

Talent and effort: The keys to personal growth

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"How can I be useful, of what service can I be?" wondered Vincent van Gogh. Like the artist, many individuals are unaware of their talents.

"Sometimes we stop short of the peak because not even we ourselves believe in our vast potential," writes [IESE Prof. Santiago Álvarez de Mon](#), an expert in Leadership and People Management, in the introduction to his new book, [Con ganas, ganas. Del esfuerzo a la plenitud](#). Throughout, the author encourages readers to free themselves from the cobwebs and shackles that bind them, and to embark on "a journey into the unknown, genuine and admirable aspects of our identity."

Álvarez de Mon makes a recommendation, citing Miguel de Unamuno: "Do not consider yourself more nor less, nor even equal to others, for people are not quantities. Each one is unique and irreplaceable; to do it conscientiously, give your best effort." The book is designed to help readers discover their strengths by making a voyage of personal discovery from the inside out, from the "I" to the "we," from the distinctiveness of each person to their communal dimension.

To steer the process, the author draws upon the testimonials of revered professionals from various fields: orchestra conductors such as Jesús López Cobos and Inma Shara; scientists and doctors such as Valentín Fuster; artists such as Slovenian painter Marko Rupnik; and athletes such as [Rafa Nadal](#). Nevertheless, the author argues that all human beings - plain and ordinary people, whether male or female - are capable of extraordinary feats if they put their minds to it. The key is getting the aptitudes of each person to blossom.

Winning the inner battle

Given the lack of passion, commitment, vigor, perseverance and effort that characterizes modern society, Álvarez de Mon suggests a plausible alternative rooted in the individual dimension of each person. He begins by stressing the importance of one's personal attitude as a deciding factor for dealing with life's events, opportunities, drawbacks and challenges. In the face of any event or circumstance, a person can either react mechanically or impulsively, or [let themselves be guided](#) by their observations, reflections and control over the situation.

Intensity and vigor, desire and drive, struggle and passion: all of these underlie a serene, tranquil, concentrated, patient intelligence, one at peace with the time that has been afforded. This is the leitmotif running throughout the book. The author elaborates on each of these aspects with "the hope that the right combination will arouse a yearning for plenitude and personal fulfillment within every human being."

Rafa Nadal exemplifies an attitude of devotion and enthusiasm. Toni Nadal, his uncle and coach, explains that the tennis star is mentally very strong, "a mentality that has become gradually solidified with each workout, ever since he was a little kid. In the game of tennis, you know that sooner or later you'll be faced with difficult situations that require strength and determination. I don't allow him to make excuses, whether it's the wind, or the court, or the tennis balls, because the opponent is in the same situation."

It is also important to discover each person's talents, the quality or qualities that all human beings across the board have been blessed with. Once that discovery has been made, which is certainly no easy task, "you have to follow the power of your ingenuity wherever it leads you," in the words of Séneca.

Talent and ingenuity must go along with curiosity, self-confidence, a willingness to listen to other people's suggestions, self-esteem, and a passion for what you're doing. Pleasure is crucial; talent alone does not suffice. Here, Álvarez de Mon emphasizes the ability of the great ones to be "in the zone" when performing their jobs, whether that be on a tennis court or in a classroom: that special moment when effort gives way to intuition and everything just flows.

Work, work, work

In order to be "in the zone," one must work to get there. Reaching the desired greatness demands a substantial investment of time and energy. The luminaries of the world - from

Michael Jordan to Mozart, from Pavarotti to Federer and Gasol - know better than anyone that the more they practice, the greater their talent.

"The more I practice, the luckier I get," golfing legend Gary Player once mused. Inma Shara, who at age 34 has already led some of the world's premier orchestras, including the Israel Philharmonic and London's Royal Philharmonic, asserts that "nothing in life comes without effort. Absolutely, positively nothing. As a person, I consider myself as steady more than talented. Perseverance is, has been and will always be a cornerstone in my life. Of course there must be a certain natural inclination, but I can't conduct Beethoven's Ninth Symphony unless I've spent two months contemplating it." She adds that, "I'm utterly convinced that genius does not come without effort. Everything requires sacrifice, and sometimes it takes a long time to see results."

One of the greatest inventors of all time, Thomas Alva Edison, holder of well over 1,000 patents, famously quipped that, "Genius is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration." Coincidentally, inspiration always came while he was working.

Meanwhile, it is vital to have a mentor, since, without one to guide them, many competent, upright professionals would have gone hopelessly astray. The cardiologist Valentín Fuster explains that he started out studying medicine "with a great tutor, Farreras Valentí. A competent, meticulous professional and a great person. Under his tutelage and encouragement, I dove into my studies."

On success and happiness

Trial and error: there is no other way to grow, no alternate path. Sure, but does it guarantee that the desired success will come? Definitely not. The only thing certain here is uncertainty, says the author.

"Success is illusory. It doesn't exist. Success lies within. It is about making others happy. Being successful means having the ability to excite," according to Inma Shara.

Orchestra conductor Jesús López Cobos uses a similar definition: "Personally, as orchestra conductors, the only criticism that matters to us is the orchestra's, and we see that right away."

None of them leaves success in the anonymous, whimsical and erratic hands of public opinion. Beyond that lies fame, which, by definition, is short-lived and unsteerable.

In sum, the book proposes a rigorous and enthusiastic education, asserts the universalism of human talent and genius, calls for a return to the culture of effort and discipline, and endeavors to probe into the original source of energy and passion.

Success, if we pursue it, is within everyone's reach, "if we are honest, determined, humble and diligent. It depends solely on our desire, and letting that desire be guided by the internal compass of an intelligence that is honorable and predisposed to learning," says the author.

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