

Building a Base for Leadership Development by Assessing Natural Abilities

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Identifying Talent

Several well-received books by significant and respected authorities have argued from different but overlapping perspectives for the identification of natural talent as basic to leadership development efforts. Management guru Peter Drucker presents the case for creating a personal model built upon defining roles in which a person can excel. These roles require the discovery and development of a person's natural strengths and talents.

Groundbreaking research from Gallup's Buckingham and Coffman suggests that "great managers' hire for talent and not skills or knowledge." They define talent by reference to an individual's hardwired problem-solving and thought processes and explore why talent is more important than experience, brainpower and willpower. Equally important is the significant body of work on Emotional Intelligence, now often called Emotional Competence. These studies, popularized by Daniel Goleman, document the relative contributions of individuals to teams and work settings as measured by their levels of interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence (i.e., competence.) Researchers are examining a person's "hardwired emotional ability," as well the process by which this ability can be used to be build skills and enhance talents.

Getting to the Hardwire? The Vital question

The clear consensus for a search into abilities suggests the importance of finding the best tools for recognizing hard-wired talents. Typically, all of the recommended assessment tools employ the use of self-report or multi-rater feedbacks. The vital question: do these self-report and multi-rater feedbacks alone provide us with the data we need?

The Problem with Self-reports: Subjectivity vs. Objectivity

We are often asked to evaluate ourselves through self-report. There are literally hundreds of self-report-type instruments offering evaluation based on the questionnaire format. Some of the more popular instruments include MBTI, DiSC, Birkman, and Hermann Brain Dominance. Essentially, these self-reports require that individuals respond to questions based on their own memory of associated behavior and their ability to quantify that behavior on a five-point scale, or by simply answering “yes” or “no.” These tools do have some value, but by themselves they are insufficient to describe the whole individual.

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Self-reports vary with mood and setting. They ask us to reflect on ourselves. We are asked to be objective observers of ourselves. Thus, while the self-reports are usually described as “objective,” the responses are truly subjective.

Self-reports are essentially problematic because people can adaptively distort, defend and self-deceive in an effort to influence the answers. Many individuals will give the answers that will present them in the best light. Self-report allows us (consciously and unconsciously) to draw upon our self-perceptions, as well as on our impressions of how others perceive us. It may tell us quite a bit about ourselves as we see ourselves, but it is not the most reliable and valid source for gaining insight into our hardwired talents and abilities.

Multi-rater feedback surveys present a similar weakness. The multi-rater survey combines self-reported information with commentary from others who have observed us in different roles. The feedback produced is drawn from a cumulative report combining answers from both sources to a group of questions. Critics dismiss multi-rater feedbacks as “reputation polls.” Like the self-report tool, this psychological assessment tool has some utility in leadership development, but it will **not** find the individual’s hardwiring in an objective way.

The Gold Standard – Objective Work Samples

Objective analysis would suggest that the best indicator of hardwired talents and abilities lies in the performance of objective work samples.. In fact, the academic originators of the work in Emotional Intelligence (Peter Salovey and John Myer) argue that a work sample approach to assessment is the gold standard for the field. Simply put, a work sample asks the individual to solve a pre-defined

problem, or respond to a pre-defined task, within a fixed timed period. The Highlands Ability Battery is one example that uses the work sample approach.

First, an Understanding of Natural Abilities

Our natural abilities are those abilities we are born with. They are as unique to each individual as his or her genomic patterns. Abilities mature over the period of infancy and childhood and are fully developed by the age of fourteen. They are not affected by practice or neglect, and they are neither measures of intelligence nor reflections of our experience. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' or 'good' or 'bad' in an individual's ability profile. Our abilities testify to our uniqueness — to who we are and how our special gifts can best be used.

The Highlands Battery

The Highlands Ability Battery (THAB) traces its history back to the pioneering studies begun more than seventy-five years ago by Johnson O'Connor, an engineer at GE. O'Connor perceived that every individual is born with a pattern of abilities unique to him or her, that those abilities are essentially hardwired and that they can be measured successfully when the individual is sufficiently mature to manifest or express them.

THAB was designed to offer an objective measure of an individual's abilities and to help the individual to understand how knowledge of these abilities can guide him or her through vital choices in the work environment. THAB consists of a series of work samples executed by the individual either on paper or on the

computer; it is neither a subjective self-reporting device nor a measure of individual skills and knowledge. It is, instead, an objective assessment of the relative ability of the individual to perform defined tasks embodied in timed work samples. These tasks measure the individual's innate abilities

The Process

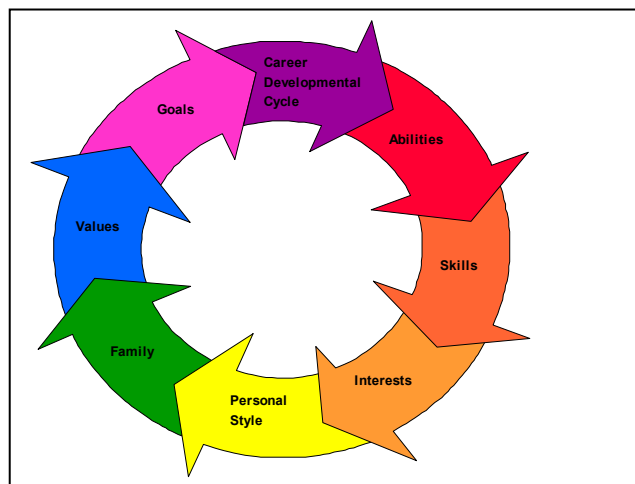
The completion of THAB is the first part of a three-part process. This first part takes three hours and may be completed at one sitting or spaced out in segments. The second part consists of a 30-page analytical report which is shared by the individual and a Highlands consultant trained to interpret the report. The final (and most vital) part is a two-hour, one-on-one feedback session with the consultant who helps the individual to understand the significance of each element of the results.

THAB is aimed at identifying the unique sets of abilities within each of us. It has a simple but powerful goal: finding our strengths through an objective work sample assessment and using the results as a guide for seeking work roles that allow us to excel.. Think of hardwired abilities as those productive strengths which we inherently utilize in solving recurring problems each day. Our strengths for leadership development are built on what we are hardwired to do!

Putting Abilities in Perspective

Although THAB is the Highlands foundation for leadership development, the Highlands process recognizes that many factors beyond innate natural abilities combine to make “the whole person” who faces life and its challenges every day. We have identified eight well-researched critical factors (Abilities, Skills, Interests, Personal Style, Family of Origin, Values, Goals and Career Development stage), which combine to make the “whole person”. These factors are represented on The Highlands Personal Effectiveness Wheel (Figure C). and each plays a crucial role in the structured integration process of building an individual’s Personal and Career Vision. It is this process that forms the base of our view of Leadership Development. Leadership development rests on each individual’s having a firm foundation in self-knowledge. The Highlands leadership development program, in which THAB is a vital foundational element, incorporates all these factors into its assessments.

**Figure C: The Highlands Whole Person Technology
-8 Factor Effectiveness Wheel**



Note: This is the author's original submitted article and has not been edited for style and content by ASTD.