

Maximizing talent

Releasing people's natural talent is widely recognized as critical to business performance. But how do you do it? **R&A Consultancy** works with JTI Ireland to **help teams and individuals develop their talent and increase performance**. **INSIDE** asked consultant Karen Stone how individuals can maximize their own and others' talent.

INSIDE: How do you identify talent?

Karen Stone: First, what is talent? Talent is innate, natural and does not require conscious effort. It differs from skill. When we see someone demonstrating their talent, we see them achieving near-perfect performance in a specific activity. They make it look easy, and for them it is.

Skill, on the other hand, is learnt. Think of Tiger Woods: he has a natural talent, but he continues to develop those skills that keep him at the top of his game. We cannot rely on talent alone.

INSIDE: How can we discover our own talents?

Karen Stone: We are typically not good at identifying our own strengths, because for us, they are natural. There are four 'signs' of innate talent we can look out for.

1. SPONTANEOUS RESPONSES

Think of a situation when you had to make a decision, but you did not have all the facts. Did you relish the uncertainty? If so, you have an innate talent to act quickly. Or did you stop short, delaying action until more facts became available? In this case you have an innate talent to analyze before taking action.

2. CENTERS OF INTEREST

Which activities are you drawn to time and again? Even in early life, they reveal talent. At 12 Mozart had written his first symphony.

3. EASY LEARNING

The speed at which you acquire a new skill highlights the presence and power of talent.

4. FULFILMENT

If you are enjoying an activity and the time goes quickly when you are engaged in it, chances are you are using a talent.

INSIDE: How can talent be developed?

Karen Stone: Firstly, feedback aids people's awareness. When organizations get into the habit of noticing 'someone doing something right', there is increased trust and a willingness to go the extra mile.

On a recent program with JTI Ireland we used a card system for people to praise others' input during an exercise. People were enthusiastic about using the cards, they kept them, and their positive facial expressions when receiving the cards demonstrated the power of feedback.

Secondly, we traditionally focus on improving our weaker areas. Yet research* shows that we can only improve in any area by a maximum of two points (out of 10).

Therefore it makes more sense to focus on improving what we are good at and enjoy doing. The rewards are two-fold: we improve from 'good' to 'very good' and we feel energized, gaining satisfaction and motivated to give more.

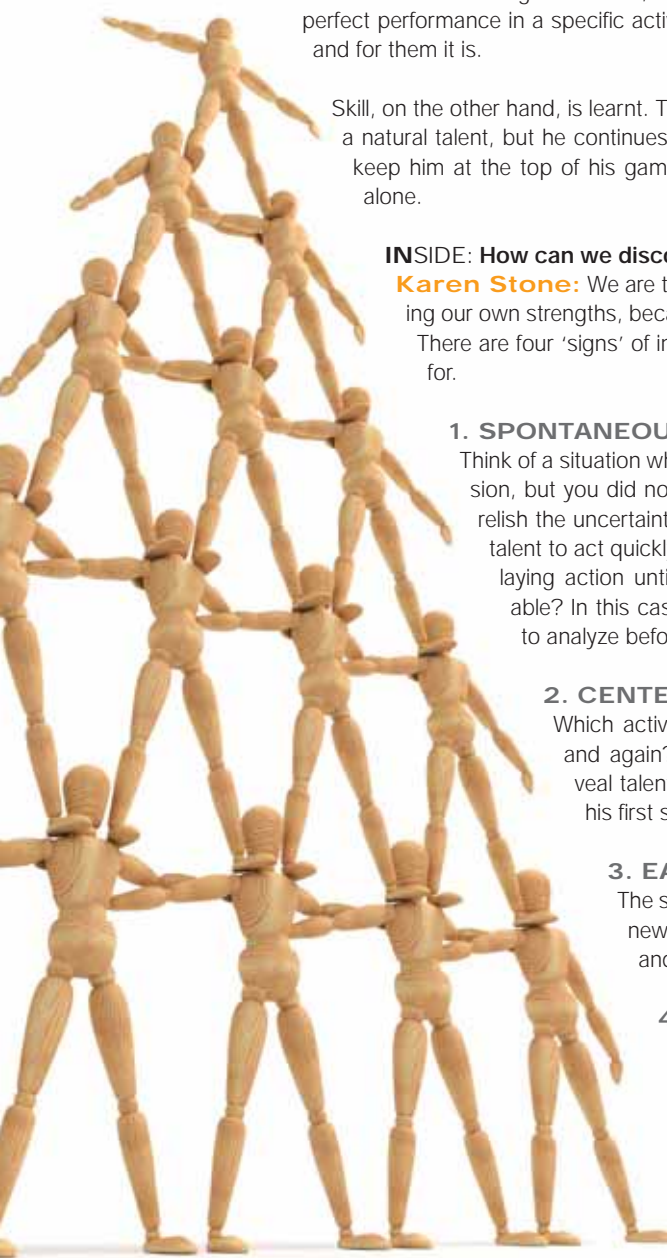
INSIDE: How can leaders and managers release talent?

Karen Stone: People generally join organizations and leave managers. The leader's role and behavior is critical to how people feel about working in the team.

Leaders can develop their awareness of how actions might impact others. This strongly influences the success of their reporting manager.

As for managers, it is essential that they recognize what contributes to colleagues' motivation. They need to understand each person's values and how they can feed those values. For example, if someone values challenge, the manager has to ensure they get assignments and tasks which challenge them (and understand what they perceive as 'challenge').

* Talent is Never Enough, by John C. Maxwell, 2007.



Great leaders are able to create compelling goals for their team. The goals engage people through their values. This contributes to a leader who is seen as inspirational – not a mythical god-like person, but simply someone who has the talent for translating what needs to be done, so that people can see what success will look like and can communicate that clearly.

Leaders need to think of people as individual contributors and think about each person's unique strengths, skills and experience and develop roles and opportunities that allow them to truly shine and demonstrate those talents.

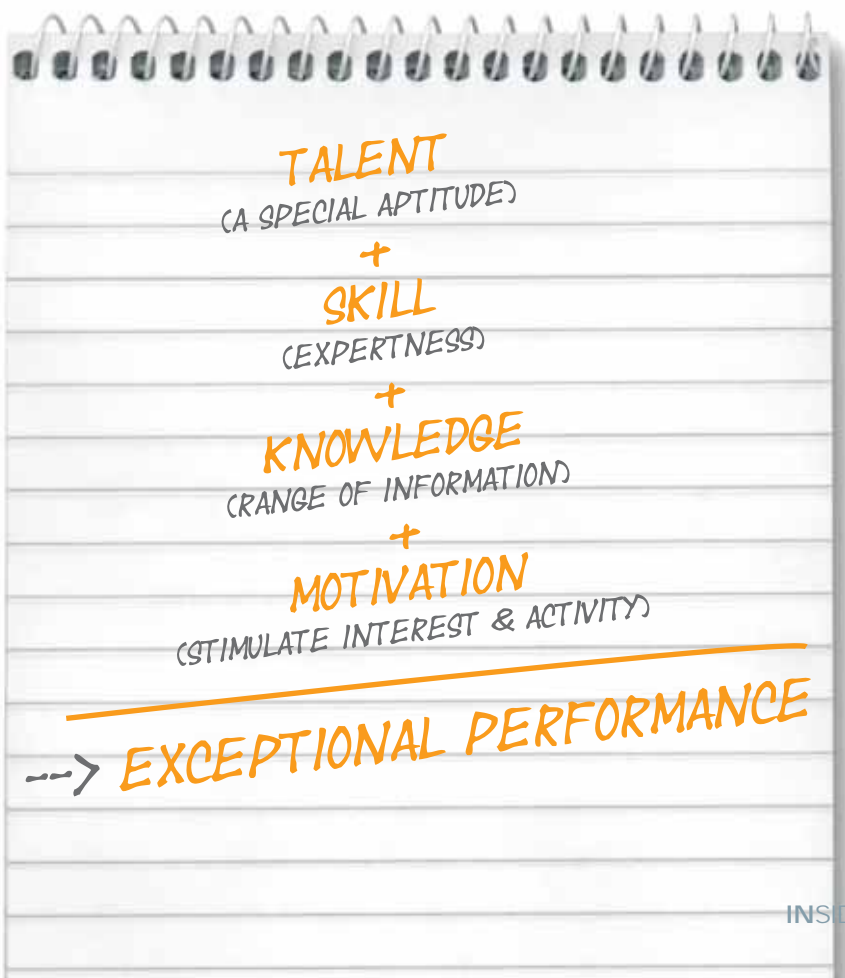
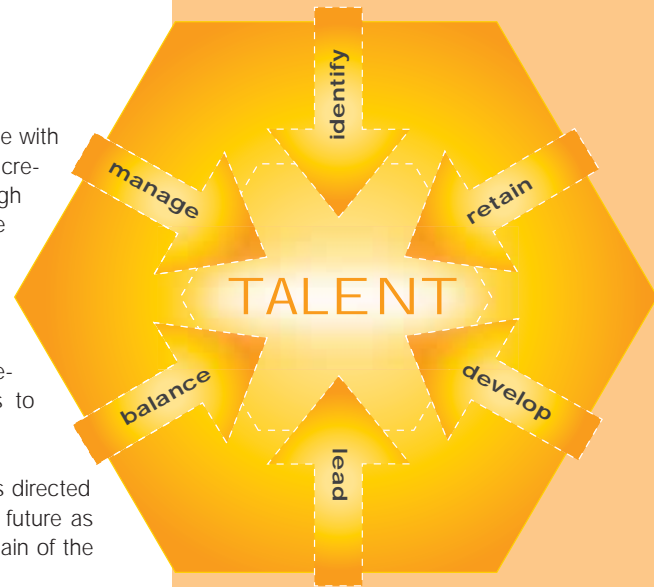
Great leaders don't solve every problem, but may help their team members to focus on what they actually want to achieve. This will provide the impetus for identifying solutions and taking action.

INSIDE: What kind of culture allows talent to flourish?

Karen Stone: If you plant high quality seeds in poor soil, you will not grow healthy plants. The soil is like the culture of an organization. Even if you recruit the most talented, skilled and experienced people, if the culture of the team or business does not allow them to demonstrate their expertise, you will get poor performance.

We have a program which we use with the leadership team in Ireland to create a fertile environment through aligning all the members of the team. Step one is to explore and identify a clear vision, mission and values that all agree with. The next step is to ensure they have the appropriate strategies, skills, behaviors and tools to realize their success.

This focus is vital: the attention is directed at what needs to happen in the future as opposed to struggling with the pain of the 'now'.



WHAT YOU CAN DO - EXERCISES

1 Identify talent
Reflect on your life – what do you learn easily, what activities have a 'magnetic' attraction for you? What talents are they related to?

Ask others to tell you what they think your strengths are and why.

2 Develop talent
Consider those strengths that you consider to be your 'top talents'. How well are your talents being maximized in your role right now?

What could you do to maximize them better?

What skills could you develop that would help you maximize your talents?

3 Develop leadership behavior
When we respond to each situation, we have the opportunity to demonstrate leadership with our actions. Reflect on how you can lead with your next actions and conversations. Think of the positive, not the negative. Leaders do not solve every problem, but rather they inspire and enable people to discover solutions.