Chapter 2

What's Your Talent Philosophy? Talent as Construct Versus Talent as Phenomenon

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Abstract

In this chapter, I propose an integrative framework for theorizing and empiricizing about talent management, based on the notion of "talent philosophies." I believe that current debates about whether talent management should be inclusive or exclusive create the risk that our field will become fragmented, thereby undermining its social-scientific legitimacy. Nonetheless, this debate is absolutely correct in identifying the tensions between inclusive and exclusive approaches to talent management as a phenomenon. This, however, creates issues for talent management as a construct for scientific inquiry, as we need clear definitions and measures to create a cumulative body of research as a community. I propose that the solution lies in an expansion of our vocabulary as talent management researchers and identify four constructs that can help us structure and categorize our collective work: giftedness, talent, potential, and strength. Each of these constructs map logically onto different talent philosophies and talent management practices. In establishing "unity in diversity," I believe talent management could finally make the transition into a more mature field of academic inquiry – although clearly phenomenon driven – characterized in equal parts by construct clarity, rigor, and relevance.

Keywords: Talent philosophies; exclusive versus inclusive talent management; potential; strength; star performers; phenomenon-driven research

Introduction

Since the late 1990s, early 2000s, annual surveys of CEOs and business leaders have consistently found that they rate talent management as their top "people" priority (PwC, 2017). So, if most executives agree that talent management is crucially important to businesses worldwide – then what is "talent"? This question dominated the academic literature on talent management for many years (especially in the 2010–2015 period; Gallardo-Gallardo, Nijs, Dries, & Gallo, 2015), as there was a lack of agreement on how talent should be defined and, consequently, measured. Much conceptual progress has been made since then, thanks to a tireless community of scholars devoted to solving the issue of "definition," so that we could move on to studying the (side-)effects and (intended or unintended) consequences of common talent management practices on important employee (e.g., De Boeck, Meyers, & Dries, 2018), organizational (e.g., Collings, 2014), and labor market (e.g., Evans, Rodriguez-Montemayor, & Lanvin, 2021) outcomes. In other words, before we could begin to understand under which exact conditions talent management "works" versus "fails," we needed to first agree as to what talent management "is" exactly. It is here that the issue of construct versus phenomenon becomes relevant.

Chapter Outline

From many years of doing talent management research, I have drawn two preliminary conclusions: (1) creating a robust body of social-scientific work on talent management requires clear, operationalizable, and measurable construct definitions; and (2) understanding talent management fully requires acknowledging the different forms it can take in the field phenomenologically. In what follows, I will first discuss the state of the art on talent as a construct and then on talent (management) as a phenomenon. I then explain how the construct of "talent philosophies" (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014; Meyers, van Woerkom, Paauwe, & Dries, 2020) ties both aspects together and offers a solution to solving the tension between construct and phenomenon. I conclude with some recommendations for theory and practice.

The "Talent Management" Construct Versus Phenomenon

The tension between talent management as a construct versus a phenomenon can be summarized as follows: On the one hand, if we want to claim to be social scientists, adopting the scientific method in studying "talent management," our central construct can really only have one definition. Only if all scholars in a field define and operationalize their central construct in the same (or at least a highly similar) way, can we aspire to make meaningful progress through cumulative research, where further theoretical and empirical work builds on prior work. So, if some scholars are defining talent as "top 10% in a given performance domain" (the exclusive view on talent management; e.g., Nijs, Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & Sels, 2014), while others state that "everyone has talent but in a different way" (the inclusive view on talent management; e.g., Swailes, Downs, & Orr, 2014), it

becomes hard to integrate research findings from both traditions into a broader body of knowledge on "talent management."

Imagine that, in research on stress, stress was defined by one half of the field as a harmful state of unpleasant arousal triggered by a situational threat, and by the other half of the field as a completely normal state of motivational arousal that helps people achieve optimal levels of performance. We can immediately see that there is some truth to both definitions – but also that research findings stemming from the former view should not just be mixed in with findings from the latter view. In thinking of solutions, it also seems unlikely that either "camp" will abandon their view and definition. Rather, what might be helpful is to analyze exactly where both views overlap and differ and develop more nuanced constructs (e.g., "distress" and "eustress"; Hargrove, Hargrove, & Becker, 2016) that create more clarity and structure in underlying assumptions.

On the other hand, we must also acknowledge that, in practice – that is, in the "real world" outside of academia – companies can and do adopt many different practices under the header of "talent management," entirely unhindered by and unconcerned with scholarly debates about the exact definition of talent (Dries, 2013a). For practitioners, to some extent, issues of definition and operationalization amount to pure semantics – whereas they are much more interested in practices and impact. The truth, I believe, lies in the middle.

In recent years, I have developed a full-day workshop for human resource (HR) practitioners called "What's your talent philosophy?" in which I walk them through conceptual issues in talent management and their implications for daily talent management practice. This chapter is a written reflection on some of the topics I address in these workshops but also on what I have learned from practitioners in running them. In my experience, academic research on talent management can definitely add value to talent management practice, even when it is highly conceptual and theoretical in nature – as long as the link to concrete practices is explicitly made. That said, through these workshops – and through a study I did together with talent management scholars from Tilburg University (Meyers et al., 2020) – I have also come to realize that there is academic value in studying talent management as a phenomenon, by which I mean "whatever organizations are doing that they are calling talent management."

If we want to understand and study antecedents, outcomes, and boundary conditions to successful talent management implementation, it seems important to acknowledge and study all the different forms this can take in the field – rather than exclude a large number of organizations from participating in our research because they do not fit our construct definition. The study that most opened my eyes to this was the above-cited one by Meyers et al. (2020), which uncovered that (in a sample of 321 HR managers) all four examined "talent philosophies" (more on this later) were equally prevalent in the field. This means that not only are organizations doing very different things under the header of talent management, they do so based on fundamentally different assumptions they have about "the nature and instrumentality of talent" (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014, p. 193) – for example, the extent to which they believe talent is rare or prevalent in the population, and the extent to which they believe talent is innate or developable.

Talent as Construct

To answer the question of what "talent" is as a construct, it is helpful to look at its historical origins (Tansley, 2011). Etymological research dates the term "talent" back to Greek antiquity, when it was used as a unit of measurement (i.e., the weight of the amount of water that fit into a large amphora; approximately 36 kg or 80 pounds). Over time, its meaning shifted from a unit of weight to a unit of currency, equivalent to that weight in silver. For instance, the Parable of the Talents in the New Testament uses the term "talent" to refer to a coin of particularly high monetary value. One "talent" was worth about 6,000 denarii, and one denarius was the typical payment for a day's work. This means that a single talent was worth the equivalent of 20 years of labor, assuming a six-day work week (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & González-Cruz, 2013). Around the thirteenth century, the meaning of the term "talent" shifted to denote human ability but keeping the association with high value and "extraordinariness." For instance, in the late Middle Ages and up until the nineteenth century, people believed that having a talent at something was a gift from God, and that people thus had a moral duty to put their talent to good use in society (an idea still featuring in many Oscar and Grammy speeches today). In the nineteenth century, talent became associated with the idea of "mad genius" – that is, brilliant scientists or artists who lack social skills and develop mental health issues as a result of their abnormal levels of talent (Baudson, 2016). This view of talent correlating negatively with well-being outcomes was nuanced, however, by longitudinal research following gifted children throughout their lifespan, which found that on average, high levels of (intellectual) talent are associated with better life outcomes overall, including social skills and happiness (e.g., Oden, 1968). Across all of these evolutions in the meaning of "talent," it is clear that the term was consistently used to refer to highly rare and valued attributes (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013).

The first (documented) mention of "talent" in the context of management was probably the *War for Talent* book written by McKinsey consultants Michaels, Handfield-Jones, and Axelrod (2001). In this book, the authors claim that, due to both demographic (i.e., aging society) and labor market trends (i.e., the weakened loyalties between employers and employees), attracting and retaining talent would become increasingly harder. Drawing heavily from the human capital/resource-based view logic that dominated strategic HR discourse at that time, they equated talent with being an "A player," meaning that a person belongs to the top 10%–20% in terms of performance and contribution to the company (p. 127). Again, what we see here is an emphasis on interpersonal excellence, meaning that a person is seen as having or being "talent" on the basis of demonstrating exceptional skill as compared to others (Nijs et al., 2014).

There is one major problem with this type of definition of talent – many people deeply dislike it and therefore refuse to adhere to it (Holck & Stjerne, 2019). They typically argue that it is both impossible and undesirable to determine which employees are "better" than others. Surely, such evaluations depend on subjective impressions and biased criteria (Highhouse, 2008), office politics and nepotism (Dries & De Gieter, 2014), and are harmful to self-esteem and morale (Swailes &

Blackburn, 2016), creating a "winners versus losers" hierarchy in which opportunities for growth and development are unfairly hoarded by A players (Malik & Singh, 2014), thus creating self-fulfilling prophecies (Livingston, 2009). Rather, the proponents of "inclusive" talent management argue, organizations should recognize and reward different types of talents that people may have, and appreciate each individual employee in their own right, instead of having employees compete with each other for validation (Swailes et al., 2014). Importantly, although it is often believed – not in the least by proponents of the inclusive approach – that the exclusive approach to talent management is the most dominant one, Meyers et al.'s (2020) study showed that it was actually 50-50 in an international sample of HR managers. In recent years, I have come to believe we can only interpret these trends in the literature, and these field data, as indications of the following: that inclusive talent management, as a phenomenon, is equally legitimate as exclusive talent management.

What I propose, however – based on the ideas of many others, including but not limited to Eva Gallardo, Sanne Nijs, Giverny De Boeck, Christina Meyers, and Stephen Swailes – is that we refine our constructs to allow systematic empirical study and theorization of the different forms that the phenomenon of talent management can take in the field. Specifically, I suggest that the constructs of *giftedness* and *talent* reflect an inherently exclusive approach to talent management, whereas *potential* and *strength* reflect an inherently inclusive approach. Thus, although I believe we should stick to the terminology of exclusive and inclusive talent management – as this dichotomy is quite established in the literature at this point in time – I also believe that inclusive talent management research would be better served by using the constructs of "strengths" and/or "potential" rather than "talent." As outlined above, the etymological and historical origins of talent have consistently referred to it as being something "exclusive." Compare this to the etymological origins of the term "potential" – which derives from the Latin *potens*, meaning "capable." Aristotle (in his seminal work "Nicomachean Ethics") linked the construct of potential to *eudaimonia*, or the achievement of a meaningful life through the purposeful fulfillment of one's potential (as opposed to *hedonia*; the pursuit of a pleasurable life), in line with one's "personally expressive, self-concordant goals" (Sheldon, 2002). I argue that the essence of the difference between the inclusive and exclusive approach to talent management lies in whether "excellence" is defined more along the lines of personal "thriving" versus interpersonal "outperforming." In Table 1, I present formal definitions for giftedness, talent, potential, and strength, based on the academic literature on each of these constructs.

In Fig. 1, I organize these four constructs along two dimensions, reflecting how they relate to each other. Specifically, while potential and giftedness represent aptitudes, strength and talent represent systematically developed abilities. And while potential and strength refer to abilities allowing a person to perform at their "personal best," giftedness and talent refer to abilities allowing a person to perform better than others – that is, at the "interpersonal best" level. For example, a person can say they have a "language brain" more so than a "math brain," meaning that they see languages as a personal strength of theirs. But only when

Table 1. Different "Talent" Constructs With Formal Definitions and Examples of Studies.

Construct	Definition	Example of a Study
Giftedness	The possession and use of untrained and spontaneously expressed natural abilities, in at least one ability domain (i.e., intellectual, creative, socioaffective, sensimotor) to a degree that places an individual at least among the top 10 percent of age peers (Gagné, 2004, p. 120).	Corten, Nauta, and Ronner (2006): Qualitative study on the characteristics, pitfalls and management needs of intellectually gifted employees in the workplace.
Talent	The outstanding mastery of systematically developed abilities and knowledge in at least one field of human activity (i.e., academics, arts, business, leisure, social action, sports, technology) to a degree that places an individual at least among the top 10 percent of age peers, (a) who have attempted to master the specific skills of that field or fields as well, and (b) who have learned and practiced for approximately the same amount of time (Gagné, 2004, p. 120).	Nijs, Dries, van Vlasselaer, and Sels (2021): Data mining study examining talent hierarchies in teams – that is, configurations of characteristics and behaviors that lead to being seen as "most talented team member."
Potential	The modifiability of unobservable structures that have not as yet become actual, or exist in possibility, capable of development in actuality; the existence of underlying abilities and skills that are currently not being fully used or demonstrated – reflecting the possibility that individuals can become something more than what they currently are. It implies further growth and development to reach some desired end state. In work environments, potential is typically used to suggest that an individual has the qualities (e.g., characteristics, motivation, skills, abilities, and experiences) to effectively perform and contribute in broader or different roles in the organization at some point in the future (Silzer & Church, 2009, pp. 379–381).	De Boeck, Dries, and Tierens (2019): Longitudinal mixed-method study examining the relationship between the (non-)fulfillment of potential and work meaningfulness.

Strength Characteristics of a person that allow them to perform well or at their personal best, developed on the basis of naturally occurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior. For these to become a strength, they must first be identified and then refined and developed with the appropriate skills and knowledge, which requires a high level of personal investment (Page & Vella-Brodrick, 2009, p. 452; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Kashdan, & Hurling, 2011, p. 15).

Wood et al. (2011): Longitudinal study examining the effects of strengths use in the workplace on stress, self-esteem, vitality, and positive affect.

Source: Author's original work.

that person's language skills are better than those of (most) others (of the same age and experience level), would we also call it a "talent" of theirs. In addition, a potential can be developed into a strength, if a person systematically applies themselves to it; and a strength can in turn be developed into a talent, if a person becomes so good at something that they surpass the typical performance level of 80–90% of their peers. As for the relationship between giftedness and talent, Françoys Gagné (who wrote many of the most-cited articles on giftedness) famously said that "you can be gifted at something without being talented at it, but you cannot be talented at something without having an underlying gift for it." What he means by this is that if two people devote 10,000 hours of their life to perfecting a certain skill (he uses the example of Olympic athletes), but one of them has a genetic (or early childhood) advantage over the other, that person will always outperform the other. In other words, although many types of skills and abilities can certainly be learned and trained, it will still be extremely difficult to compete with a person who has a higher aptitude for it – and who has trained equally hard as a person with a lower aptitude (Gagné, 2004). Conversely, it is also possible that a person has a gift for something that they never develop fully – either because they are unaware of it or unmotivated to pursue it – and therefore do not become "talented" at it (Gagné, 2004).

Talent as Phenomenon

We can now map Meyers and van Woerkom's (2014) talent philosophies onto each of these four constructs and, in turn, relate each talent philosophy (and construct) to a logical set of talent management practices. In their seminal article, the authors already made some suggestions as to what types of practices make more sense for what type of talent philosophy (cf. Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014, Table 1). Below and in Fig. 2, I complement their ideas with insights I gained through the "talent philosophy" practitioner workshops I have run for the last 10 years or so – and additional literature reviews I have conducted based on those insights.

   Exclusive/Innate Talent Philosophy.   The construct that best fits the exclusive/innate talent philosophy – both in research and in talent management practice – is *giftedness*. Admittedly, this is a construct that is more often used in reference to gifted children than in the context of business (Gagné, 2004). That said, several management authors have written about phenomena quite similar to giftedness, in the context of talent management in companies – most notably, Morgan McCall who wrote several thought-provoking books (1998; McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988) and articles (McCall, 2004; Spreitzer, McCall, & Mahoney, 1997) on what he called "X factor" thinking in management. (I should probably note that McCall clearly holds an exclusive/developable talent philosophy.) Basically, the idea behind this type of talent philosophy is that (an exceptionally high level of) talent is something you either "have" or you don't. This type of discourse is most evident when talking about prodigies or geniuses like Mozart, Messi, or Einstein (Meyers, van Woerkom, & Dries, 2013). The argument is that some people are so amazingly gifted that no amount of training or development could help
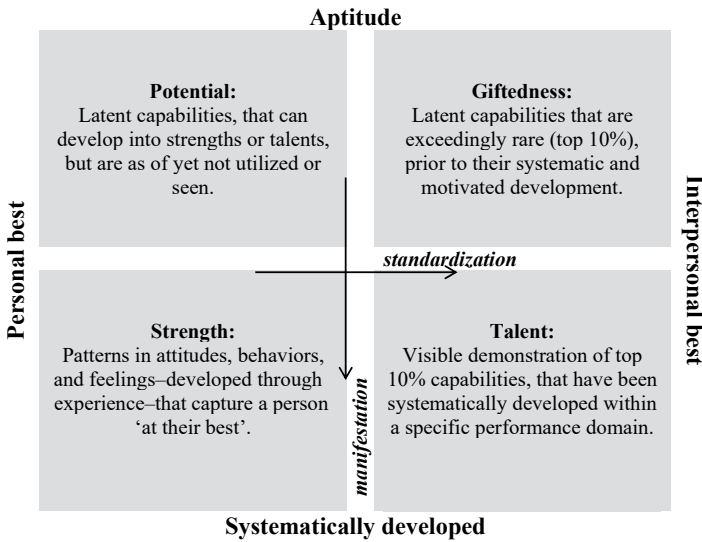
Fig. 1.   Mapping the (Relationships Between the) Different "Talent" Constructs. *Source*: Author's original work.

more "average" mortals approach their level. In the business context, this type of rationale is applied in particular to leadership. In recent decades, there has been a lot of debate as to what extent great leadership is developable, especially when we are talking about transformational (Johnson et al., 1998) or charismatic leadership (Gibson, Hannon, & Blackwell, 1999). In an interview study I did with 14 people identified as "talents" by their organization (Dries & Pepermans, 2008), a majority among them (13 out of 14) said that they believed their abilities were at least partly innate or had emerged in their childhood – citing leadership roles in youth associations (such as scouting) and fraternities/sororities as evidence of their natural leadership.

So what types of talent management practices offer a logical "fit" (Garrow & Hirsh, 2008) with the exclusive/innate talent philosophy and the associated construct of giftedness? Clearly, such practices should focus heavily on assessment and selection, as the underlying assumption of this philosophy is that there exist rare individuals "out there" who must be "found" and recruited. Headhunting and direct search make most sense as external recruitment practices for this type of talent management approach (cf. the "make or buy" question; Groysberg, Lee, & Nanda, 2008), while forced ranking of the performance of one's current staff is a fitting approach for internal talent identification (Blume, Baldwin, & Rubin, 2009). As it is assumed, in this approach, that the basis underlying observable "talent" is largely dispositional, I argue that when budgetary choices need to be made, it makes most sense for organizations adhering to this philosophy to invest in talent identification rather than development. In addition, as talent is assumed to be highly rare in this approach, a strong differentiation in resources – allocating
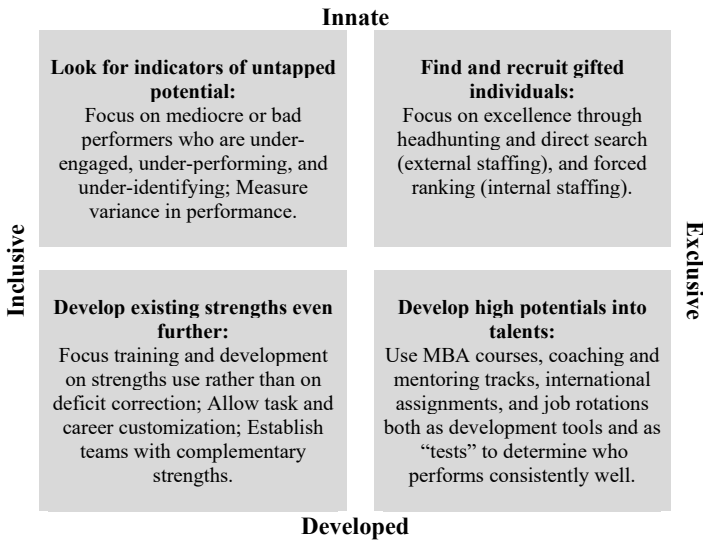
Innate

Look for indicators of untapped potential: Focus on mediocre or bad performers who are under-engaged, under-performing, and under-identifying; Measure variance in performance.	**Find and recruit gifted individuals:** Focus on excellence through headhunting and direct search (external staffing), and forced ranking (internal staffing).
Develop existing strengths even further: Focus training and development on strengths use rather than on deficit correction; Allow task and career customization; Establish teams with complementary strengths.	**Develop high potentials into talents:** Use MBA courses, coaching and mentoring tracks, international assignments, and job rotations both as development tools and as "tests" to determine who performs consistently well.

(Left axis: Inclusive; Right axis: Exclusive; Bottom: Developed)

Fig. 2. Linking the Different "Talent" Constructs to Talent Philosophies and Talent Management Practices. *Source*: Author's original work.

more talent management budget to a small subset of employees who are expected to generate a disproportionate return on investment (ROI) (Huselid & Becker, 2011; O'Boyle & Aguinis, 2012) – also follows logically.

Case examples representing the exclusive/innate philosophy would be Apple (at least, Apple under the management of the late Steve Jobs) and Tesla (under the management of Elon Musk). We see both founders here, talking about how they define "talent" – as gifted people demonstrating exceptional ability and work ethic:

Steve Jobs (Apple): https://youtu.be/a7mS9ZdU6k4
Elon Musk (Tesla): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQbKctnnA-Y

Exclusive/Developed Talent Philosophy. The construct that best fits the exclusive/developed talent philosophy is *talent*. In this approach, the focus lies on an élite subset of employees who are seen as having high potential and are being further developed to take up key strategic roles in their organization (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). As opposed to the construct of giftedness, the focus here lies much more on development, although it is still targeted only at those employees who are considered high potentials to begin with. Most organizations that I encountered in my field research over the years run such programs only for around 20–30 employees annually (e.g., through custom-designed, company-specific MBA programs at renowned business schools), even when they have several thousands of employees. The reason why I say this talent philosophy is centered around the construct of "talent" and not "high potential" is because in my experience,

this type of talent management sees such employees as being "on trial." That is, they are considered high potentials up until the point where they either prove they indeed have observable, measurable talent or are "eliminated" from the race and seen as "false positives" who did not live up to their potential (Dries & De Gieter, 2014). In other words, being seen as a high potential is considered only a temporary state that either develops further into the much more tangible construct of talent (mostly equated to high performance in this approach) or dissipates into thin air (Silzer & Church, 2009).

In terms of practices, this view translates itself into high-potential, fast-track development programs that can feature MBA courses, executive coaching or mentoring, international assignments, and job rotations (cf. Dries & Pepermans, 2008, Table 4). Along the way, the performance of the members of the cohort is closely monitored to see if they, indeed, perform well under changing and novel circumstances (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000) and are consistently rated high performers by whoever they work with next. Those who "survive" are destined to become the future leaders of the organization, as they demonstrate the "helicopter view" and "generalist" leadership talent typically expected of corporate executives (Altman, 1997).

A case example representing the exclusive/developed philosophy is the BESIX Potential Academy. Every year, a cohort of 25 employees is selected from an employee population of 14,000 employees worldwide to come to Belgium for a custom-made MBA program at Vlerick Business School and/or Solvay Business School. The idea is to offer their most "high-potential" employees a head start in developing a helicopter view of the business and give them access to mentoring by members from the Board of Directors. After the program, however, it is expected that the participants – who are typically under 35 – take their career into their own hands and figure out how to move forward with what they learned in the highly intensive (short) program themselves. Key values for career development at BESIX are proactivity and self-directedness. For more information, see https://www.besix.com/en/careers/top-reasons-to-join-us/your-development-our-priority.

Inclusive/Innate Talent Philosophy.   The construct that best fits the inclusive/innate talent philosophy is *potential*. Note that I am not talking about "high-potentials" here (which is an exclusive construct; see, for instance, the work by Finkelstein, Costanza, & Goodwin, 2018), but rather potential in the broadest sense – referring to abilities that exist in a person latently but have not yet "come out." The interesting thing about untapped potential – as opposed to high potential – is that it is a negative construct, one that I believe is rarely addressed or assessed both in research and in organizational practice. In research, a former doctoral student of mine (Giverny De Boeck) did her entire dissertation on the construct of untapped potential (i.e., potential that is not yet fulfilled and/or observable), from which an empirical study was published in *Journal of Management Studies* (De Boeck et al., 2019). Specifically, she asked a representative sample of 1,028 Belgian employees to indicate, on a sliding scale, what percentage of their (perceived) potential they were currently not utilizing at work (and why). On average, respondents indicated that they had 30% untapped potential at work. Reasons cited were being overqualified for one's job, having a bad relationship

with one's supervisor or not being taken seriously due to being "only a lower-level worker" or being low educated.

In organizational practice, interestingly, untapped potential could be assessed by looking at *negative* performance indicators, such as a lack of engagement with work, performing below one's ability or education level, or the lack of identification with one's job or profession. What I mean by this is that, when a person scores badly on these indicators, this almost always means that there is room for improvement. One may even argue that organizations can create a larger ROI among employees who are clearly underperforming than among employees who are already on the "winning team" and for whom only marginal gains can be expected from additional encouragement (Swailes et al., 2014) – on the condition, of course, that the organization can figure out exactly what causes the underperformance. One suggestion is to move away from a focus on assessing people's average performance and instead look for variance in performance over time. If a person has a mediocre (or even bad) performance, while it is believed they do in fact have more potential (cf. the "nine-box" method of crossing performance and potential ratings; Philpot & Monahan, 2017), the following indicators may be of interest: When was it "better"? On which project, on which team, with what type of job tasks, at which point in time or career stage, and under which supervisor did this person perform better than they currently do? What is the degree of variability in performance *between* the formal appraisal periods (especially if these take place only once a year)? What is the best performance this employee has demonstrated across that entire period, and what were the circumstances of this "personal best" performance episode? And are there other sources of variance that may play a role in the performance ratings – is everyone on that team poorly rated? Is the supervisor lenient versus strict in his or her ratings? How are the team relationships? Is the person chronically understretched or bored? Does he or she have passions outside of the workplace that could be utilized, in one way or another, to enhance their engagement?

To date, I have not yet found a case example of an organization that has specific talent management practices aimed at uncovering untapped potential in their employees. (If there are readers aware of such cases, I would love to hear about them.) In fact, when I have asked this question to companies ("Which of your employees are in the low-performance high-potential box and what do you do for them?"), I was mostly met with surprise and told that this is a "weird box" and they don't know "if anyone is even in it." It seems to me, however, that the inclusive/innate approach in particular offers a lot of promise for distilling exactly what "truly inclusive" talent management should look like. That is, one could argue that a focus on potential, that is not "high potential," among all approaches would be most focused on exactly those employees who might benefit from inclusive talent management the most (Swailes et al., 2014).

Inclusive/Developed Talent Philosophy.   Finally, the construct that best fits the inclusive/developed talent philosophy is *strength*. Again, this construct implies very different underlying assumptions about "talent" (Nijs et al., 2014), as well as a very different set of practices (Garrow & Hirsh, 2008). Specifically,

strengths refer to abilities that were developed over time by individuals that make them feel like they are being true to themselves and "at their best" (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014). To an extent – and especially when linked to talent management practices – strengths are the opposite of weaknesses (or "deficits"), which are gaps in functioning that demand remediation. In contrast, strengths refer to those things people like, find important, and in which they wish to invest energy (Nijs et al., 2014). It follows that people doing the same type of job – say, university professors – can have different strengths and weaknesses related to different aspects of their jobs. Among university professors, there are those who, when given the choice, would gladly spend 90 or more percent of their time on research, whereas there are others who would much prefer to be appreciated for all the time and energy they put into their teaching, in return being relieved from publication pressures. There are those who are strong at coordination tasks and willingly take up administrator duties like department chair and dean, while for others, this is their worst nightmare. This is where a strength-based approach to talent management could potentially pay off the most (van Woerkom, Meyers, & Bakker, 2021).

One example of a strength-based practice is to train people on their strengths, rather than on their weaknesses. This idea is more provocative than it may appear at first glance, as training and development is typically focused on gaps in knowledge and skills – not on what people are already good at (van Woerkom et al., 2016). Think about it – if your boss tells you she thinks you should take a scientific writing course, would you assume she thinks you are a good writer, or that your writing needs work? What the strength-based approach argues is that larger gains can be made (both in terms of learning outcomes and positive reinforcement) by encouraging people to push forward in areas that are already strengths of theirs than to "force" them to remediate their weaknesses up to an acceptable or average level. So, rather than expecting everyone in an organization to be at least average performing at each aspect of their job, work tasks and career paths are customized (Straub, Vinkenburg, & van Kleef, 2020). In other words, employees are allowed the opportunity to focus their work and training hours more around activities and skills they like and are good at than on activities and skills that do not fit their strengths very well (van Woerkom et al., 2021). Managers might argue that there are "simply tasks that need to be done whether one likes it or not"; however, this issue can in part be countered by creating complementary teams, in which members have strengths and weaknesses that cancel each other out, allowing for an optimal division of tasks (Green, Hill, Friday, & Friday, 2005).

An interesting case example representing the inclusive/developed philosophy is the "Aspire" program at the Walt Disney Company, hash-tagged #DreamsWithinReach. The program grew from the observation that Disney employs a lot of workers who are typically disregarded by talent management, like temporary, hourly, and seasonal workers. Since 2018, Disney has spent over $150 million on tuition and education reimbursement for over 80,000 of their hourly workers – effectively changing their lives. More information about this case can be found here: https://disney.guildeducation.com/partner?auth_redirect=true.

Discussion

Implications for Research and Practice

In this chapter, I argue that the notion of "talent philosophy" (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014) offers the potential to bridge the tension between talent as a construct and talent as a phenomenon (Dries, 2013a). I propose that both researchers and practitioners start their respective talent management projects by asking themselves the following two questions: What are my fundamental assumptions about whether "talent" is something that many people have or only a small and exceptional subset of people? And what are my fundamental assumptions about the extent to which "talent" is something that people either have or they don't (a type of proclivity or predisposition), versus something that can be largely developed? (To help workshop participants with this second question, I often ask them: "Do you believe I can go out onto the street right now, take a random person, and with an infinite amount of resources – ten thousand hours, an unlimited budget, the best teachers in the world – turn them into a nuclear physicist?").

I must of course acknowledge here that, in addition to being individually held, talent philosophies also develop at the level of organizations, institutions, and cultures (King & Vaiman, 2019). That is, talent management decision-makers typically operate within a "system," in which their personal talent philosophies are influenced by organizational cultures, national or local value systems, and talent management practices (King, 2017). I refer interested readers to the work of Karin King and others on macro talent management and talent systems.

An important implication for practitioners is that getting a better grasp of their talent philosophy will help them determine exactly which ROI indicators are most relevant to their organization (Phillips & Edwards, 2008). On the "return" side, it is important to determine exactly what indicators one seeks to improve through talent management. Both more "utilitarian" and "deontological" return indicators are conceivable – the former targeting improvement of the bottom line and the latter aimed at "doing the right thing" from a humane standpoint, whether it improves organizational performance or not (Swailes, 2013). Examples of utilitarian return indicators are increased performance/productivity, increased effort/motivation, reduced turnover, encouraging employee cooperation, and enhancing the organization's reputation. Examples of deontological return indicators are increased employee well-being/satisfaction, increased self-confidence/self-efficacy, reduced risks of stress/burnout, encouraging self-actualization, and strengthening employees' passions (Dries, 2013b). On the "investment" side, organizations should systematically track the time, energy, and money they invest in talent management. Examples of investment indicators are the percentage of the total operating cost spent on talent management; the number of full-time equivalents (FTEs) involved in talent management; the workload in relative hours for line management; and the talent management budget compared to the company's direct competitors in attracting and retaining desired profiles (Dries, 2013b). After both types of indicators are known, a formula of sorts can be developed that will be used to calculate ROI at a predefined point in the future and preferably tracked over time, for instance, annually. (Anecdotally, I have been asked by several companies to determine the ROI of their talent management program,

only to be told they did not establish any return indicators before the implementation of the program – clearly, it is very important to set one's ROI indicators a priori to be able to track their progress longitudinally rather than in retrospect.)

Contributions to Theory

Based on their answers to the two basic talent philosophy questions above (Meyers et al., 2020), talent management researchers can now correctly identify their core construct – giftedness, talent, potential, and strength – and the associated definitions, measures, and practices that go along with it (Garrow & Hirsh, 2008). Such a more deliberate focus will help them more consciously select their dependent variables (and moderators/boundary conditions) of interest (Dries, 2013a). In addition – and this is quite an important point, as it opens up all kinds of novel avenues for further research – it directs researchers to literature streams that may not contain the term "talent management" proper but are nonetheless highly valuable in light of their adopted talent philosophy (perhaps even *more* so than the talent management literature "itself").

For instance, the literature on gifted youth discusses important questions such as the "talent for what" question (cf. different types of talent domains; see Gagné, 2004) and the question of cutoff points (i.e., population percentiles) that determine "how" talented a person is (Bélanger & Gagné, 2006). For a recent talent management application of Gagné's work, see the work of Sanne Nijs (e.g., Nijs et al., 2021). As for the strengths construct, there is quite a large and active research community around the topic of strengths use in the workplace (e.g., Page et al., 2009; van Woerkom et al., 2016, 2021; Wood et al., 2011). Another literature stream that seems to exist largely separately from the talent management literature but covers quite similar ideas (especially to the exclusive/developed approach) is that on stars and star performers. Examples are the work of Rebecca Kehoe, who developed a typology of star employees (i.e., universal stars, performance stars, and status stars; Kehoe, Lepak, & Bentley, 2018) and examined the effects of star employee performance on coworker and organizational performance (Kehoe & Tzabbar, 2015) – among others – and that of Herman Aguinis on the statistical distribution of star performance in the population (Aguinis & O'Boyle, 2014). Finally, in addition to the literature on high potentials (e.g., Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000; Silzer & Church, 2009) and leadership potential (e.g., Dries & Pepermans, 2012; Finkelstein et al., 2018), studies on potential can be found in the fields of education and social psychology. For instance, I highly recommend Scheffler (2010) for those looking for a deeper conceptualization of and reflection on "potential" as a developmental construct. Among many other excellent insights, he distinguishes between the capacity, the propensity, and the capability to "become" as necessary preconditions to the fulfillment of potential. On the social psychology end, authors like Tormala, Jia, and Norton (2012) and Williams, Gilovich, and Dunning (2012) have pointed out key psychological mechanisms such as (respectively) the tendency of raters to prefer high potentials to high performers due to the attractiveness and "promise" of the value-laden idea of "potential," and the phenomenon whereby people judge themselves mostly on their (self-perceived) potential but others only on proven achievements.

I believe that in the above lies the solution to reintegrating the "exclusive" and "inclusive" talent management literatures – which are currently somewhat at odds with each other (Swailes et al., 2014) – into an accumulative body of knowledge. Rather than each approach arguing against the other, I believe it will be more constructive to acknowledge the different forms that talent management can take both conceptually and in organizational practice. In establishing such "unity in diversity," I believe talent management could finally make the transition into a more mature field of academic inquiry (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015) – although clearly phenomenon driven – characterized in equal parts by construct clarity, rigor, and relevance (Chatman & Flynn, 2005). As described in Von Krogh, Rossi-Lamastra, and Haefliger's (2012) seminal paper on phenomenon-driven research, the transition to a mature field is characterized by consensus about constructs and theoretical frameworks – or at least, a clear categorization of competing approaches with their own internal logic – allowing a leap from exploratory, phenomenon-driven research to hypothesis-based, theory-driven research (adhering to the strictest rules of reliability and validity; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015).

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