

# The Genius Project

Michael Lorelli is one of those guys who some might like to hate, and I mean this in the kindest of ways. I'm sure, like all of us, Michael has had his share of failures, but overall he is a guy who has managed to succeed more often than not. You could say it has become a way of life for him. At the age of 18 he earned his private pilot's license in just three weeks. He finished his MBA at NYU in twelve months. He has been the Chief Marketing Officer at PepsiCo, President of PepsiCo East and President of Pizza Hut's international division, finding significant success in each role. He was responsible for the first-ever commercial advertisement on the sails of a boat in the America's Cup race (thanks to Michael we now can barely make out the shape of a boat behind the flurry of advertisements). He was also the first one ever to put a commercial advertisement in a home video (Paramount's smash hit, *Top Gun* in 1987).

Clearly Michael is a guy who gets things done, and in talking with him I found the exact opposite of what I'd heard from Lina. Here was a person who suffered little to no real frustration, outside of the relatively normal amount we all do at least. He didn't feel unfulfilled

at all, and he certainly didn't think that he put in more effort than he got out in results. Everything I saw in Lina's face was completely absent from Michael's. All the stress, tension, struggles and frustration to feel satisfied and successful that existed in one were absent in the other. What was it then that was different about the two? Both are very intelligent, well educated, in environments that were conducive to success and superior performance...at least for some.

One difference that jumped out at me was that Michael was quick to say that he has always been *true* to himself. He has always lead from his gut and gone with his natural talents instead of having to depend on his weaknesses. When he has been *true* to his natural talents he has found that success came more naturally, but when he has been *untrue* to himself success has eluded him.

Remember Lina's comments about not feeling that her role allowed her to be true to herself? Michael felt that the exact opposite was the case in his life. This *authenticity* that Michael described is something we found to be common among the most successful people we studied and least common among those who suffered from the problem. It actually turns out to be one of the core findings of the research and central themes of this book.

## **The Genius Project**

The Genius Project was originally only the nickname for the study we started in 2000 called the *Innermetrix Comparative Performance Study* (now you see why we decided to stick with the nickname!). This study spanned seven years, involved 197,000 individuals across twenty-three countries, and was designed to identify any causes that might explain the difference between the best and the rest. In our effort to understand the differences between these two groups, each individual was given a scientifically validated instrument called the Attribute Index<sup>2</sup>. This profile measured each individual's ability in a wide variety of attributes relevant to individual performance. These attributes are naturally occurring talents that people possess based on

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<sup>2</sup> To receive your own free Genius Profile, visit [www.whatsyourgenius.com](http://www.whatsyourgenius.com).

how they think and make decisions. The science behind this profile has been rigorously validated, and proven through its use in business for more than fifty years.

We also chose these attributes because we, as a company, had lots of experience with them. This is important when you are trying to understand what these data are telling you. We already had over seventy-five PhDs and 900 certified professional consultants and coaches around the world with the experience and understanding required to accurately administer and interpret the results.<sup>3</sup>

The results of this study are the main underpinnings of this entire book, and the rest of the book will tell you what we found and what you can do to take advantage of this new knowledge to become more successful and satisfied yourself.

## What's a Genius?

*“Genius is the ability to put into effect what is in your mind.”*

~ F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

To be able statistically to compare the differences between the most and least successful people, we needed to separate them into categories of performance. We started with a fairly universal set of four levels of performance:

- 1st Level—below average;
- 2nd Level—average;
- 3rd Level—above average; and
- 4th Level—excellent.

Very early on, however, as we started interviewing people and looking at the best performers, we began to see the need for perhaps yet another level of performance. Those who were describing the absolute

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<sup>3</sup> For corporations interested in learning how to unleash the genius in their organizations, see the resource guide at the back of this book.

best performers were having trouble with the four levels of performance. The interviewees were telling us that these people were better than excellent. You've no doubt seen this yourself. Think of someone who is so damn good at what they do that they are better than "excellent." The word falls short of conveying just how good these people really are.

Time and time again, as we conducted our interviews, the word used to describe these "better than excellent" people was "genius." They would say, "John is so great at seeing the big picture, he is a genius at that," or, "Mary is an absolute genius when it comes to understanding the client's problem."

Because we heard this talk of "better than excellent" so much, we decided to add another level of performance on top of excellent. This became the 5th Level of performance, and because we heard the word genius so many times, that became the nickname for this new level.

The revised rankings then became:

- 1st Level—below average;
- 2nd Level—average;
- 3rd Level—above average;
- 4th Level—excellent; and
- **5th Level—genius.**

When I say "Genius," by the way, I'm not referring to a person's IQ. My use of the word has nothing to do with how intelligent a person is, but everything to do with how well he or she performs. Genius in this sense is descriptive of a person's ability to perform, due to his or her own natural talents.

Someone once asked me, "Not everyone can be a genius right?" My answer to this question was a definitive "yes, everyone can be a genius—they just need to figure out how and at what." I truly believe that anyone can indeed be a genius at something; the trick is to figure out at what. That might be a genius surgeon or genius sales person or architect, but that might also mean a genius auto mechanic or genius server in a restaurant or even a genius janitor. The descriptor "Genius" doesn't have to be used only for high profile or high paid roles. It isn't

reserved for celebrities, artists or scientists alone. Somewhere out there is someone doing a job that no one would normally associate with a genius, but any role that exists can be fulfilled at a genius level.

But yes, even geniuses have bad days or weeks or even years. Even the best can't deliver genius-level performance all the time at everything they do. Our lives and our roles are constantly changing. We grow into new duties and responsibilities. We outgrow roles and employers. When such changes occur, even geniuses can struggle with delivering peak performance.

The geniuses I interviewed would be the first to admit that they have had lots of roles in their lives in which they were not able to be geniuses. What differentiates them from non-geniuses, though, is that they realize this fact and don't allow themselves to take up permanent residence in those roles.

Their willingness to try new things, and their ability to recognize that those new things may have been a mistake, are two keys that make them the geniuses they are today.

## The Findings

Before we talk about what we did find in the Genius Project, let's look at what we did not find, because that's actually quite important as well. We wondered if the data would reveal certain natural thinking talents that were only present in the most successful and missing in the rest.

After crunching all of that data, what we did *not* find was a single natural thinking talent that showed up in only the most successful.

It turns out that being better at seeing the big picture (the natural talent known as Conceptual Thinking) is not more likely to make *everyone* successful than is being better at seeing the small picture (the natural talent for Attention to Detail). Neither does being better at understanding others (Empathy) have any greater impact on success *across the board* than does being great at doing what you are told to do (Following Directions).

Sure, in some roles a specific set of talents may be more critical to success than others. We see this all the time with our corporate

clients, but did not find any thinking talents that correlated with success in every role and job.

For example, possessing the natural talents for understanding and persuading others is crucial in most sales roles, but when you look at non-sales roles those talents may have little impact on success. Yes, some natural talents may indeed be vital in certain roles, perhaps even lots of roles, but not in all roles.

That's right. We failed to find any single natural talent that was the key differentiator between success and failure in *all* cases. While this might sound disappointing at first, it's actually great news!

It's great because were this the case, and had we found talents that must be present in order to succeed, you would pretty much be out of luck if you didn't already possess them. You'd be out of luck because natural talents are hard-wired or engrained in how our minds work, and as such, they can't be developed through learning and effort. If we had found certain talents that were mandatory for success in any role, then only people with those talents would be able to become geniuses. But thankfully that's not what we found.

When I say that we didn't find any *natural* talents, however, that doesn't mean we didn't find any correlations at all among the most successful people. It just means that we didn't find any natural talents that correlated. What we *did* find in the Genius Project were two acquired *skills*, and these two skills were present in all of the successful people, and quite absent in those who suffered from The Problem.

Natural talents come from the way your mind is built, and because of this, they do not change much over the course of your life. Skills, on the other hand, are a form of acquired talent. Skills are the knowledge and experience that you learn throughout your life, and they can be developed. If natural talents are engrained in you early on in life, skills are added later. If natural talents are fixed and something you can't develop through conscious effort, skills are the opposite.

As I said, all of this is great news, because it simply means that, regardless of the natural talents you possess, you can take whatever those talents are and become more successful with them. This means that the playing field is level. Genius performance isn't reserved for just

the most intelligent. It isn't just for those who were lucky enough to be born with certain talents. Everyone possesses his or her own unique set of natural talents, so anyone can become a genius at something.

**Natural Talents:** Are your *innate* ability to do something, your natural endowment or aptitude. The key word here is natural. These talents can be physical, as in Lance Armstrong's remarkable lung capacity (a physical talent due to his anatomy and physiology) or they can be mental as in Anthony Robbins' ability to speak and engage people through words (a mental talent due to his high empathetic ability). The natural talents we are concerned with in this book are only those mental ones we all possess. Natural (mental) talents are patterns of thinking and decision-making that you were either born with or that you developed very early on in life.

Based on your genetics and the way your brain is structured, you are naturally good at seeing certain things, while you may be completely blind to others. Those things you see clearly are your natural talents, whereas those things you do not see clearly are your non-talents. We all have our own unique mix of these two. Your set of natural talents is unique to you. In the entire world, no two people possess the exact same set or level of natural thinking talents.

**Acquired Skills:** Unlike natural talents, skills are those abilities that we *can* acquire or develop. These are the knowledge and experience we gain throughout life. The person who doesn't possess a natural talent for empathy may, through lots of reading and training, become somewhat competent at being sensitive to needs and emotions of others. The person who isn't naturally good at seeing the big, strategic view may take classes on strategic planning and become somewhat proficient in that area.

The sales person who learns the technical steps of the sale and the features, functions and benefits of the product has a form of acquired skill for selling. The airline pilot who has learned the principles of flight and aerodynamics has an acquired skill for flying. The differences between acquired skills and natural talents, however, are significant, and having one without the other will never deliver 5th-level performance.

The sales person who has acquired knowledge and experience only has one half of the picture. If he doesn't possess the natural talents for being aggressive, persistent or empathetic, then all that acquired talent may be for naught. If he isn't aggressive enough, then he won't apply the necessary steps of the sale when he needs to. If he isn't persistent enough, he is likely not to get past the gatekeeper to talk to the key decision-maker in the first place.

Without the natural talents to support him, all of his skills will not make him a genius at what he does. What success he does achieve will be like the student in that difficult class who struggles to get results. He may get them, but not easily, not passionately, not consistently and not without feeling like he has to put in a lot more effort than what he gets out in results.

I fly a lot, and I'm glad that the pilots who fly me around the world have the skills for knowing how to actually pilot a Boeing 777 from Hartsfield to Heathrow. But I would not want to fly with someone who didn't also have the natural talents for decisiveness, intuitive decision-making and an ability called compartmentalization that the best pilots possess. Being technically proficient is important, but in the moment when the left engine goes out and the pilot has seconds to react, if he lacks the natural talents to go along with his acquired knowledge and skill, I wouldn't want to be on that plane with him.

Every role is different, as is every person who fills it, but the one thing we've learned in this study is that without natural talents, performance will be hindered. Every role, in order to be performed at genius levels, requires that the right natural talent be present. The 5th level of performance is impossible without natural talents.

Now that you understand the difference between natural talents and acquired skills, here are the two skills we discovered in the study. They are called *self-awareness* and *authenticity*.

### **Acquired Skill #1. Self-Awareness**

Self-awareness looks at how aware people are of their own natural thinking talents. For example, does John know he has a great natural

talent for strategic thinking that makes him a genius for seeing the big picture and making accurate, long-range plans? How aware is Mary that her greatest natural talent is in empathizing and understanding others? Self-awareness also looks at how well a person understands where he or she does not have a natural talent (i.e. their non-talents). So, while John knows he has a natural talent for strategic thinking, is he also aware that paying attention to details or being empathetic are not two of his strongest talents?

Many people make a common mistake in assuming that self-awareness is automatic. They think, “Surely if you possess some natural talent, you must be aware of it right?” Unfortunately, this is simply not the case. Just because someone has a natural ability for something doesn’t ensure that they fully appreciate it. Being self-aware is more than simply thinking, “I could do that.” Being self-aware requires a much deeper understanding for the way you think and make decisions and the natural talents you possess as a result.

Being self-aware is being aware of your own true potential, which is a beautiful thing. In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Jay Gatsby is described as having, “something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life.” When people have high levels of self-awareness, they too seem to hold a heightened sensitivity to all the promise they contain. They know very well what they are and are not good at, and what potential lies within them.

If self-awareness deals with the knowledge you have for your natural talents, then the second acquired skill deals with how you apply those talents. We call this skill *authenticity*.

## **Acquired Skill #2. Authenticity**

Authenticity, at its simplest level, is “being true to you.” Being self-aware is only half the picture. Properly applying that knowledge to your life is the other half. Setting goals that capitalize on your natural talents is “being authentic.” Finding a job that depends primarily on your natural talents is “being authentic.” Working from your strengths is “being authentic.”

The opposite of being authentic is being inauthentic. Whether you are aware of your natural thinking talents or not, whenever you fail to properly incorporate them into what you do and how you do it, you are being inauthentic. When you allow yourself to fill a role that requires natural talents that you don't possess (but hope to develop), you are being inauthentic.

Of all the people we studied, the only two things that turned out to be really different between the most successful and the rest were their level of understanding for their natural talents and their ability to act on these talents—to incorporate them into what they do and how they do it.

The message in this study then becomes: the more completely you know your own natural talents (i.e. are self-aware), and the truer you are to those talents (i.e. are authentic), the greater your satisfaction and performance will be.

Figure 1 below demonstrates the simplicity of this concept.

Philosopher G.E. Moore put it as simply as anyone when he said, "Everything is what it is, and not another thing." In other words, we are what we are, and not what we are not. We are our natural talents and our non-talents, and the more aware of these we are—the truer we are to this fact—the better we perform. Trying to be something we are not is fruitless. If your natural talent is not for strategic thinking, then the more your success depends on this ability, the more you are likely to suffer from The Problem.

*~ Only when we are what we are, and our roles and objectives are true to that—only then can we reach the 5th level of performance. ~*

Figure 1. Authentic Performance Model



## A Simple Mistake

The problem, though, is that the vast majority of people assume there is no real difference between talents and skills. They assume that natural talents can be developed through learning, training and hard work. They fail to appreciate just how fixed the neural networks that control these talents really are. Instead, because they fail to differentiate between talents and skills, and because they assume that *both* can be acquired equally, they set about identifying what talents and skills they need for a given role and then start trying to develop them both.

When they do this, they are only halfway successful. They may manage to develop new skills, but they don't develop new talents. They don't change the neural networks that control natural thinking talents. In so doing, they may indeed become one of the most knowledgeable sales people in the company, but they still don't *think* like the great sales people. They become the greatest knowledge expert on the planet for the rules of accounting and the workings of mathematics, but they still don't *think* like the great accountants do. They become the pilot who knows more about the technical manual than the engineer who wrote it, but they still don't meld with the controls and become one with the plane as an extension of their own body, like the great pilots do.

Don't get me wrong. Training and development are vital to success, but by assuming that training and development will develop the natural thinking talents *and* skills they need, many people fail to understand that they are only building up half of the picture. When the other half of the picture isn't there (the natural talents half) they wonder why they continue to struggle. Unfortunately, when people fail to achieve the level of performance they want, the solution is often even more training and knowledge.

People exert a tremendous amount of energy attempting to change themselves in a way that just isn't going to lead to success, when in reality it is the outside world that needs to be changed. That's what geniuses do, they change the world in which their natural talents play.

## The Numbers

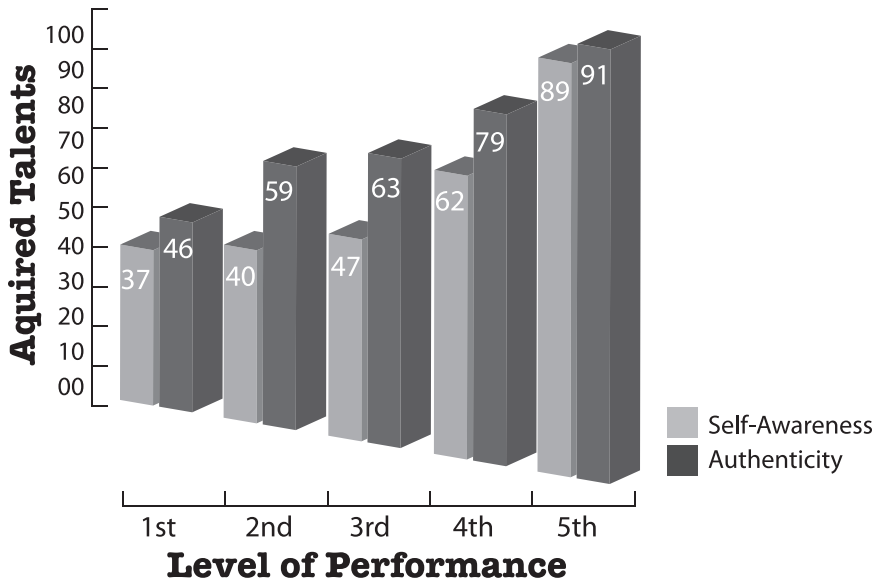
From a purely statistical perspective, the correlations between self-awareness, authenticity and performance are significant:

- The average level of self-awareness for the 5th-level performers in the study was 89%, compared to 62% for the 4th-level performers, and less than 47% for the 1st- through 3rd-level performers;
- Those who were 5th-level performers had levels of authenticity that were 91% versus levels of authenticity seen in the 4th-level performers of 79% and in the 1st- through 3rd-level performers, who were at or below 63%;
- Correlation between self-awareness and performance was  $p = 0.893$ ;<sup>4</sup> and
- Correlation between authenticity and performance was  $p = 0.879$ .

These differences make a very compelling argument for becoming more self-aware and authentic. Figure 1a below shows you just how significant the differences are between the five levels of performance studied.

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<sup>4</sup> A Pearson's Coefficient of Correlation ( $p$ ) above 0.700 is considered to be significant.



These data show us that there is a direct and positive correlation between the two acquired skills of self-awareness and authenticity and performance. Those who performed at the lower levels also had lower levels of self-awareness and authenticity, but the higher the performance went the greater the level of self-awareness and authenticity became.

**R Chapter 2 Review**

Chapter 1:

- “The Problem” is an epidemic of people that feel unfulfilled, dissatisfied and frustrated with their performance.

Chapter 2:

- To find out why, we created the Genius Project, and what we found were two key things:
  - There is no one “Genius Talent”; and
  - Self-Awareness and Authenticity are present in higher levels in the best performers.

**CG Chapter 2 Gut Check**

If you look at the times in your life when you have felt the most passionate, the most fulfilled and the most *natural* at what you were doing, these are probably times when you were being authentic. These are also times when I bet you were much more successful with less effort and stress. Please think of a role, or major aspect of a role, that you have filled in the past that you were passionate about and did very well, and then answer the questions below.

What was this role, and which part of it came naturally for you?

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How comfortable were you at that time? (circle one)

*Very Uncomfortable* 1 2 3 4 5 *Very Comfortable*

How happy were you? (circle one)

*Very Unhappy* 1 2 3 4 5 *Very Happy*

How successful were you? (circle one)

*Very Unsuccessful* 1 2 3 4 5 *Very Successful*

Now think of a role, or major aspect of a role, in which you did not feel this way; where you struggled; where you did not feel passionate about what you were doing, and you did not perform as well as you wanted to. You probably didn't enjoy it, didn't do it well and if you had your druthers, wouldn't do it again. Chances are very good that these were times when you were not being authentic.

In that moment, how were you being inauthentic?

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How comfortable were you at that time? (circle one)

*Very Uncomfortable* 1 2 3 4 5 *Very Comfortable*

How happy were you? (circle one)

*Very Unhappy* 1 2 3 4 5 *Very Happy*

How successful were you? (circle one)

*Very Unsuccessful* 1 2 3 4 5 *Very Successful*

This is just a short little exercise to give you a glimpse of what it feels like to be a Genius every day, because Geniuses find ways to make sure almost everything they do feels like the first set of questions. They always strive to be authentic. The question to you is, "Would you rather create a life where you feel like the first scenario all the time, or would you rather continue to experience lots of the second scenario?" As you will see, the choice is yours alone.

