

HITTING
THE RIGHT
NOTES

“Talent is a special and precious gift given to people. It is up to the holder of the talent to put it to good use.”

FINE
TUNING
TALENT



Harnessing talent requires focus on the individual not the organisation. Bernhard Kerres tunes into the reality of managing exceptional talent.

Watch a great star on stage — whether it is Yo-Yo Ma, Lang Lang, Wynton Marsalis or Lady Gaga — and you see talent being expressed in its purest form. Imagine if you could harness such energy, virtuosity, power and beauty in your organisation. Imagine a world where talent works for individuals and organisations.

The word talent comes from Ancient Greek where it was used as a measurement for precious metal. There was also the Parable of the Talents in the Bible and that is where we derive our modern understanding of talent from. Talent is a special and precious gift given to people. It is up to the holder of the talent to put it to good use.

Talent and talent management have long been considered important in the world of management. The study and subsequent 1997 book by McKinsey & Co., *The War for Talent*, set the agenda. But mostly talent management has been looked at from an organisational perspective rather than from an individual's point of view.

Contrast this with how talent and talent management is perceived in the worlds of music and entertainment. There talent management addresses the individual, not the organisation. And there are good reasons for that approach.

Variations on talent

In music there are three different requirements for naming someone a real talent. First musicians need to have technical abilities. Second, they need an incredible musicality. And third, they need a presence on stage.

Technical ability is the easiest to assess. It is all about the skills of mastering an instrument. Technical ability proves itself when musicians play the most complex music absolutely correctly. Think of the *Variations* by Nicolo Paganini for violin or the music by Franz Liszt for the piano. Technical ability of musicians can be compared relatively easily between them. This is done in exams at music universities or in competitions. But technical ability is only the qualification to become a real

musical talent. It is a pre-condition for putting ones talent to use.

Significantly more difficult is the assessment of musicality. As long as we assess it according to established ways of interpretation, it is still relatively easy. There is a certain accepted way of playing the music of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart or Ludwig van Beethoven. But listen to the recordings of the Austrian pianist and composer Friedrich Gulda and you will hear that his interpretation often differs from the generally accepted one. We sometimes hear Gulda's love and interest for jazz in his interpretation of Mozart and Beethoven. He might be faster or slower, sometimes freer in changes of tempo and so on. It is musically amazing. Musicality brings music written on white paper with black lines to life. It suddenly begins to move listeners emotionally. That is the essence of musicality. Musicality is a differentiator between great musicians. And, it is subject to the individual taste of listeners.

Taking the stage

A musician with the greatest technical ability and an emotionally moving musicality still must communicate with his audience. He needs a presence on stage. Similar to musicality, stage presence is very different from musician to musician. But a musician needs the ability to communicate to an audience of several hundred and sometimes even thousands of people.

A good example of where you can see these three characteristics coming together in an amazing talent is the multi-percussionist Martin Grubinger. The Austrian-born musician is still in his twenties and is able to play several hundred different percussion instruments. He started developing his technical skills as a small child when he was just three years old. Grubinger still practises 12 to 14 hours a day and is one of the very few musicians who goes back to practice directly after a concert.

Grubinger's musicality is not only admired by his audiences but well recognised by some of the most famous composers of our time — including Tan Dun, Friedrich Cerha and Avner Dorman who have written concertos for him.

Martin Grubinger's concerts are firstly unusual because they bring percussion to the front of the orchestra,



rather than being consigned to the back. But his concerts are especially unusual because he often speaks to his audiences. He very quickly builds up a close relationship with them culminating often in standing ovations for him and his fellow musicians. His incredible positive stage presence and ability to communicate with audiences is now utilised by Bavarian Television which has given him his own music show KlickKlack.

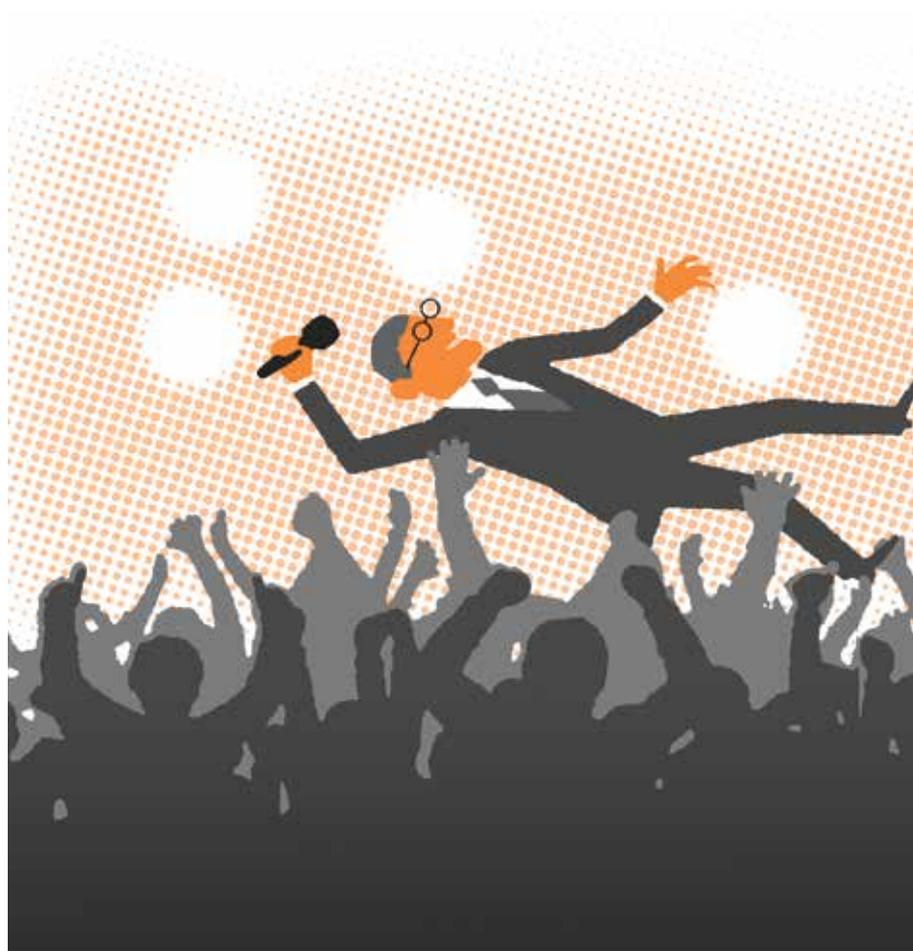
Back to business

What has this to do with managing talent in a business context? I believe that there are compelling similarities. Talented managers and business leaders need to have developed the necessary technical skills as a prerequisite. In management these can be financial skills, expertise with numbers, understanding of organisations and individuals, and many other skills. But, to be considered as a talent, these technical skills in the individual's field of expertise need to be perfected in various environments and proven to hold up.

Musicality in management translates to the application of technical skills to a bigger context. This means that, apart from utilising technical skills, managers need to understand a bigger picture and the context in which they apply their technical skills. Writing a business plan is a reasonably straightforward technical task. But ensuring that the business plan holds up in an industry of fast change, surrounded by political risk and other environmental factors, and putting these considerations back into the business plan, requires more than just technical skills.

It requires even more skills to then simplify the business plan to make it generally understandable without missing the important practical and contextual issues.

Management talent is just as much about communication as is making music. Management talent includes leadership potential. And leadership without communication, without the ability to inspire others, is not possible. Managers are on their respective stages almost daily. Not Covent Garden or La Scala perhaps, but they are in sales meetings, brainstorming task forces, shareholder presentations or many other events. They are on stage and



we need to ensure that the requisite skills are identified and developed in the management talent pool.

What it takes

Looking at outstandingly talented musicians, the really top talent performing as soloists or conductors, we can identify certain personal traits in their ambition and behaviour.

The greatest soloists start to practice several hours a day at a very young age. They have practiced all their lives. They spend very little time with any vocations other than music. They have the best teachers. They listen to endless concerts and recordings. Music is their life. Their ambition is to make great music and value the quality of music making above most other things in their life. They will thrive

in any environment enabling them to perform at the highest level.

This means that in their personal value system, making great music is above the loyalty to any organisation or group. Their loyalty only comes when they realise that the organisation supports their music making. Great musicians are therefore very often highly-motivated individuals. It should not come as a surprise that the Berlin Philharmonic used the slogan “128 Stars — 1 Orchestra” in a recent campaign. This slogan refers to the highly individualistic musicians committed to the highest quality of music making, even if they are part of an orchestra. It also makes clear that such an excellent organisation is made up of 128 highly talented individuals.

Parallels can be made with the changing world of business. Over the last two decades, for example,



unionised. Conductors and soloists need to find a way to work in that constraining framework. In Japan, for example, the rehearsal schedule for a soloist might read, ‘13:11 to 13:43 rehearsal of the concerto with soloist’. There is a big clock in the rehearsal room. The orchestra will not start rehearsing the concerto before 13:11. And the orchestra will stop when the clock shows 13:43. It does not matter if the conductor or soloists need more or less time to achieve their artistic vision. The conductor needs to be finished in 32 minutes.

Other orchestras might not be as strict. But conductors only have three to five rehearsals for a concert. And each rehearsal will normally be around three hours with a 20 minute break. Perhaps surprisingly, with the need for artistic freedom and their ambition of making the best music possible, many top musicians work under such strict time restraints. They have learned to work within it.

But a successful example of a different approach is shown by the Austrian chamber orchestra Camerata

“Leadership without communication, without the ability to inspire others is not possible.”

more and more MBA graduates have preferred to start their own companies instead of joining blue chip organisations. Individualism rules. Top managers look for areas where they can apply their talent to the greatest effect and personal satisfaction. They are as much driven by great business ideas and thinking as are musicians by music.

The increasing realisation is that talent management is not only about recruiting, developing and retaining clients, as mapped out by McKinsey. Organisations need to change if they want to work with top talent. The question is no longer about fighting to recruit top talent for a company and retaining it within an organisation but rather designing how to work together with top talent be it inside or outside an organisation.

Talent first

Consider the Lucerne Festival Orchestra, founded by conductor Claudio Abbado in 2003. It only performs during the summer. The simple reason is that it is made up of some of the very best players from many famous orchestras. They come together in Lucerne to make music on an even higher level, with even more inspiration. The Lucerne Festival Orchestra is not a traditional organisation, but an organisation attracting the best musical talent and working around the individual talent instead of trying to recruit talent into an existing organisation. It is first the talent, then the organisation. The results are amazing.

Interestingly, orchestras often have a highly regulated way of working. Many orchestras are still strongly

Salzburg in their collaboration with Martin Grubinger. The Camerata Salzburg was founded in 1952 and strongly inspired by the legendary violinist and conductor Sándor Végh. Today the Camerata Salzburg battles for its position in a highly competitive market with many orchestras closing down because of funding problems.

In 2011 they invited Martin Grubinger to become Artist in Residence. Together they were planning three to four big projects per season. But the condition for that commitment from Martin Grubinger was that they would have as much rehearsal time as necessary to achieve the aspired musical quality. The Camerata Salzburg accepted. So far each project has toured in Europe and been a huge success — not only for Martin Grubinger but also for the Camerata Salzburg.





“We need to connect top talent to an organisation but not necessarily imbed them in an organisation. Only then will talent truly thrive.”

The Austrian chamber orchestra was able to differentiate itself from its competition by creating a new and unique structure to work with one of the world's top talents.

So, think of your organisation. Can you persuade and enable it to give up traditional patterns of working? Could people believe in a vision? Preparing for a much better performance is much more attractive to management talent than a strictly regulated environment. It is not a War for Talent, but about creating open and adaptable organisations which are attractive to talent.

Two stages

I see two important stages in talent management — a teaching stage and a mentoring stage.

During the teaching stage, talent needs to be identified, observed, developed, and protected. In music, the three characteristics of musical talent allow you to identify it. It is important that this initial identification is revisited from time to time. Some young talent might develop much faster. Others might develop in a different direction than expected. Talent requires a lot of observation to see where it develops, where it needs support and where it needs more freedom.

Developing young talent is just as important during the teaching stage. Young talent needs to be challenged but also given opportunities to prove themselves and to build up confidence. In addition, young talent needs to learn a lot of technical skills, as well as background knowledge, for developing their personal musicality.

Most of all, young talent needs to be protected. They must be protected from people putting them on stage too early, including sometimes their own family or closest circles. They must be protected from themselves being either over-ambitious or full of self-doubt. And protected from an environment

setting the wrong priorities or taking up too much of their time for things which are not critical to their success.

I call the second stage the mentoring stage. It reflects the fact that at a certain point relationships around talent change. Teachers are not teachers any more when musicians have learned all their technical skills and the background knowledge required for their musicality. At a certain point, which is hard to clearly define, talented musicians need to be let free. They need to find their own interpretations, their own way of making music, and the musical alliances right for them.

At this point, they do not need teachers any more but mentors, trusted and experienced people who can accompany them in their journey while resisting the temptation to tell them where to go or what to do. These mentors need to ensure the freedom of the talented mentees they are looking after. They need to ensure that a talent can develop regardless of the organisation they are associated with.

“Every Great Group is an island — but an island with a bridge to the mainland,” writes Warren Bennis in his book *Organizing Genius*. This is exactly what top talent needs — the freedom to create with a bridge to the main organisation. But talent only needs a bridge to an organisation and should often not be part of that organisation.

As a result, when thinking of managing talent we have to develop new models of working with them rather than new ways of integrating them into existing organisations. The best musicians will be fascinated by working with a conductor and an orchestra where they can realise their musical ambitions. They will never become part of the orchestra but will be happy to return if they see that everyone exceeds their potential in working towards the highest musical aspiration even if this never can be reached. We will find the best scientist interested in and committed to working on a specific project regardless of the organisation behind the project.

Similarly we need to create organisations which are attractive for top management to work with and not necessarily being part of. We need to connect top talent to an organisation but not necessarily imbed them in an organisation. Only then will talent truly thrive. ■

THE AUTHOR

BERNHARD KERRES
WWW.BERNHARDKERRES.COM

Kerres has performed as an opera singer together with José Carreras and others. He has also worked in various C-suite positions for high technology companies and ran the Wiener Konzerthaus in Vienna, one of the most active concert houses in the world. He has an MBA from London Business School. He now teaches and lectures on performance leadership.

