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Professor of the Practice Tina Seelig, along with Steve Garrity, founder of Hearsay Systems and Juliet Rothenberg, product manager at DeepMind, define the characteristics of a superpower. Garrity and Rothenberg share their insights on what a superpower looks like, and how you can identify your special skill that sets you apart.



Transcript

- What does that actually mean? What is it to have a superpower? - So when I think of superpower.... When you first invited us to this talk, I thought, "Oh crap, now I need to find out what my superpower is." (all laughing) But when I stepped back and thought about it, and I thought, "What is it, "the skill that you uniquely bring to the table?" And Tina, I really appreciate Leap and its focus on soft skills.. Because, as students, it's so easy to think of a superpower as an individual effort, right? It is what am I great at, what at I a rock star at, where am I gonna get, you know, constant A pluses, and what could I get a PhD and then that type of thing, But as you get more and more out to the world, it's, "What is the unique skill that I bring to a team?" and, "Where will I best when complemented "by other members of the team?" And I think that within that, then, it's what you uniquely bring to do, and unique means a couple of things.. I think it means you enjoy doing it, right? You should enjoy your superpower and be really passionate about it, And then, the other one is, that other people should praise you for it, meaning that they value it and that it's a valuable thing to bring to others as well.. So, when I think of superpower, that's how I break it down.. - Great.. What do you think? - I generally agree with everything Julia has said.. I think when you invited us, my first thought was, "Oh yeah, maybe this talk will help me figure out "what my superpower is." (Julia laughs) So I'm still trying to find it.. But, to me, the superpower is really something about what can you do.... Significantly better than most people around you, In the sense that what's the thing that you....

I think there's a couple of companies that call it "what do you spike on", as a term I've heard a lot.. But it's classically, to me it's what do you do that you can create an outsized impact more quickly.. And so I think like, computer science you talk about this a lot.. Where, like, the 10x engineer.. Right? Like the best engineers are 10x more effective, not 2x.. (Julia concurs) Which I think is a really interesting shift from a world, where.... If you get into, you know, all the AI taking job conversations at some point.. But physical strength is one of those things that the fastest person in the world is 2x faster than everybody in this room, not 10x faster.. But the smartest person at a given.... (Julia concurs) Whether it's a machine learning problem, or literature, potentially, right? Anything intellectual is actually....

The distribution looks very different, and you as a superpower, you having a superpower might be 10x more effective, versus 10%.. - Well, so that's really interesting.. Does that mean that, does everyone have a superpower? I mean, is it that, okay, we all have something that we do better than other people, that we're uniquely qualified to do? What do you think? And also, as a part of that, do you.... Is a superpower something that is innate, or is it something that you build? Can you decide I'm going to be a superpower in computing, or in literature, or whatever other type? - So, one of my favorite quotes, it's sometimes attributed to Einstein, although the internet disagrees with whether he actually said it or not, and it's, "Everybody is a genius, but if a fish spends its entire life "trying to climb a tree, it will think it's stupid." (group concurs) And that, for me, resonates so much, because I think that we all have these innate abilities.. And there're people who are really talented and can see them, and hopefully one of those people becomes a mentor of yours or a manager throughout your life.. And puts you in a position where you can then exercise and build on that superpower.. And there're things that will inherently not be your superpower, right? Like my mom wanted to have a professional tennis player as a child.. And I was born, and she looked at the size of my shoulders, and she said, "Well there goes that dream." (man smiles) And.... So, there are things that you can't do, and there are things that you will be good at.. And hopefully there will be people who encourage you along the way, who can see the things that you are great at..

- Yeah.. I think the optimist in me is gonna agree, and says that everybody has a superpower, and it's a matter of finding it.. And then there's the separate question of, "Is it valuable? Does the market value it?" (group concurs) Um.... I don't know if it's true or not, but I hope it's true.. I think your second question about can you choose a superpower to develop, um.... Again, the optimist in me would like to believe that yes you can, but I tend to lean.... My intuition says more it's something that you are inherently good at, that you choose to focus on.. Because you enjoy it, whatever, it just comes easily.. When I think of most people I know or superpowers that I can identify in friends of mine, they're often things that they don't think are very hard.. And, you're like, "You are exceptionally talented "at this particular thing." And they're like, "Really?" Like, "I, I don't....

I just thought that it was easy." - You know it's funny, because when I ran my first company, I had this experience where everybody thought they were doing the easy job, and it was dazzling, because you look around and it was like, "Oh my God, you think that's easy.. "To me that would be really hard." And I think that's actually really great when you have a team, where everyone was playing to their superpowers and their strengths, and then everybody feels like they're doing the easy job...