to these questions will provide direction for our energy. Our spiritual center of vision, values, and purpose will provide the necessary courage.

Each of our choices, large and small, will change our interconnected world if only in microscopic yet important ways. Do we make choices that increase the harmony in our lives and in all other life on the planet? Do we make choices that increase our learning? What do we invest our energy in? Do we live the change we want to see in the world so our example will teach others? Absent energy, effort, right action, and a willingness to suffer our talents remain unrealized potential.

For leaders of organizations, as for individuals, to identify talents is also necessary but not enough. That is the quick-fix approach to change that only distracts for a time. The job of creating a “talent-driven” organization is not as simple or easy as some would lead you to believe. A talent-driven organization requires a total transformation in how we think in organizations, how we organize our work, and how we treat one another.

To live our talents, personally and organizationally, we must venture courageously into the dark, shadowy places of our hearts and organizations and explore honestly our losses, our anger, and our anxieties. We must be honest with ourselves about our reluctance to be who we are, our impact on others, our fear of our freedom to choose, and our cowardice in taking right actions in all areas of our lives. Our time spent in the darkness will unearth unrealized potentials and release life-renewing energies--the keys to evolution, creativity, and sustainability. Erica Jong is right. Talents abound—the courage to follow talent where it leads is rare.

Many organizations remain fundamentally dishonest and mediocre places where, as colleague Kenny Moore wrote, no one trusts, no one believes management, and where workers are too stressed to care. We deny emotions, side-step issues, and abuse others. We waste talent from ignorance and selfishness. The fragmentation of responsibility diminishes accountability at all levels. The search for consensus makes cowards of most. The demand for conformity denies the uniqueness of each person (and each person’s unique talents), and these dumbed-down environments refuse greatness to most.

Organizations cast large shadows of fear, envy, anger, anxiety, jealousy, and frustration. The organizational shadows are places of brutality, arrogance, selfishness, zero-sum games, and dishonest competition. Quick-fix schemes

promise relief and change. In reality they provide only diversion from reality. The Gallup data shows both the reality and the potential of organizational dysfunction. We made our organizations this way; therefore, we can change them. What a great opportunity for real leaders.

We can deny the shadow and get excited about developing everyone's talents. We can make playing to talents sound easy and take surveys and talk about our talents—fun things to do. We can pretend innocence. We can retreat to childlike ignorance. The refusal to look in the face the organizational evil that lives in the shadows is the ultimate mistake for this darkness prevents the realization of most talent within organizations. True leaders court the difficulty of confronting the organization's shadow.

Leaders ask themselves: What talents do we want and expect to create a great organization? How do we nourish those talents? Do we hold the destroyers of talents accountable? As a leader do I believe in the potential of my followers? Do I help others be who they are? Will I do the hard work necessary to create conditions for those talents to flourish?

The leader creates conditions that allow each person to develop their talents and their authenticity, in all its fullness. A leader attacks with a vengeance the cultural memes and the personal and organizational dysfunction that prevent people from expressing their talents—including those within the leader.

The leader removes obstacles to authenticity, challenges each person with their personal freedom and responsibility, and holds everyone accountable for respecting the uniqueness of each person. The leader creates a hospitable environment for creative people—necessary for the survival of a threatened system. The greatest potential for development lies in the shadows where our dark side (personally and organizationally) awaits acceptance, mastery, and integration.

This work becomes a way of life carried out with tenaciousness. Personal confidence and humility grow as step by step personal and organizational change occurs. My old boss Chuck Freeman did this and he was successful and loved.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi wrote that a good society helps each person develop his or her genetic potential to the fullest. A good society provides opportunities for action to everyone: to the athlete and the poet, the merchant and the scholar, the janitor and the CEO. A good society does not prevent anyone from doing what he or she does best and guides everyone to discover what that is. A good society makes it possible for each person to develop the skills necessary to experience aliveness in socially productive activities.

Simultaneously a good society guards against anyone's exploiting the psychic energy of another person for his or her own advantage. Leaders hold oppressors and parasites accountable. Each person is free to develop themselves to the utmost level of their potential but not to curtail another person's freedom to do the same. If we want to have a good society, we must have good organizations, and we must be good people.

More than a talent revolution, our organizations need a conscious human and leadership evolution that encompasses a talent revolution as one aspect of a broader and deeper evolutionary movement. Our collective futures depend on people and the ideas in their heads, the passion in their hearts, the choices they make, and the courage in their bellies—not on the technological marvels that we have and envision for the future. We need to learn to imagine life among better people as easily as we imagine life with better technology.

Our world needs a commitment to renewal and personal evolution in the context of our shared values that seeks lifelong learning and betterment of who we are—in all our wonderment, not just our talents.

RECOMMENDED READING: *the CEO and the Monk* by Robert B. Catell et al