

The Power of Shared Leadership

Great leaders never do it all by themselves. They recognize that they have unique talents as well as unique non-talents. They recognize their blind spots and acknowledge their limitations. They know what they don't do well and have no talent for.

In their best-selling book, *First, Break All The Rules*, Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffmanⁱ suggest that leaders succeed by finding ways to capitalize on who they are, not by trying to fix what they are not but working round them. If they are blunt in one or two areas, they find partners whose peaks match their valleys.ⁱⁱ At Electronics Data Systems, with the inspirational, impetuous Ross Perot, there is the wise guiding hand of president Mitch Hart.

Balanced by such partnership, leaders are then free to hone their own talents. That will not only keep them humble but also help them recognize that in making an organization great, leadership has to be shared. This is the basis for working as a team.

They recognize that every person has some unique talents. They want to make a hero out of everyone. Great leaders create heroes in every role. They try to make every role, performed with excellence a respected professionⁱⁱⁱ

One of the leader's first important responsibilities is selecting talent. Let me begin by saying that talent is not the domain of the exceptional few. Everyone has talent. Each one is endowed with a unique set of talents. It is incumbent on the leaders to help their team members uncover their talents and unleash them in the organization.

How do we define talent?

Talents are mental highways. They are recurring patterns of thought, feeling and behavior. Talents refer to (1) the person's passion or the reason for doing what they do; (2) the person's thinking pattern, how they weigh alternatives and make decisions; and (3) the person's communication pattern, whether he is direct or indirect, warm or cold.

Through nature and nurture, much of our talents are already carved out as a unique network of mental connections by the time we reach early teens. If people end up with a four-lane highway for empathy, they will feel every emotion of those around them. But if they have a wasteland for empathy, they will be emotionally blind. "Roads with the most traffic get widened. The ones that are rarely used fall into disrepair."^{iv}

Leaders discover what the team members are wired to do and then motivate them to do their best in their wired-paths.

The second role of leadership is the ability to create the right kind of environment to allow those talents to flourish. Talent is only potential. A potential cannot be turned into performance in a vacuum. Many great talents have gone to waste, or been suppressed, or destroyed because some leaders cannot turn talent into performance.

How to you develop talent?

1. Allowing them to become more of who they already are

Great leaders focus on each person's strengths and manage around their weaknesses. Everyone has its unique set of passions, talents and competence.

In their best-selling book, Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman have this famous mantra^v:

“People don't change that much.
Don't waste time trying to put in what was left out.
Try to draw out what was left in.
That is hard enough.”

Leaders find out what their team members are talented to do and motivated them to do their best. As a leader once said on the subject, “I want to find what is special and unique about each person. If I can find what special thing she has to offer, and if I can help her to see it, then she will keep digging for more.”^{vi}

2. Finding the right person for the right job

Leaders make sure that each person is positioned in the right role. They then balance the strengths and weaknesses of each individual in a team so that they complement one another. As one leader has rightly put it, “If you want to turn talent into performance, you have to position each person so that you are paying them to do what they are naturally wired to do.”

3. Talking and interacting constantly

Great leaders are deliberate. They talk with each individual asking about their dreams, passions, goals, strengths and weaknesses. They work closely with their executive team: noticing their drives, noting their choices, finding out who they enjoy interacting. In order words, they know their team very well. It is an ongoing process. Great leaders recognize that their ongoing relationships and communication cannot be taken for granted.

4. Setting high benchmarks and expectations

After discovering their talents, leaders define the right outcomes and clarify their expectations. Leaders recognize that they can't make anything happen. They can only influence, motivate, and cajole their team. They are consumed with purpose and performance. They define the right outcomes and then let each person find their own route towards those outcomes.^{vii}

5. Recognizing and affirming talents and successes

Having set clear expectations, great leaders often spend their time affirming talents and outstanding performance. They celebrate performance and success when their team achieves them. They are affirmers.

A healthy shared partnership is based on one crucial understanding: No one is perfect. If leaders are afraid to admit their imperfections, or are not trying diligently to correct them, or are reluctant to ask for help, they will become desperately lonely and will slowly wreck their own leadership. Hence, shared leadership is imperative for leaders and organizations to survive in this competitive world.

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ⁱ Buckingham, M. & Coffman, C. (1999). ‘First, Break All The Rules’. Simon & Schuster. New York, USA.

ⁱⁱ Buckingham, M. & Coffman, C. (1999). ‘First, Break All The Rules’. Simon & Schuster. New York, USA.

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