

Helping people find career positions which maximise their innate personal strengths as well as their acquired skills¹

By Alan Stretton

INTRODUCTION

Many years ago, I wrote an article in *PM World Today* entitled “*Aspects of people management in a projectised [i.e. project-based] organisation*” (Stretton 2009g). This is now reprinted in this issue of *PM World Today* as a Second Edition. This commentary expands a little on the major section in the latter on *People Selection and Development*, and particularly on the approach of *Finding and building on individual strengths*. We can identify two intertwined components of individual strengths. One is acquired knowledge, skills, and competence. The other, and more difficult, attribute to identify and build on, is innate personal strengths – i.e. positive attributes which come as naturally as breathing to the individual, but whose existence and nature that individual only rarely recognises. I am going to label these as “hidden” innate personal strengths.

This commentary explores the latter subject a little further. It starts with a short discussion on the nature of innate personal strengths, which still do not appear to attract much attention in the project management literature, but which we regarded as very important indeed at Civil & Civic. It then discusses difficulties in unearthing such hidden innate strengths in selection interviews when recruiting people. It goes on to expand on the organisational arrangements which Civil & Civic put in place to help people naturally gravitate to positions which evidently best suited their own particular innate strengths – an approach which worked rather well for us in practice. Examples will also be given of some other organisations which made rather similar arrangements – evidently also successfully. Finally, I will discuss, albeit in a somewhat tentative retrospective mode, one of my own elusive (to me) innate strength attributes, in the hope that my rather idiosyncratic experience with this may be relevant by some other reader or readers.

THE EXISTENCE AND NATURE OF INNATE PERSONAL STRENGTHS

As noted in the Introduction, I have used the label “innate personal strength(s)” to describe distinctive positive personal attribute(s) which appear to come as naturally as breathing to the individual, but whose existence and nature are only rarely recognised by that person (hence my occasional addition of “hidden” to the above descriptor). In the course of a long career, I have recognised that most people appear to have such hidden innate personal strength(s). Further, most of my colleagues also have had much the same kind of recognition – and I will shortly be discussing how this was recognised and acted upon in Civil & Civic.

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However, perhaps surprisingly, I have seen very little reference to the existence and importance of such innate personal strengths in the project management literature. However I must also admit to a substantial decline in my coverage of this literature in recent years – so, perhaps there are some relevant empirical data and discussion which have eluded me, but which I would certainly like to know about.

Amongst more indirect references I have come across in the project management literature are some recent comments by Wagner 2022, who, in a slightly different context, discusses “intrinsic motivations for actions”, and “self motivation” which facilitates “the development and use of acquired competencies”. Rightly or wrongly, I associate Wagner’s “intrinsic motivation” and “self-motivation” with innate personal strengths – which, as he points out, are also linked to acquiring competencies. However, in this article I will focus mainly on the former.

UNCOVERING INNATE PERSONAL STRENGTHS IN SELECTION PROCESSES?

As I discussed in Stretton 2009g, Civil & Civic grew at a real rate of 25% per annum (compounding) during the 1960s, and consequently had to recruit a lot of new people over that period, and indeed subsequently. By an accident of history, I found myself on the selection committees of most of our staff recruitment efforts throughout Australia in that period, in the role of a kind of quality control person, trying to ensure a relatively uniform standard of recruitment.

In this role I had the somewhat enlightening experience of seeing how some hundreds of people I had had a hand in recruiting worked out in practice. There were quite a few surprises along the way, some good, some not so good. However, the good surprises often revealed a talent which was not detected in the selection interviewing processes – namely, a distinctive strength which was innate to the individual, but typically not recognised as such by that individual – i.e. “hidden” innate personal strengths.

This “hidden” attribute made the task of uncovering those talents at selection interviews very difficult indeed. When questioned about their strengths, applicants typically described situations where they overcame problems in areas where they were not naturally strong! Whilst this was useful information, it did not reveal the nature of the individual's hidden innate strengths.

Perhaps there may have been more recent developments in interviewing and assessment techniques which have helped solve this problem. I am not aware of the emergence of any such techniques, but would most certainly like to know of any fully validated ones which may have been developed.

So, in the circumstances of the time, what did we actually do in Civil & Civic to discover and utilise people’s hidden innate strengths?

HELPING PEOPLE FIND APPROPRIATE “INNATE STRENGTH” POSITIONS

The approach taken in Lend Lease/ Civil & Civic

In Civil & Civic we did the best we could in selecting good people, but then looked for ways to give those people opportunities to gravitate to positions which were most relevant to their hidden innate strengths. We approached this by creating a very flexible organisational environment, in which individuals were encouraged to find the position in which they felt more personally compatible.

In our experience, discovering individuals' natural strengths is best facilitated by having no organisation charts or position descriptions, as these circumscribe and imply boundaries to the job. If people have no apparent boundaries to what they can do, they can – and normally will – naturally gravitate to what they naturally do best. Unless a particularly poor choice has been made in the selection process, the appropriate task will be available in all but small organisations or projects.

The broad philosophy of the early Civil & Civic, and later Lend Lease CEO, G.J. Dusseldorp, with regard to people is captured in two quotations from Murphy 1984:69.

Based on the belief that ‘the best investment that can ever be made is in the creative ability of people’, Dusseldorp aimed to provide an environment in which ‘everyone has the opportunity to do the maximum he is capable of’.

Dusseldorp put it ... this way: ‘Anyone in this organisation will get as much rope as he can handle, as soon as he has shown himself to be bigger than his present job’.

Under this approach, instead of position descriptions, the focus tended to fall naturally on the results that the person achieved. The approach certainly worked well in Civil & Civic. It has often been suggested to me by outsiders that the reason why Civil & Civic was so successful at that time was because it had such good people. Well, we did have good people, but one of the key reasons they were so good was because most of them were allowed, and indeed encouraged, to find the right job at the right time, relative to their natural innate strengths, and to their acquired working skills.

Parallel approaches by other organisations

But evidently the sort of approach taken by Lend Lease/Civil & Civic has worked well for others, too. For example, Peters 1993:162 quotes Withers of the Imagination company:

It may take six months for them to find the right role, but we'll hire a good person anyway.

In relation to his own organisation of the time – McKinsey – Peters 1993:133 says,

... it's taken me ten years to realize that these oddly organised knowledge merchants, managed so "poorly" by conventional standards (e.g., no job descriptions, no organisation charts,), have now - in the age of "value-added through knowledge" - become premier role models for almost everyone else.

In relation to projects, Peters 1993: 25 says:

Though the project's product/result is buttoned down, the formal structure of the project team is murky.

You can, however, loosely discern three "ranks": individual performer, ... sub-project team leader, ... and project manager. Formal project manager status usually comes along after "the individual performer starts to display project management skills".

Such flexible organisational approaches would appear to be increasingly appropriate in current and ongoing VUCA environments. Facilitating movement of people to organisational positions in which they can best utilise their hidden innate strengths is arguably even more important.

A RETROSPECTIVE ON ONE OF MY OWN “HIDDEN INNATE STRENGTHS”

There is a bit of a personal conundrum here in my writing about discovering hidden innate strengths, because, in some ways, I am far from certain that I know what my own innate strengths are, or have been, even in my late 90s. Some colleagues have occasionally pointed to what they have regarded as an inner strength I had – but I have been cautious about accepting their conclusions, as the latter often tend to say more about the observer than about the observed. However, in the following I will example a particular inner strength which was largely “hidden” to me until comparatively recently, but which I can now see I certainly had. I have described this as an innate “bigger picture” predisposition. However, it took some time for this to become relevant in my career context.

Early experiences that were valuable, but did not “turn me on”

In the multitude of different roles I have undertaken over a very long career, I have certainly occupied many which evidently did not match my hidden strengths – at least as far as I can tell. For example, in my first working decade in the construction industry, I had several different types of hands-on experience. One was designing structures and the like, which did not “grab” me. Neither did the supervision of construction contracts. Nor did working for traditional construction contractors under the construction-only tendering system.

With the wisdom of hindsight, I can now see that a major impediment was that each of these covered only part of the broader whole of the what-and-how of the construction business, and was one which did not suit my innate “bigger picture” predisposition – one that I was completely unaware of at the time.

More compatible experiences in Lend Lease/Civil & Civic and beyond

In contrast with these early experiences, when I joined Lend Lease/Civil & Civic, I soon gravitated to a variety of positions and programs/projects in which I was very comfortable. Again, with hindsight, most of these suited my innate “bigger picture” predisposition very well.

In an overall context, Civil & Civic was already well advanced in the design-and-construction of buildings and was soon to add Client Needs Determination and sometimes organisation strategic planning services to this increasingly holistic approach to building-related processes. My own roles included management of R&D, organisational strategic planning, program management of a Lend Lease-wide management education program, and a variety of other roles associated with expanding the organisation's capabilities, virtually all of which were evidently quite compatible with my own innate strengths.

In Stretton 2022I I discussed an informal role that more or less overtook me when, much to my puzzlement at the time, all sorts of people within Lend Lease would come to me, totally informally, to discuss very wide ranges of professional and person issues. The bare bones of these instances was that their issues would be presented to me in a reductionist mode, I would ask questions, and deliver my understanding of the issue, in an holistic mode, and that this usually helped those people see their problems in a more rounded or inclusive way.

In this context, I had this to say about my innate “bigger picture” predisposition.

For some reason whose origins I can only guess at, my natural instinctive approach to a problem is to first put it into its wider context, to see if this throws any light on that particular problem in a holistic sense.

It remains the case that I can only guess at the origins of my innate predisposition to look first at the “bigger picture” – to first try to place the situation I am dealing with into its broader context. But I now recognise that this has probably been a near life-long attribute of my makeup, and that I generally found career positions (and non-career activities) where this attribute helped me make reasonably substantial contributions.

How did I “find” appropriate career positions while not recognising this attribute?

It remains true that, until quite recent times, I simply did not recognise this attribute as being a specific innate personal strength. So, how did I manage to “find” these appropriate career positions in earlier times? Once again, I don't really know – but in trying to answer recent questions about this put to me by younger career aspirants, the best response I could find was that I followed an “informed gut feeling”.

This went well beyond any feeling of comfort in familiar positions. In fact, the range of positions and projects that I undertook with Lend Lease involved the acquisition of a wide range of completely new knowledge and skills.

This also applied beyond Lend Lease, from which I resigned at the end of 1987 to develop and deliver a new Master of Project Management degree course for the University of Technology, Sydney. This was a major change to make at the age of 61 – but I had quite a strong “informed gut feeling” about it, which proved to be a good one. My innate “bigger picture” predisposition helped substantially in developing quite a unique type of course, as discussed in more detail in Stretton 1994g, Healy et al 1994.

Finally, in concluding this section, I also record that, rather to my surprise, my “informed gut feeling” response appeared to make some sense to my relatively young, but still mature age, questioners. Hopefully this may also apply for some readers of this article.

SUMMARY/DISCUSSION

This commentary is related to part of my Second Edition article in this issue (originally Stretton 2009g). It has focused on what I have described as innate personal strengths, which the individual is typically unaware of (“hidden”). These are rarely discussed in the project management literature, in spite of being so obviously important in progressing the careers of individuals. It is usually very difficult to unearth such hidden innate strengths in selection interviews. It therefore makes sense for the recruiting organisation to try and help its new people find career positions which maximise their innate personal strengths, as well as their acquired skills.

I then described the highly informal organisational arrangements which Civil & Civic had to help people do this, and which worked rather well for us in practice. I also gave examples of some other organisations which made rather similar arrangements to help their new people find appropriate “innate strength” positions.

Finally, I gave a personal example of a “hidden” innate strength, and a retrospective on how I believe I “found” appropriate career positions even though I did not consciously recognise that I had this attribute, via a kind of “informed gut feeling” approach.

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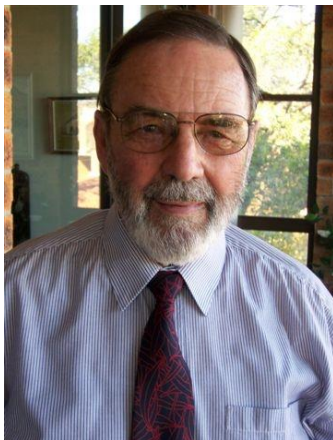
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