

The Career Activist Republic

Peter Weddle

People of talent are professional athletes, entertainers and artists. An opera singer at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City has talent while the best a bank teller or a plumber can be is good at their job. Talent, Americans are taught and told, isn't something the masses have nor is it really talented to be an exceptional performer in unexceptional occupations.

The Conventional Elitism of Talent

Ascribing talent to only a select few is a pretension that strikes at the very heart of human equality and the American democracy. This elitism of talent has its roots in the industrial era. In the early decades of the 20th Century, mass manufacturers—most notably those that produced cars and food—needed workers who would labor like machines or beast of burden and perform the same tasks over and over again.

Happy to respond, the social arbiters of the time created the conceit of America's "unwashed masses." This notion set common people—the working class—apart from their more educated and cultured betters. It was a derogatory description with synonyms like "boorish," "simple-minded" and "talentless."

Not to be outdone, the country's academic establishment reinforced the talent divide by introducing a developmental structure and programmatic format designed to relegate all but an exceptional few to mediocrity. Called "gifted and talented" programs in elementary school and "advanced placement" in high school, these initiatives didn't just serve the needs of smart kids—an admirable goal. They also communicated a sense of inferiority to all those who were not selected. In effect, the "normal" kids were told they didn't have talent or advanced capabilities and thus were second class citizens in the nation's educational system.

The Duke University Talent Identification Program, for example, describes itself as "a global leader in identifying academically gifted students and providing them with innovative programming to support their development." In other words, a person isn't talented unless they are academically gifted. If a kid doesn't score high on some so-called "intelligence test," they aren't smart enough to do extraordinary things in life and thus should receive only uncreative programming and support.

A More Pluralistic Perspective

The dictionary, thankfully, takes a more pluralistic view of talent. It defines the word as "the natural endowments of a person" and an endowment as "a natural gift, ability or quality." There is no qualifier limiting talent to extraordinary people or to extraordinary endeavors. The term is not reserved for the infallible and famous or even for the in-your-face and infamous. Quite the contrary, talent is a natural characteristic of the human species and is expressed in the full range of its idiosyncratic interests and occupations.

There is talent in being an exceptional salesperson and extraordinary truck driver. Talent can be expressed by an especially good customer service representative and bank teller, and by a truly outstanding electrician, mechanic, carpenter and computer programmer. The talent is not in what a person does, but in how they do it. Talent, then, is the expression of excellence, and that excellence can be attained in every profession, craft and trade.

In addition, the contempt with which many traditional talent elites are now held among the general public has further undermined their claim to specialness. Thanks to athletes who use steroids to set records, entertainers who indulge in sophomoric behavior to make headlines, business and investment gurus who commit criminal acts to enrich themselves, and politicians who can't seem to act at all despite the pressing issues of our day, people simply no longer believe that those who have traditionally been viewed as being talented are also extraordinary beings. Despite the nation's tabloid fascination with them, most Americans have concluded that talent elites are no better and often much worse than everybody else. And since that's so, the rest of the population is just as likely to have talent as the so-called superstars are.

This shift in perspective recasts talent as a trait that:

- all people possess, regardless of their social standing, fame or fortune; and
- each and every individual can use to be accomplished in their life's work.

These two principles undergird the democratization of talent. They form the foundation for a new movement in the American workplace. Called the Career Activist Republic, this emerging culture affirms the nobility of all human work and of all of those who perform it. It recognizes that, despite the differences among Americans in their ethnicity, gender and national origin, they are all equal persons of talent. Each and every one of them.

Thanks for reading,
Peter
Visit me at Weddles.com/WorkStrong

P.S. My new book, *The Career Activist Republic*, is due out in June of this year. Look for it on Amazon.com, at Weddles.com or in your local bookstore.

Peter Weddle is the author of over two dozen employment-related books, including *Recognizing Richard Rabbit*, a fable of self-discovery for working adults, and *Work Strong, Your Personal Career Fitness System*.

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