

Social Responsibility for Talent in Europe:

Considerations in planning for a European Model of Talent Support

Introductory address to "Social and European Responsibility" of the Hungarian EU Presidential Conference on Talent Support, Budapest, Hungary, 7-10 April 2011

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Session IV Focus (14.30 – 16.00): To what extent and in what form do business and private sector of individual European countries take social responsibility in the field of talent support, and how do these best practices affect the decision making process of individual European countries, the creation of a talent-friendly Europe?

To initiate an endeavour like "Talent Support" as the very tangible result of the EU-funded Hungarian Genius Programme making it into a Pan-European concern is indeed a commendable and much needed effort. Especially when considering that not all of Europe embraces traditions for encouraging and supporting talent with equal interest. Due to a combination of policy, culture and national history, to champion an idea in Europe that some individuals are more capable than others is not infrequently seen with suspicion.

Even though a handful of European nations are willing to lead the way and take responsibility for establishing viable talent support all over Europe, there are several issues that most likely need considering lest admirable fervour risks going before the proverbial fall and failure.

This session has been devoted to social responsibility in regard to talent support and how such support relates to the private sector as well as to the decision-making processes of individual countries in Europe. In addressing these important issues there are aspects of giftedness and talent that need to be brought to the fore in order to define what is meant by responsibility and how this is to be achieved. I speak of the varying ability climates of European nations; the social group dynamics of someone being better at something than all the others of that group, and finally also the often overlooked risk of cultural cloning; that is, doing exactly what everyone else is doing.

Differing European Ability Climates

First, the notion of talent or giftedness is not one accepted or valued in the same way in every European country. In fact, there is likely to exist a discrepancy between what policy-makers wish to achieve and what is in fact currently possible to achieve in regard to the perceived importance of Science (European Commission, Directorate-General for

Research, 2004; OECD, 1996). Allow me to demonstrate by showing a map of Europe suggesting which clusters of abilities are currently valued where in 29 European countries:



The Ability Climates of Europe

Black = A Uniform Ability Climate,

Grey = A Divergent Ability Climate

Striped = A Diverse Ability Climate

Arts and Entertainment abilities are dominant in all European nations and constitute the **only** dominant ability cluster in countries characterised by a uniform ability climate (Black)

Intellectual Pursuits and Science abilities appear dominant **only** in: Slovenia, Latvia, Switzerland, Czech Republic, Austria, Poland, Netherlands, Romania, Germany

There are four so-called ability climates which appear to *dominate* European cultures in terms of how each respective population values certain abilities: 1) Arts and Entertainment; 2) Intellectual pursuits and Science; 3) Societal and Socio-Affective Pursuits and 4) Sports and Physical Pursuits (Persson, in press a). Note that all European cultures embrace Arts and Entertainment abilities but only nine countries appear to value Intellectual Pursuits and Science. The implication of this is that, on a population level, European nations may well have a considerable interest in some abilities but much less so in others. It is significant that the European Union collectively has expressed the importance of Science in order to secure future welfare (European Commission, Directorate-General for Research, 2004; OECD, 1996). Science, however, is an intellectual pursuit but new research suggests that such pursuits are little valued by populations in 20 European countries!

Group dynamics and intellectual talent

Second, bestowed with many and much-desired abilities to solve societal and private sector problems we wish that the gifted and talented amongst us should be made part of

decision-making processes affecting all European nations, thereby increasingly making possible a bright and affluent future. We tend to forget, however, that we inevitably are subject more to long-term socio-biological forces as prompted by evolution than we are to relatively short-term ideological fervour. Intellectually talented individuals are almost as a rule seen as a threat to individuals of lesser ability and are therefore often considered “inconvenient” (Nauta & Corten, 2002; Persson, 2009a). To quote a recent study of this phenomenon in the world of business: “Group members simply do not like leaders whose intellect far exceeds their own” (Judge, Colbert & Illies, 2004; p. 549). According to other research, the intellectually gifted individual seems to fare quite badly in organisations and environments governed by rigid bureaucratic control, but thrives and is exceedingly productive, on the other hand, when given relative freedom and influence as part of his or her own professional position (Persson, 2009b). In the light of this, consider the fact that national policies in Europe tend to establish an “audit culture” imposing rigid control by evaluation and set standards thereby seeking improved quality and efficiency (Power, 1997). Such rigid control, often contrary to political expectation, tends to stifle creativity and innovation in science (Hamm, 2005; Schlesinger, 2001) and is more or less anathema to the intellectually talented individual.

In a setting of corporate work, David Willings—a personnel management expert and scholar—offers a few typical statements as told by senior managers of intellectually gifted individuals being part of their workforce: “Why do we hire these intellectuals? They're no damned use. They don't fit in. They cause trouble”, and further “we had a very gifted young chap. He came up with two ideas, which we have unashamedly stolen. But he never learned to follow normal procedure ... He left us after seven months and I think it for the best” (as quoted in Kelly-Streznewski, 1999; p. 132).

Transferring systems across cultures

Given that ability climates are indeed a culture-bound social reality it follows that it would be unwise to develop *one* talent support system for all of Europe, since the various European countries have different needs, values and also different understandings of the matter at hand. It has been argued by some scholars that we all have an inherent drive to produce a degree of sameness in comparison to that which is socially dominant, even to the extent that one could speak of cultural *cloning* (Essed & Goldberg, 2002; Persson, in press b). Any successful fashion design or a revolutionising invention is certain to be copied sooner or later in a number of ways since others wish to share in the success. Importantly, *Science* and education are equally prone to cultural cloning. A successful academic culture is likely to be copied elsewhere (see Stücker, 2001). Scholars of academic research policies, however, warn against uncritically adopting “success concepts” in the wake of globalization (Deem, Mok & Lukas, 2008). Hence, while the Hungarian Genius Programme initiative to create a system for Pan-European talent support is indeed welcome and commendable, it is likely to be imperative that the endeavour serves as an inspiration to the rest of Europe but that the conceptual Hungarian model is also not copied uncritically in other countries.

Conclusion

So, how do we need to understand social responsibility pertaining both to the decision-making processes as well as to the private sector?

First, the unique needs of gifted and talented individuals must be officially recognised by each European country and its political leadership. This is not yet the case.

Second, organisations and institutions need training in how to understand and manage talented individuals by characteristics and behaviour through social acceptance rather than merely by audited achievement and performance according to pre-determined standards. The gifted first need permission to be gifted (Freeman, 2005), and that of which they are capable is then likely to follow.

Third, to be socially responsible also means to take individual cultures and their uniqueness into account when establishing a supportive structure and not impose a copied structure based on pre-determined cultural values. Talent Support needs to be part of every European nation's welfare effort, but the basis for it as well as its organisation must reflect the uniqueness of each culture.

On this note, I am much looking forward to learning what EU Hungarian Presidential Conference on Talent Support has to offer for the future of Europe and its gifted and talented individuals.

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