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What Type of Talent are You Seeing?

All human beings have talents... and weaknesses. In their best-selling book, Now Discover Your Strengths, Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton define talent as "a recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied". Neuroscientists define talents as synaptic connections that form strong neural networks in our brains. These networks are shaped by nature and nurture, and after we reach the late teen-age years, remain pretty constant throughout our lives. Talents endure.

Human beings grow and develop fastest in areas where they have talent. Their brains are wired for success in these areas. We grow and develop much more slowly, and our potential is less in areas of non-talent. Again, from Now Discover Your Strengths, "Successful individuals capitalize on their strengths and manage around their weaknesses".

The ability of the observer to see and understand the different ways a teacher is talented is key to the development of that teacher. In the LCS™/Artisan Teacher™ work, we have identified 23 themes of teacher talent. Teachers can be talented in their use of Personal Relevance, Conscious Attention, First-Time Learning, Mental Models, Overt Responses, Congruency, Stagecraft, or Complementary Elements, to name a few. For the purpose of developing teachers' skills through coaching, it is important that we are able to recognize and name the meaningful patterns of talent expressed in a lesson.

To be a really keen talent scout, however, we must be able to answer a deeper question... what type of talent am I seeing? It helps to think of a talent as being one of three types— a latent talent, a conscious talent, or a strength.

Latent Talent: A latent talent is an undiscovered talent. It is a "yet to be developed" talent. If a talent is latent, the teacher may not even be aware that she possesses the talent. A latent talent reveals itself in the classroom as a natural, intuitive behavior. It is not a learned behavior, or the product of careful study, or the result of staff development. A latent talent often seems embedded in the teacher's temperament or personality. If we were to comment on the talent, the teacher may seem surprised or express that she's "never really thought about it."

Developing
The Artisan
teacher



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These notes are supplements to "The Skillful Observation and Coaching Laboratory." The SOCL is a job-embedded professional development experience that grows expertise in classroom observation and teacher coaching.



The key to developing a conscious talent is to build skill. Help the teacher build variety, consistency, flexibility, subtlety, and nuance.

To discover a latent talent is to find something of great value. What a gift it is to be able to say to a teacher, "I've been watching you and I see something that is a real talent of yours, and I think you may be unaware of it."

The key to developing a latent talent is to build awareness. Label the talent, describe it, point it out on multiple occasions, and keep coming back to it. The coach's goal is to cause the teacher to be consciously aware of the talent so that skill and intentionality can be developed later.

Conscious Talent: A conscious talent is a known talent. The teacher is aware of its existence and seeks to consciously and intentionally use the talent in his teaching. The key "look for" here is intention. In a classroom observation, the teacher seems to be making an intentional choice to use the talent. If we were to speak to the teacher about a conscious talent, he would likely not be surprised that we brought it up. The coach might say "you really seem to have a knack for providing great examples to your students". (the talent of connection) To this the teacher might reply, "others have told me that too. I do think this is one of my strong areas."

The key to developing a conscious talent is to build skill. Coach the teacher toward more expert use of the talent. Help him build variety, consistency, flexibility, subtlety, and nuance. The coach's goal is to cause the teacher to maximize and optimize the results gained from the application of this talent.

Strength: A strength is a polished talent. The teacher is not only aware of the talent and skilled in its use, but is also consistently near-perfect in its application. The key "look for" here is practiced execution. The teacher makes it look easy. The teacher can "shift on the fly" when something unexpected happens. There is a sense that the teacher is not even trying hard; that she has something in reserve in case it's needed.

The key to developing a strength is to provide opportunities for leadership, reflection, and renewal. Ask the teacher to assist in developing others in this talent. Provide opportunities for the teacher to observe others and provide feedback. In some cases, when the talent has become too automatic, it is wise to help the teacher "re-discover" the talent- promoting more creative and innovative applications.

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A coaching connection...

A good way to confirm your judgment on the type of talent you're seeing is to pay special attention to the teacher's responses in the diagnosis phase of the coaching session.

Let's say, in a classroom observation, you spotted Personal Relevance as a key talent. In the diagnosis phase of the coaching session, you might say "I noticed that you often took the time and care to creatively connect what you were teaching to the real-life experiences of students. Talk a bit about why this is important to do".

If the talent is latent, you'll be expecting the teacher to be a bit thrown by this statement. She'll have to think about it a bit. She may even seem a little annoyed at your inquiry, saying something like "well of course I do, that's just how I teach. Everyone does that".

If the talent is conscious, you'll be expecting the teacher to "get it" right away. He might begin nodding as you're speaking and "jump right in" to respond. He might not know the exact science behind the talent, but he will know that Personal Relevance is important and will have some kind of theory as to why it is important. The teacher may seem a bit relieved that the coaching session will be about something he is comfortable with and knows a lot about.

If the talent is a strength, you'll be expecting the teacher to be able to run with it. She may pause a bit before beginning, narrowing down her ample knowledge base on this topic to the few items that she wishes to express. Without being prompted, she will likely suggest other ways the talent can be used and even some applications where it doesn't work very well. She may talk for quite a while and even teach you a thing or two you didn't know.

So... All teachers have talents and weaknesses. As skillful observers and coaches, we should be able to spot and develop all types of talents in all types of teachers. To this end, it is helpful to know what type of talent we're seeing. For latent talents, build awareness. For conscious talents, build skill. For strengths, build leadership and renewal.

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