

August 29, 2015

A Primer on Talent

Improving performance through working on weaknesses recruits mental networks that are not well connected or fast-operating. Improvement is slower, more incremental, and likely never adds up to truly high levels of performance.

It is an oversimplification of course, but when one considers all the possible approaches to developing teachers and teaching, they generally fall into one of two categories. The first category is called needs assessment. In this approach we appraise the teacher's entire portfolio of strengths and weaknesses and call to their attention... the needs or weaknesses. The theory behind needs assessment is that, for improvement, a teacher should keep using their strengths, but for the purpose of improvement, should identify and remedy their weaknesses. The result will be improved performance. The logic equation might look like this: **same strengths + improved weaknesses = improved performance.**

A second category of approaches to teacher development might be called strengths-based improvement (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). In a strengths based approach, we again appraise the teacher's portfolio of strengths and weaknesses, but encourage them to first capitalize on their strengths- what they do best already. The theory here is that humans have a large capacity to improve in the areas where they already have talent, strength, ability, or skill, because their brain is pre-wired for fast development in these areas. In a strengths based approach, the logic equation looks like this: **stronger strengths + managed weaknesses = higher performance.** Notice that in a strengths based approach, the teacher is not encouraged to ignore weaknesses, but to manage them.

In both approaches the goal is improved performance; and in both approaches, improved performance can be realized. The difference between the needs assessment approach and the strengths approach is in their relative efficiency. Because building on strengths recruits mental networks that are already well connected, the growth process is typically faster. Improving performance through working on weaknesses recruits mental networks that are not well connected or fast-operating. Improvement is slower, more incremental, and likely never adds up to truly high levels of performance.

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