

How does one become a high-flyer? For several years, Ulrike Stedtnitz has been occupied with the issue of giftedness and superior ability. She knows which paths lead down blind alleys, and which bring a person's full potential to light.

By Johann Thalheimer

Theme: High-flyers and giftedness

Skills count, not IQ

Isn't it odd? Here we are, the inhabitants of the 21st century, with access to a vast range of scientific knowledge – more than any generation in history – and yet in so many areas, we still allow ourselves to be influenced by prejudices and make-believe certainties. Among the remarkable fallacies still haunting the minds of many people today is the notion that someone with an IQ of 130 or more is a highly gifted human being.

Such a statement is at once problematical on two levels. First, it treats giftedness solely as a function of intelligence. And second, it is a very static approach: Any measurement of intelligence can only ever be a snapshot, which will still bear the stamp of significant methodological randomness. Current research is cognizant of the dubious nature of the label "gifted" and therefore prefers to use language that focuses more on developing a person's potential. And when referring to particularly capable people, "high performers" is the preferred formulation.

Close to the subject for 30 years

Ulrike Stedtnitz also emphasises nuanced terminology and avoids assigning labels to people prematurely. Together with a team of eight specialists, she heads up a consulting company in Zurich for developing potential. She discovered this area more than 30 years ago, when she was a young primary school teacher. She had recently earned her degree, but even with a diploma in her pocket, there were no jobs to be found – a glut of teachers reigned in Switzerland at that time. So the young teacher decided to deepen her education by studying behavioural sciences and pedagogical psychology in the United States.

In the USA, Dr. Stedtnitz' eyes were opened to the issue of developing people's potential: "I read an article about American adolescents, who, thanks to their abilities, were already allowed into college at the age of 10 instead of 16 or 17," she recalls. That was her first contact with the subject, and it immediately enthralled her. She also realised how different the reactions to these situations can be. "In

the USA," notes the psychologist, "people equally admire top performance and top performers, whilst in Germany and Switzerland, we only really appreciate the top performance, but not the top performer."

Adult high performers are usually able to cope with this, but children often cannot. This is one of the reasons why Dr. Stedtnitz avoids the label "gifted child" wherever possible. "Except perhaps in sports, high-performing children have a problem in many countries – they are envied and excluded." Interestingly enough, studies show that children who have been labeled as "gifted" perform less well than gifted children who are able to grow up without this burdensome label. The reason: the "gifted" are often passive because they imagine themselves as already having reached the goal, while the others remain curious, creative and motivated.

What it all comes down to

"Talent, giftedness and intelligence are not static," insists Dr. Stedtnitz from long experience as a professional coach and consultant. Neuroscience, as well as research on cognition, expertise and intelligence, shows that talent or intelligence is not in itself sufficient for success in life.

Dr. Ulrike Stedtnitz originally hails from northern Germany, but spent part of her youth in Switzerland. After training as a primary school teacher, she went to the USA and studied behavioural science in Los Angeles and pedagogical psychology in Connecticut, where she earned her PhD. Back in Switzerland, she founded the first counseling centre for the gifted. Today, as the Managing Director of "stedtnitz.design your life," she advises adults, adolescents and children together with a team of eight specialists, conducts comprehensive analyses of her clients' potential, and develops for them individual Life Design Concepts. In her book "Mythos Begabung" (Verlag Hans Huber, Berne), she describes the path from potential to success.

www.stedtnitz.ch



^ Experienced in the promotion of gifted individuals: Ulrike Stedtnitz and her team have analysed the potential of more than 8,000 individuals.

Thus, for example, Henry Mintzberg of McGill University in Montreal looked at the 19 top graduates from Harvard Business School in a particular year and found that only five had succeeded in their professional life. Four of them had mediocre careers, and ten were complete failures.

Ulrike Stedtnitz is not really surprised by these findings and those of similar studies. "Intelligence and talent are often overvalued," she says, "while skills are undervalued." In this sense, talent and intelligence are good starting points, but not much more. Much more crucial is the acquisition of skills. Skills are capabilities. And skills do not simply fall from heaven onto a few lucky people, fully developed in

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the form of giftedness or talent. People have to acquire skills through learning and practice, through experience and mistakes. Along this long path, the encouragement of parents, teachers or bosses is important. During her years of study in America, Dr. Stedtnitz experienced this encouragement as a profound empowerment. "Try to do

more," "Go to your limits," she heard constantly from her professors, taking this as genuine interest on the part of teachers in their students – a level of interest she had never previously experienced in Europe.

Recent research has rebutted and seen off the stage the old static concepts of giftedness, which were based all too much on intelligence and talent. Ulrike Stedtnitz' thinking is completely in line with current research when she says that an Intelligence Quotient of 115 is entirely sufficient for top performance, be it in school or on the job. These findings have been very liberating for both children and parents, because suddenly, many more people see that they have the potential to become high performers. From the standpoint of educational policy, however, the findings are explosive, because they indicate that universities, polytechnics and colleges should be accessible to a larger group.

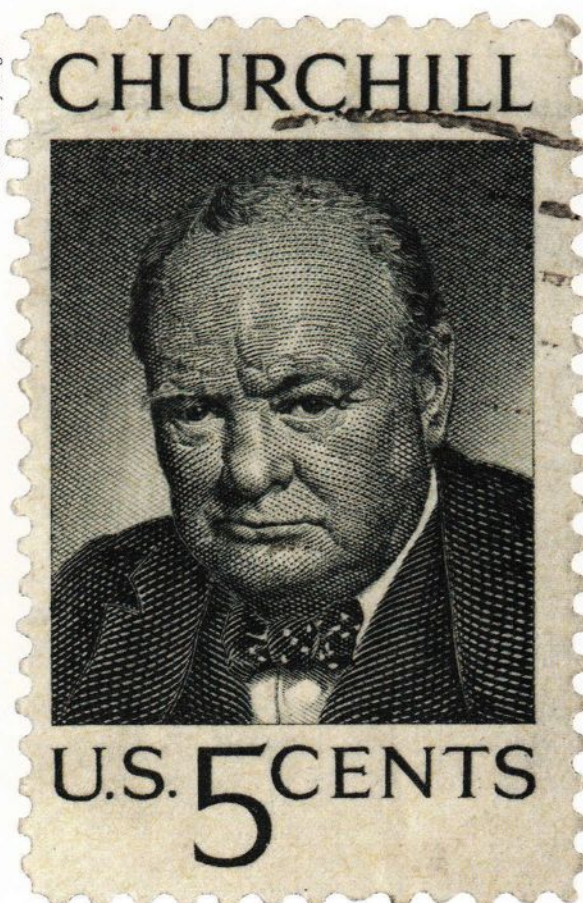
In her work, Dr. Stedtnitz time and again encounters people with a high skill level, who are not managing to achieve a corresponding level of performance. In such cases, it is necessary to find out what it is that is inhibiting their performance. In one case, it may be due to a learning or attention disorder, whilst in another, it may be an emotional imbalance or deficiencies in social skills that are holding the person back.

Photo: Interfoto



^ Albert Einstein
Stood out as a low-achieving pupil; later became a world-renowned physicist, the founder of the theory of relativity and winner of the Nobel Prize.

Photo: Getty Images



^ Winston Churchill
Hated school; later successfully led Britain through the Second World War with his determination and uncompromising will to win.

Find out what fascinates you

When it comes to consultations and analyzing a person's potential, Dr. Stednitz and her team follow a principal objective: Afterward, their clients – whether young or old – should know themselves better and be able to evaluate themselves better. Or in the words of Ulrike Stednitz: "Figure out what matters to you, what fascinates you and where your strengths and interests lie. And then make the best of them and don't let yourself be discouraged by setbacks." ■

The interests model

American scientist John L. Holland has developed an interests model, which is convincing as a system and is used, among other applications, in giving career advice. With the help of six basic orientations, it allows interests, jobs and activities to be classified. Holland categorises interests as practical/technical, intellectual/research-based, artistic/linguistic, social, entrepreneurial, and conventional. Among these six interests, everyone usually has one to three preferences. These interests remain constant during one's entire life, but depending on the stage of one's life, they channel themselves into different skills.

The high-performance model

Based on biographical and empirical data from numerous performers, Prof. Joe Renzulli at the University of Connecticut developed a definition of high performance. According to him, high performance is creative productivity resulting from the interaction of above-average abilities, creativity and commitment. Above-average abilities may be general or subject-specific skills. To Renzulli, creativity exists when someone stands out through curiosity, imagination, flexibility and originality of thought. He defines commitment as a high degree of interest, enthusiasm and fascination for a very specific subject area.

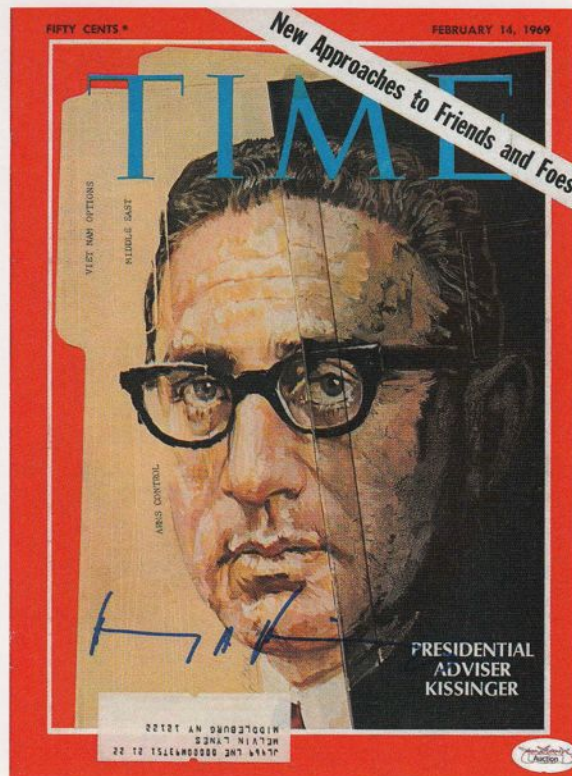
Photo: Deutsche Bundespost



^ Bertolt Brecht

Distraught, suffered at school; as an author and playwright, he was among the greatest figures in 20th century German literature.

Photo: Time Magazine



^ Henry Kissinger

A mediocre performer in school; later became a negotiator in many delicate international missions and one of the most important Secretaries of State of the United States.