

Change+Management

Exploring How Change Affects People

Off the Shelf: The Talent Code

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When I think about Talent, I think about the NY Urban Debate League, a local non-profit that helps teachers in under-served high schools create debate teams, teach their students to debate, sponsors debate tournaments, and sponsors attendance at mainstream debate tournaments. During the time that I volunteered with them, I saw kids, for whom school had been a dead end, learn to debate and take pride in their achievements, and kids who never had a thought of attending college earn debate scholarships at Northwestern, Emory, and other top-notch schools.

It's become a thing now to blame the "everyone gets a prize" mentality for creating the aspects of the Millennial culture that rubs Gen X the wrong way. And I have to say that I initially looked a little askance at the awards ceremonies where two-thirds of the kids earned prizes. But then I saw one young man, dancing down the aisle of the auditorium, with his medal, shouting "I got a medal! I got a medal!" and how it encouraged him to work even harder.

As I greeted the kids before the sun came up, I wondered what on earth could inspire these kids to get up so early on a Saturday, subway several hours to school with huge plastic tubs of evidence, and spend the whole day formally arguing about climate change or school uniforms. But they did. Get me right: they were kids, they did dumb kid stuff – but they also really got into debate. And this wasn't a few nerds – it was sometimes over 400 really cool kids. They started by debating each other and ended by beating some of the best high school debate teams out there, debate teams from privileged schools. What made them do this?

I recently read *The Talent Code* (<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/talent-code-daniel-coyle/1102658691?ean=9780553806847>), a fascinating look inside what makes people successful which shed some light on these kids. Boiled down, it comes to three points:

- The amount of intense practice that people invest in
The kids of the NYUDL gave up three days of their summer vacation for an immersive camp on debate and to learn about the year's topic. They researched additional material and tried it out in tournaments and adjusted it when it didn't work. They met after school and ran lines with each other in the halls and on the trains. They sat in on debate rounds to practice "flowing" (a debate method of taking notes about an argument); they ran speed rounds on the trains. These kids practiced, practiced, practiced – and they practiced smartly, taking their work apart and putting it back together again.
- The motivation to continue that practice
Like I said above, the awards the kids won inspired them to continue debating – even if they won last place, this was sometimes the first academic award they had ever won, and it meant something. They saw their peers winning awards and saw it was possible for them to win those awards. They saw their peers beating debate teams from two of the best high schools in New York City and eventually nationally, and saw they could do that, too. They saw their peers – kids like them whose parents didn't go to college, whose siblings didn't go to college – win scholarships to some of the best schools in the country, and knew they could do that, too. And it inspired them to practice.
- The master coaching, they receive
I won't say that these kids received expert coaching from top debate coaches. Their coaches were high school teachers, many of whom hadn't debated in high school and were only one step ahead of the kids. But they brought enthusiasm and a commitment to learn equal to the kids themselves. And, though many of them were young, they knew these kids and they knew how to bring out the best in them, adjusting their approach to the individual kids, knowing who needed to pushing, who needed encouragement, who needed to be confronted. The tournament judges – all volunteers, some students or debate coaches from nearby schools like West Point, members of corporate volunteer programs, debate junkies who somehow found out this was going on, and alumni of the program – took care after each round to give advice and write extensive notes to help the kids improve their work, sometimes complaining that they wanted more time to advise the kids.

Looking back, I can see why the program was so successful: without realizing it, they were applying *The Talent Code* (<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/talent-code-daniel-coyle/1102658691?ean=9780553806847>).

How have you seen the principles of *The Talent Code* (<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/talent-code-daniel-coyle/1102658691?ean=9780553806847>) in action?

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