

The Road to Self-Knowledge

How to define your natural abilities.

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THERE APPEARS to be a growing consensus of positive organizational psychology that focuses on innate strengths as a key to development. This is true whether we are assessing our own careers, defining excellence in a manager, or measuring the effectiveness of a leader.

Echoing the ancient Delphic advice, the late Peter Drucker pronounced: "To know thyself in the new organizational context is fundamental to development: Know yourself, know your strengths, and [know] what roles you best contribute from and how you most easily learn." Drucker delivered this pronouncement after his most famous observation: "Most people think they know what they are good at. They are usually wrong."

If Drucker is right, and people need help in defining their strengths, what should practitioners do? Many of us fill the void with popular instruments that claim to measure our strengths when in fact they are measuring our personality traits—often without adequate psychometric support. The problem lies not with the wisdom of the "know thyself" dictum but with the tools we employ.

Arsenal of tools

What passes in many organizations for opportunities to learn our strengths rests more often than not on tools that are based entirely on self-report or the biased reports of others. These tools assume self-knowledge, and are one-dimensional, easily manipulated, and measure only personality orientation, not how to use our hard-wired abilities to work easily.

Moreover, to restate the obvious, we all know that there is more to our complexity as humans than can be measured in a 15-minute assessment based on self-report. While this is not

a forum to advocate elimination of these tools, we should confine them to their limited utility. All these instruments tap into the same limited area—what we have come to know as personal style. Whether or not they measure accurately what they purport to measure, we are compelled to recognize that personal style is a very small part of the total picture of personal effectiveness.

Focusing exclusively on personal style is like asking your physician to do your annual physical with only a blood pressure monitor—a very narrow and limited measure of your physical condition and a very distorted prognosis of your health.

To supplement the contribution of these instruments and complete the process of self-assessment, we need to add an instrument assessing hard-wired abilities, and analysis of seven additional factors that are essential to self-knowledge to our arsenal of tool.

Natural abilities

If we are to follow the 'know thyself' dictum, it is essential that we know the abilities we were born with and the talents we have developed. If we don't concede that simple truth, we have to argue that all abilities are acquired through experience, which is an indefensible position.

Knowledge of our hard-wired abilities tells us what things we do easily, and what things we do with more difficulty. This knowledge enables us to decide what work will be gratifying to us and then develop the skills that gratifying work requires. No one can do everything well, but all of us possess unique talents that we can draw upon. We may suspect we do some tasks better than others, but except for occasional feedback from peers and our own response to life's tests and challenges, we really don't have a valid measure of what we are

naturally inclined to do well. Whether we brought them with us or developed them early in life, our abilities are fixed and stable by late adolescence.

How can we unravel a person's natural abilities? We can require him to perform a series of carefully constructed and time-tested work samples, each measuring a separate and identifiable ability. Those abilities should include all of these abilities we have found to be reliable, measurable, and capable of isolation:

- intuitive problem solving—the non-logical ability to find a relationship between seemingly unrelated objects or data
- logical problem solving—the ability to assemble facts and to find a logical relationship among them
- idea productivity—the speed with which an individual can generate new ideas from a given set of facts
- spatial relations theory and visualization—the ability to see the relationship between two abstract or two tangible objects; and the interest in hands-on or tangible work and experience
- musical abilities and pitch discrimination—the ability to remember musical sequences; to turn physical movement into a learning process; and to sense differences in external stimuli
- observation—the ability to remember visual details and changes
- workstyle—a measure of the ways in which the individual responds to the social environment and to interpersonal relationships (the generalist or specialist scale; the introvert and extrovert scale)
- the five learning channels—five measures of the ways in which individuals learn: design memory; verbal memory; number memory; rhythm memory; visual speed and accuracy
- tactical and strategic planning—the ability to project a plan to its fruition.
- vocabulary—although not technically an ability, this measure is essential to

the degree of satisfaction in work; we measure vocabulary at the college level.

One assessment tool I use is the Highlands Ability Battery, which requires several hours to complete. It is available online at www.highlandsc.com. When the consultation is finished, you should have a thorough grasp of his abilities.

Eight factors in personal effectiveness

Over the past 50 years, significant strides by a variety of researchers and practitioners have added to our understanding of the critical factors needed to consider personal effectiveness. As is so often the case in our increasing specialization in the social sciences, these factors are rarely brought together in a systematic fashion.

What we recommend is a unifying treatment of the eight factors that must be considered the essential ingredients for developing a personal strategic life plan. When we meet an executive to discuss our work, we are dismayed to see volumes on personal development gather dust on her shelves. We wonder how much more useful to the executive it would have been to integrate all these volumes into our own simple formula for personal development.

These are the eight critical factors in the personal development formula:

- natural abilities
- stage of career development
- skills
- interests
- interpersonal skills
- family of origin
- values
- goals.

Integration of these eight factors leads to maximum self-awareness. It also leads to the conclusion that no two people are alike. When you combine all eight factors, differences between one person and another are inevitable.

The cornerstone of self-awareness is self-knowledge or “know thyself.” Self-knowledge requires self-study. Self-study cannot depend only on describing yourself to yourself or answering self-serving questions about yourself. It requires a valid test of your natural abilities in the context of other key factors.

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