

## Hog Hollow: Excellence – Innate or developed?

During the course of our work, whether in coaching sessions or workshops, we're often asked, "Can you really learn how to become a leader, aren't leaders born?" or "Aren't some people naturally great at presenting/being creative/selling/influencing etc and others aren't?" We meet many people who are good at what they do but who firmly believe that others who are exceptionally good are prodigies, having been endowed with gifts at birth. Recognising that people with exceptional talents exist is one thing but it can be difficult to understand the path in such individuals' development that took them from being good to being extraordinary. The standard of extraordinary talent seems too high to achieve and the path to develop exceptional skills is not clear.

This 'innate or developed?' conundrum was the focus of research undertaken by Anders Ericsson and Neil Charness who sought to discover whether some people are just born with 'innate talent'. Their findings were that, regardless of whether individuals were considered to be prodigies in music, maths, chess or sport, all had a very consistent pattern. All showed interest in their talent and all had practiced for between two and four hours a day for 10 years. Moreover the 10 year mark was a consistent finding regardless of musical, mathematical or sporting talent. Ericsson and Charness concluded their research by stating,

*"The traditional view of talent, which concludes that successful individuals have special innate abilities and basic capacities, is not consistent with the reviewed evidence."*

They went on to say that more plausible explanations of individual differences are "factors that predispose individuals toward engaging in deliberate practice and enable them to sustain high levels of practice for many years".

The above argument has received widespread support. A separate study analysing the extraordinary talent of Tiger Woods concluded that Tiger is great because, with the help of a dedicated coach, he has practiced about 10,000 hours more than most golfers, beginning at a very early age! Similar Boris Becker argues that, to be excellent at anything requires three key ingredients – you've got to want it enough, have discipline to nurture and develop your talent and be open to feedback to others. (See the [previous Boris Becker tip](#)). In short to get really good at anything requires practice.

"All very interesting", you may be saying, "But how does this relate to me and my everyday job? Well, we think there are some practical everyday lessons which are applicable to all of us and are illustrated in the following short story.

Two years ago we visited South Africa, flying to Cape Town and travelling along the Garden Route to Port Elisabeth. We selected our accommodation very carefully, choosing to stay in unusual lodges and small hotels. One of our choices sounded particularly interesting - Hog Hollow Country Lodge just outside Plettenburg Bay. The write up on the website described the Lodge as the realisation of a dream for two South Africans who wanted to do something within tourism in a meaningful and hands-on manner. The Lodge had been built on a regenerated wattle plantation in the semi wilds and completely staffed by locals. In the words of the owners,

*"One of our strongest desires was to employ and train local people from the surrounding communities to work at Hog Hollow. People who had spent most of their lives either unemployed or in menial jobs. We saw that right here, within our community was a new and vital energy with lots of exceptional talent waiting to be unleashed."*

All of the many write ups on the web spoke of the exceptional customer service at Hog Hollow and the amazing communal dining experience. Our expectations were therefore very high when we arrived.

We arrived late afternoon and were immediately welcomed by a number of staff. One unloaded our car and took it to be washed and valeted, another checked us in, another brought us afternoon tea. All of the staff gave us a warm welcome, introduced themselves and asked where we'd come from. We were invited to join the staff for pre-dinner drinks at 7.30, followed by 'communal dining' at 8.00 pm.

Not quite sure what to expect we turned up at 7.30 and mingled with our fellow guests over pre-dinner drinks before being called to the outdoor dining area at 8.00 pm. We were greeted by an enormous dining table in the centre of the floor and several smaller tables for families. As we chose our seats one of the members of staff welcomed us all to Hog Hollow and explained that it was the custom to introduce all the guests that evening to each other and that we would start at the head of the table. Feeling that I was now on familiar territory (after all this is what I do at the start of every workshop!), coupled with the fact that I was seated at the head of the table, I was all set to make my introduction. I was therefore momentarily taken aback when I heard the same voice continue, "Seated at the top of the table we have Gill from Northampton, England, and next to her is Colin". Moving round the table he proceeded to introduce everyone. There was a wide range of different nationalities but he remembered everyone's name and where they came from. It was incredibly impressive and received a spontaneous round of applause. For several minutes it was the talk of the table. "How impressive, what an amazing memory for names" people said. "I couldn't do that!"

Over coffee I sought out the member of staff and congratulated him on his performance. He told me proudly that he did the same thing every night. "And how do you do that?" I asked. "How do you memorise the names?"

"Well," he told me, "first of all I always try to be in reception late afternoon when new guests are arriving. I introduce myself, find out their names and listen very carefully to who they are and where they are from. When we meet for pre-dinner drinks I make sure that I haven't missed anyone. I do a short mental rehearsal. If I'm unsure of any names at this point I ask a colleague to go over, introduce themselves and report back to me. Just before dinner I do a final rehearsal with a couple of colleagues. Only when I'm sure I've got it right do I call everyone to the table". All of this for a performance which lasted less than one minute and which he would have to do all over again on the following evening! And yet it was so impressive and I still remember the experience vividly two years later. Remember the staff prior to going to Hog Hollow were largely either unemployed or in menial jobs.

For me, it's yet another example of how, being excellent at something requires practice and dedication. Yes, the member of staff may have had a good memory for names which he'd honed with practice. But what I heard was a lot of hard work, dedication and attention to detail. There really is no short cut to excellence. However, the effects of excellence are so far ranging and long lasting.

So often our focus of attention is what we're not so good at. What do we need to improve on or develop? Instead why not challenge yourself to think about what you're good at? What could you become excellent at with some dedicated effort?

Food for thought?

For more on Hog Hollow see [their website](#).

For more hints and tips go to [www.iridiumconsulting.co.uk/links.html](http://www.iridiumconsulting.co.uk/links.html)