

Finding Our Unique Gifts and Talents

By Paul Houston | Categories: Uncategorized

Recently I wrote about special words that teachers need to use. Among those was the phrase, *“have you ever thought about...?”* This phrase opens new possibilities for all of us if we allow it to become part of what we do as teachers and leaders.

Teaching or leading is **simply the task of getting work done through others**. Children in the classroom should be the workers; the teachers should be the instigators. The late Phil Schlecty once said that school is the place where the relatively young go to watch the relatively old work. This is, of course, upside down from how school should be. It is only by making certain that children are the workers that learning will happen. The role of a teacher is to empower children to get their jobs done.

Likewise, the role of a leader is to get work done through others. The most ineffective leaders are the ones who think they must do it all themselves. Even worse are those leaders who undermine and humiliate the workers that they need to succeed. It is my firm belief that leaders must empower those around them in order for work to get done. This is the reason Steve Sokolow and I co-wrote the book *The Empowering Leader: 12 Values to Supercharge Your Leadership* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2017) available now through Amazon, Barnes and Noble and electronically.

We titled the first chapter of the book, “Identifying and Using Our Unique Gifts and Talents.” The simple truth is that we are all one-of-a-kind originals with unique sets of gifts and talents. For that reason we must know that each of us has a unique set of gifts and talents. The task of the leader is to help those around her identify and grow those gifts.

The other job of the leader is to identify her own gifts and talents and find the best ways of growing them and using them. We are all familiar with the notion of a round peg in a square hole to describe a person who just doesn't fit. The fact is we are all both round and square all the time and we have to find the right fit to maximize our effectiveness.

I used to advise young leaders with a simple suggestion: Never polish the same side twice. Part of finding and expanding our talents is to explore what we might have. Sometimes we know we are very good at one thing, but if we are to grow, we need to explore opportunities beyond our comfort zone.

I once had an assistant superintendent who took a sabbatical from his job of supervising a cluster of schools so that he could work on his doctorate. He was promised an assistant superintendent position when he returned. When he came back, he found, much to his chagrin, I assigned him to head up the business operations for the district. He got very angry and told me he was a good supervisor of principals and he felt he didn't know anything about business. I said, “Exactly. But you want to be an urban superintendent someday and you will need to know the business side of the operation. You already know how to supervise principals, now go out and learn business.”

He was so angry he barely spoke to me for weeks. Finally after several months, he came in and thanked me for giving him the opportunity to grow and expand his gifts. He turned out to be a good business administrator and shortly after that he left the district to take over a large urban district which had been his dream.

Helping others discover their gifts isn't always easy. People want to get better without wanting to change. The role of a leader is to facilitate the change process in others. One of the ways to make this happen is to create an environment in which people share their gifts and talents. A good leader is like a circus ringmaster whose job it is to put the spotlight on the various acts. One moment he is highlighting the lion tamer and the next the jugglers. He also has to make certain that the jugglers don't accidentally walk into the lion's cage.

An organization gets stronger when the wealth is shared. We all have strengths and weaknesses and often the weakness is just the shadow side of our strengths. Anything taken to an extreme can become destructive, even if it starts out as a positive. Empowering leaders find ways to help others balance their gifts and talents and then find ways to make them complementary to one another so the best is brought forth.

The empowering leader understands and embraces the knowledge that unique gifts and talents create a tapestry. Differences create strength and beauty. The Incas created buildings that can withstand powerful earthquakes to this day because they used different sizes and shapes of stone to build their walls. The stones fit together to create a powerful support. Empowering leaders celebrate all their own strengths and flaws, appreciate what others bring, and find ways of building a strong unit from all those differences.