

BILLY ADAMSEN

# DEMYSTIFYING TALENT MANAGEMENT

A Critical Approach to the  
Realities of Talent

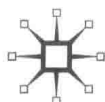


# **Demystifying Talent Management**

**A Critical Approach to the Realities of  
Talent**

Billy Adamsen

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# Demystifying Talent Management

*Talents are like ghosts  
They are not from God and  
They don't exist in the actual world*

# Preface

In my many years as an adviser and manager within business and sports, I have often been in situations where I needed to detect, identify, and recruit a talent, whether it was a talented (first- or middle-line) manager, an expert, or an athlete (I have dealt primarily with ice hockey players and soccer players). In these situations, I have often experienced personal uncertainty when it comes to the meaning of 'talent', and just as often have found myself in discussion with colleagues of mine about what talent really is. Despite this uncertainty, somehow we always managed to move on, and were able to detect, identify, and recruit an individual with talents appropriate to a certain position in the organization, or a particular spot on the team. However, the outcome of our efforts at talent management varied, and very often those we recruited did not become as successful as one would expect a truly talented person to do. I don't mean that they were inadequately qualified or weren't competent in the positions we matched them to – they certainly were that – only that they were often not exceptional, not all that different from other (preceding and present) managers or ice hockey players or soccer players. I have often been troubled by this pattern, and over the years I have sought clarification on the nature of talent, driven by entirely practical, pragmatic interest. My concern was (and is) to be more certain about when individuals are, or are not, genuinely talented. I have compiled hundreds of notes towards this end, often inspired by others' experiences with talent and talent management, or by written definitions, some of which have seemed to me to improve on existing models. But my best efforts produced little by way of results, and I have yet to find a satisfactory account of what talent really is.

All this made me start wondering about the realities of talent, about what it is and what it means to manage it. Five years ago, I embarked on a scientific journey to search for some answers regarding the realities of talent and talent management. In this I was not entirely successful, because what I found made me question whether talent exists at all. This led me to a new, and perhaps more urgent, question: what are the consequences for talent management, and for the competitiveness of businesses and sports teams, if talent doesn't exist in the actual world? The book in your hands is about this scientific journey of mine, and it

contains my attempts to answer that question as well as my thoughts and critical reflections on talent and talent management.

In Chapter 1, I begin with the Gospel of Matthew and the Parable of the Talents, both because it is so widely quoted in talent literature, talent management research, and because it offers such a simple model for the identification of talent and for thinking about the post-identification development of talented individuals. In Chapter 2, I present six stories about remarkable people in the worlds of business and sports. None of them has ever been identified as a talent, but each has had the sort of extraordinary career we expect of talented people. Chapter 3 describes the origins of talent management, the principles behind it, and how it has become what it is today. Chapter 4 presents an empirical study of the term's use in the Danish media and in the scientific literature, using quantitative and qualitative analysis of its occurrences in two newspapers to make some generalizations about its accepted meaning. In Chapter 5, I describe the methods, strategies, and practical approaches talent managers use to identify and recruit talents. Chapter 6 conducts a complementary etymological analysis, looking for the term's meaning in its historical origins. In Chapter 7, I build on this to explain how and why 'talent' has become an empty signifier, and in Chapters 8 and 9, I pursue this semiotic approach, concluding that 'talent' has little or no denotative meaning, and carries only a wide range of connotations. I discuss the consequences of this state of affairs, and the effects on talent management of the semiotic emptiness of its central operational notion, in Chapter 10. I propose a more rigorous strategy for the management of personnel, which I call IQC management, in Chapter 11.

It goes without saying that as I wrote this book, and along the way, I have received some valuable help and support from some good people whom I would like to thank. I would not have been able to finish and present my views without the moral support of Dr Torben Andersen, or without our often inspirational small coffee break discussions about paradoxes in contemporary management. Matthew Harvey has been a tremendous support during the writing process and has made valuable suggestions and raised questions that have improved and clarified the final manuscript. Without a doubt, he has a bright future in science ahead of him. Dr Gintautas Bloze has also been hugely helpful in processing the data from my study of Danish newspapers and scientific literature, as has Tom Richter with his persistent and excellent work on my references and final index. Our library staff, and especially librarian Tove Juul Hansen, have also been a great help in my search for many

of the original (crucial) scientific papers within the field of talent and talent management. Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Dr Anne Adamsen, for always being there, listening to my thoughts and ideas, questioning my views and arguments, and always showing an excess of support that makes me continue, no matter how different and difficult it may be. Thanks also to my sons Ludvig Adamsen and Albert Adamsen, for being part of my life and for showing me that, with determination, engagement, hard work, compassion, and belief in yourself, you can achieve anything you want. Thank you, I love you, and God bless you (and yeah, I know it is a paradox – but for now so be it!).

Billy Adamsen  
Copenhagen, Malmo and Ticino 2015





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# Introduction: How to Read and Understand This Book

No matter where we look in our society, we talk about talent, we see talents in the media and in talent shows, and we hear about them in school, at our workplaces, and at sports games. It seems clear that talent has become integral to contemporary culture, and to our modern way of understanding what it is that generates social success and prosperity.

Long before this almost manic obsession with talent took hold of us, it was treated more seriously by business and sports consultants and by researchers from different disciplines, all of whom had come to realize that extraordinary, exceptional individuals – even more than a high level of competence overall – were a core organizational asset that could strengthen competitiveness and ensure progress. This naturally produced the idea that exceptional individuals share an underlying attribute, some personal trait or characteristic that is an important driver for social success, and for achieving both individual and group goals, both in business and in sports. In 2001, Michaels, Handfield-Jones and Axelrod published their book *The War for Talent*, whose rapid spread and increase in influence among business and sports consultants led to the emergence of a new discipline, and new methods and techniques, for identifying, recruiting, and developing the eponymous ‘talents’. This new discipline was called ‘talent management’. Later, although at a slower pace, talent management became the focus of a corresponding area of scientific research, although at first (and perhaps to this day) it was a sub-discipline of human resource management. Today, thousands of papers and books have been published on the topic, containing both empirical research on relevant topics and a variety of models for talent management that have been developed and improved over the years.

Despite this vast accumulation of knowledge about talent and the effective identification, recruitment, and development of talented

individuals, the actual results of the associated management practices have varied widely in terms of changes in performance of individuals and competitiveness of organizations. Some researchers, such as Peter Cappelli (2008b), have demonstrated that the inadequacy of talent management methods leads to a massive failure in companies' ability to accurately identify talented recruits: "Failure in talent management is a source of pain for executives in modern organizations. Over the past generation, talent management practices, especially in the United States, have by and large been dysfunctional, leading cooperation to lurch from surpluses of talent to shortfalls to surpluses and back again" (Cappelli, 2008b:1). Silzer and Dowel (2010) point out that every individual talent manager brings individual subjective biases to bear in their work, and that these biases could (in theory) lead to the observed inadequacy of talent management models, and the resulting inefficacy of management practices. In order to find a plausible explanation for this subjective bias in talent management, researchers have recently started to pay attention to the terminology and language of talent management as a possible cause. Lewis and Heckman (2006) show how there is a lack of semantic clarity in the compound phrase 'talent management', and Tansley (2011) demonstrates that even the meaning of the term 'talent' is blurry and hard to pin down. Adamsen (2014b) argues that both terms have become empty signifiers, and analyses the consequences of this semiotic change in relation to subjective bias in management practice.

This is the context in which this book should be read and understood. I will approach the issues of subjective bias, and the obvious failure of talent management, from an interdisciplinary perspective that draws on methods and insights from cognition, philosophy, linguistics, and sociology. I will demonstrate how the issues are connected by a lack of semantic clarity, and explain how that lack affects the principles and rationale of talent management. All this is done with the intention of eliminating, or at least ameliorating, the subjective bias in talent management, and thereby decreasing its failures and improving its reliability in actual practice. If this effort succeeds, the discipline will be able to realize its potential to become central to the management strategies on which the competitiveness of organizations and teams depends.

# 1

## The Gospel of Matthew – the Saying about Talent and Talent Management

### Introduction

Christianity has had an influence on Western culture for centuries, even after the separation of religion from democratic, secularized mainstream cultural change. So, too, Christianity has influenced management culture and thinking. Within contemporary talent management, the adagium of talent derived from the Gospel of Matthew is still very much present, and has achieved widespread acceptance as an explanation of what it means to have or become a talent. The same notion is widely used to explain a social phenomenon that has accordingly been dubbed 'the Matthew effect', in which talented people receive an abundance of possibilities for advancement and recognition. In this chapter we take a closer-than-usual look at the Gospel of Matthew, and especially how the Parable of the Talents has been used and interpreted by sociologists. Based on a re-interpretation of the Parable of the Talents, the theory of the Matthew effect is subjected to critical analysis and revised, and at the same time the existence of an implicit view of talent and talent management in the Gospel of Matthew is revealed.

Even though Christianity today is separated, to some degree, from secularized aspects of Western culture, its cultural influence cannot be denied. Nor can the fact that the separation was never complete:

The importance of Christianity in the formation of Western civilization can hardly be denied. That importance is not simply a matter of the past. In the process of secularization Western culture did emancipate itself from its religious roots, but that emancipation

was by no means complete. A complete break from Christianity was not intended in the seventeenth century by those who wanted to put the public culture on an anthropological rather than religious foundation. The issue at that time was not a revolt against the Christian religion, nor even against its influence on the culture.

(Pannenberg 1994:18)

Perhaps more importantly than 17th-century intentions – or perhaps as a legacy of and corollary to them – our own awareness of the religious and secular domains does not treat them as entirely distinct:

The secular was not outside the purview of Christian faith; Christian influence was not limited to what was viewed as religious. Rather, Christian faith informed the understanding of both the religious and secular realms. The very distinction between the religious and secular has its source in the Christian awareness that the ultimate reality of the kingdom of God is still future. That ultimate reality is at present only available through individual faith and the sacramental life of the Church.

(Pannenberg 1994:19)

As Max Weber showed years ago in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, this distinction between the religious and secular realms maintained the influence of Christian thinking (in particular, the value-oriented rationality which is the “spirit of capitalism”), along with its values of individualism, materialism, and organization, on Western (secular) culture (Weber 2012). These are the Christian cultural legacy to all current residents of Western countries. Recently, Dyck (2013) demonstrated how the Christian view and values, and especially the Gospel of Luke, has had an influence on contemporary management which can be traced back to management practices in the 1st century CE:

Research specifically linking changes over time in biblical interpretation, and their implications for organization and management theory and practice, is underdeveloped. However, there is a rich storehouse of historical information that scholars interested in these questions can draw upon. For example, in recent study Elden Wiebe and I examine how the meaning of salvation has changed from the first century to the present time, and trace the relationships to management theory and practice as the shifts occur.

(Dyck 2013:196)

This influence of Christianity on management in general, and talent management in particular, has become more obvious in recent years, and is sometimes even made explicit by means of references to the Gospel of Luke, the Gospel of Mark, and the Gospel of Matthew (Bothner et al. 2011). Today, the Gospels of Mark and Matthew are both used as metonyms for contemporary concepts in the management literature. The 'Mark effect' in (strategic) human resource management refers to the inclusive approach to human resources associated with the passage in the Gospel of Mark that reads, "But many that are first shall be last; and the last first" (King James 1611 10:31). The 'Matthew effect' refers to the general pattern of events in which someone who already is rich in social resources, and who is a 'talent', consequently has a further wealth of opportunities and resources available to them. The following saying, or, rather, this adagium, from the Gospel of Matthew has achieved widespread use as an explanation of what it means to have talent, or to be a talent, and also as a description of the Matthew effect: "For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not, shall be taken away." In talent management research in particular, the Gospel is closely associated with the idea that possession of talent inevitably leads to an abundance of possibilities for responsibility and attention (Burkas & Osula 2011). But even well before the current surge of scholarly interest in explanations for talent, this key message of the story had been adopted by secular culture, along with other well-known passages and proverbs from both the Old and New Testaments, such as "no one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other [...]"<sup>1</sup>, "and if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch",<sup>2</sup> "for every man shall bear his own burden",<sup>3</sup> "the rich rule over the poor",<sup>4</sup> and "the borrower is servant to the lender".<sup>5</sup> The Matthew-derived view of talent, like these other familiar ideas, has been an adagium for centuries before the present day. People have experienced it as generally "true", as correct on some gut level of feeling, and this has lent it credence that has steadily accumulated, until today it is referred to explicitly or implicitly in all of our notions of talent (Pannenberg 1994, Danesi 2000, Mieder 2008, Dyck 2013). No matter how talent is defined, at least since the 14th century (see chapter 6), 'talents' or 'the talented' have always been described as 'having more' than others have, whatever 'more' is intended to mean (mental endowment, specific abilities, wealth, etc.). This notion of having more is the essence of the meaning of the word 'talent', and the term derives its force from the clarity with which the notion matches



up with our own everyday experiences. Because of this feeling that talent just obviously works this way, and because the Gospel of Matthew and his general view of talent have become so widespread within talent management, it is important for us to understand more clearly what the Parable of the Talents is about, and get a sense of what wisdom it has to offer us about the importance of having talent. So let us turn to the story itself.

In the Gospel of Matthew in the Parable of the Talents, a story is told about a wealthy man, the Lord, who decides to go on a journey and entrust his wealth to his three servants in his absence. To one of his servants, the Lord gives five talents, which is a weight of money corresponding to 75 pounds of silver; to a second servant he gives two talents, and to the third servant only one talent. His reason for giving different amounts of talents to his servants is simple: "to every man according to his severall ability" (King James: Matthew 25:15). As soon as their Lord was gone, each of the servants made up his mind about what to do with his respective allotment of talents.

The servants with five and with two talents decided that the money should be put to work right away – invested, in order to accumulate more talents. Each doubled his allotment, the first servant accumulating five more talents and the second servant accumulating two more. The third servant, with only one talent, decided that instead of putting the talent he received to work, he would take good care of it. So he went off, dug a hole in the ground, and hid it until his Lord returned.

This he does, after a long time away, and as soon he is back he calls his servants to settle his accounts with them. The first servant tells him that since he was trusted with five talents he invested them and generated five more talents. The Lord is thrilled and proclaims that he will put him in charge of many more things in the future: "I wil make thee ruler ouer many things: enter thou into the ioy of thy lord" (King James: Matthew 25:21).

The second servant comes in front of his Lord and tells him that he did the same thing and generated two more talents. Once again, his Lord is excited and proclaims that he, too, will be in charge of many more things in the future.

The third servant shows up and tells his Lord that he took good care of his one talent and therefore was able to return the one talent to him again. The Lord becomes upset and accuses him of being a wicked, lazy servant, because instead of hiding the one talent he should have used it to produce more wealth for his master, as the other servants did: "Thou wicked and slouthfull seruant, thou knewest that