



Developing talents is faster, more positive, and more productive than developing weaknesses.

Developing Non-talents

We all have, in our professional practice, strengths and weaknesses. Our strengths are typically areas where we have a good bit of natural ability and have polished that ability through practice and refinement. Our weaknesses are typically areas where we do not possess much natural ability and also have not given much effort to improvement. We can think of these natural abilities (or inabilities) as talents. In our areas of natural talent we have the potential to develop strengths, and in our areas of non-talent we are left with weaknesses.

In the *Skillful Observation and Coaching Laboratory*, a lot of attention is focused on developing teachers in the areas of their natural talents- and for good reason. Developing talents is faster, more positive, and more productive than developing weaknesses. Sometimes, however, it is necessary to develop ourselves and others in areas where we have little natural talent. The most productive techniques for developing non-talents, however, are quite different than for developing talents.

Three approaches to developing non-talents:

Approach A. Avoid (or minimize) the use of non-talents.

If the non-talent is a non-essential, consider just not worrying about it. Developing non-talents is too difficult and costly to use for anything that is trivial, a matter of style, or infrequently needed. If a teacher just can't master the three-legged race, don't spend any time working on it. It's non-essential and it's only needed once a year at field day.

Approach B. Manage around non-talents.

If the areas of non-talent are too important to avoid, consider managing them rather than developing them. In the excellent book *Now Discover your Strengths*, by Donald Clifton and Marcus Buckingham, the authors provide five suggestions for "managing around" areas of non-talent.

1. Get a little better. Often, by paying just a little attention to a weakness we can improve a small amount without too much effort. The idea here is not to develop the non-talent into a talent, but just to improve enough to avoid the worst of the negative consequences. Think of this approach as going from terrible to bad where terrible has major consequences but bad is just an annoyance.

Developing
The Artisan
teacher



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2. Design a support system. This, in essence, is cheating. Not the unethical/immoral kind of cheating, but the “seem better than I really am” kind of cheating. If unorganized, buy some sticky notes. If memory is poor on a subject, make some note cards. If you can’t remember students’ names, have them wear nametags. These are examples of simple support systems that help us improve our performance without actually improving our talent.

3. Get a partner. Team up with someone who has the natural talents you lack. This is doubly effective if you possess talents your teammate lacks.

4. Overwhelm the non-talent with a talent. Make your lack of talent irrelevant by utilizing your best talents. If you can’t sing, but you can play, then play so well that singing becomes unimportant. If classroom rules are a weakness, but you’re great at building relationships, then build such positive relationships that classroom rules become less necessary.

5. Just don't do it. See approach #1: Avoid (or minimize) the use of non-talents.

Approach C: Develop your non-talents... even into talents.

The human brain operates on a fundamental principle called neural plasticity. Neural plasticity is the brain’s natural ability to change its form, grow new connections, and rewire itself in order to survive and thrive in a new environment. The principle of neural plasticity opens up the possibility that we might develop our naturally occurring non-talents. It is possible, under the right circumstances, to make great strides in developing our weak areas, perhaps even to the point that they are as productive as our natural talents. This approach seeks to go well beyond avoiding our non-talents or managing around them. This is by far the longest, hardest, and most costly approach. It can, however, be done.

Some success principles for developing new talents:

1. Practice, practice, practice. Regular repetition over an extended period is necessary for neural plasticity to occur. To re-wire a talent requires many thousands of electro-chemical messages traveling down the new neural circuit. Over time (a long time), the old circuit will decay and the new circuit will become the preferred pathway.

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The answer to the question “why am I doing this?” must be inspirational, internal, personal, motivational, and mighty.

2. **Coaching and feedback.** Practice and repetition are less effective, and sometimes counterproductive, in the absence of feedback. It is important to receive growth-evoking, non-evaluative feedback from a knowledgeable observer. Valuable coaching and feedback can be obtained from three types of observers.

- A. From observers who have natural talent in the skill to be developed
- B. From co-learners who are just a little ahead in the development of the talent.
- C. From observers who do not possess the talent themselves but are skilled at seeing it and developing it in others

3. **An “M-thought”.** Developing a non-talent into a talent will be a long, hard road requiring sustained effort and disciplined attention. So, there must be an extraordinary motive for this undertaking. The answer to the question “why am I doing this?” must be inspirational, internal, personal, motivational, and mighty. M-thought is short for Meaningful thought.

4. **An accountability/support system.** Long-term goals require short-term accountability, support, and motivation. It is important to break the journey down into short segments, chart progress, and celebrate small successes.

5. **Improvement, not perfection.** Since developing a new talent is essentially a rewiring of the brain’s circuits, development will always lag behind where it might have been with a natural talent. Still, great progress can be realized and this progress, not a fantasy of perfection, should be the aim of the work.

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