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Michelangelo's Message

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ABSTRACT

What keeps us from becoming what we can be? Renaissance genius Michelangelo's ideas about crafting sculpture are a powerful metaphor for the release of our hidden performance potential. The actualizations of inherent potential can be viewed as a creative work performance that synergizes head, heart, and body. Potential is seen as being closely related to the psychological concepts of talents and multiple intelligences.

For the global economy, the effective employment of talent, intelligence, and knowledge is projected to be a primary driving force for years to come. For business organizations, investment in the realization of human potential is seen to have lasting value and is considered to be a continuing source of competitive advantage. For the Arts and Humanities, the constructive realization of human potential has been a long-pursued Holy Grail. And, for the individual, there is the real possibility of enhanced future performance with an associated economic payoff.

KEYWORDS: Michelangelo, Performance, Potential, Creativity, Arts & Humanities

1. INTRODUCTION

Renaissance artistic genius Michelangelo was once asked to explain his remarkable ability to fashion beautiful statues from roughly hewn blocks of unfinished marble. He reputedly replied that all he was doing was chipping away the excess in order to release the figure that was already there trapped in the stone. Michelangelo's response to the question of artistic creation elicits the powerful idea that many wondrous images are already resident in our minds. They just await the touch of the willing, prepared and visionary artist to reach fruition.

Michelangelo's message about sculpture is also an apt metaphor for thinking about the release of the untapped potential for greater performance and benevolence residing in each of us. However, upon thoughtful consideration, is it realistically possible for us to chip away the layers of self-ignorance and self-doubt that conceal our own latent promise? Can we uncover and actualize the very best that is in each of us? Are we cognitively and emotionally equipped to handle this daunting task?

This paper will explore the preceding questions as well as related queries, such as: What is performance potential? What form does potential take? How is it measured? How can we maximize it? What factors determine our performance? What can the Arts and Humanities offer the discovery process? Additionally, we will consider some possible responses to the questions posed and then summarize what it all might mean.

2. WHAT IS PERFORMANCE POTENTIAL?

What Michelangelo may have seen in his mind's eye was a likeness of the realized potential inherent in the raw material of the uncut stone. To actually transform his mental image into physical reality required Michelangelo to accomplish a creative work performance. A creative work performance can be considered to be an action process containing mental, emotional and behavioral components directed toward the accomplishment of individually or socially valuable outcomes.

Different outcomes appear to require different kinds of performances. For example, successfully balancing on a bicycle requires a different work performance than successfully balancing the books of a business. Acting the lead in a local play is different than playing a violin at Carnegie Hall. Creating a book is different than creating a painting. Over the period of our life-history we are apt to notice that we can perform some types of tasks with ease, facility, and grace. Alternatively, other kinds of tasks we seem to perform under duress with difficulty or, perhaps, not at all. Although as human beings we have the capacity to do many things our biology and our environmental experiences conspire to make us much better at some things than others.

Had we lived in Renaissance Italy, we might have noticed that Michelangelo, Titian, and Leonardo da Vinci performed their artistic tasks very differently. However, each of them produced highly acclaimed works of art that have stood the test of time. Likewise, our comparative observations of other people's behavior may indicate to us that they appear to be more capable performers in certain areas than are we. We may also observe that others may choose a different path to reach a desired outcome than do we. Therefore, we are led to conclude that the capacity to perform varies considerably among individuals. The performance required to successfully reach a particular outcome seems to be available to different individuals in different measure at different times in different situations.

Potential, on the other hand, is a much more ambiguous concept than performance. It is concerned with a promise of performance at some unspecified future time. One useful definition of potential is "the sum of capacities and qualities which, in the human race and in every individual, exist but have not been brought out and used (actualized); potentialities, therefore are individual hidden capacities and qualities (Otto 1970)."

Thus far, five such hidden qualities have been identified. These include: 1. the potentiality for more effective and more satisfying relationships, 2. hidden or dormant capacities, abilities and talents, 3. the potentiality for tremendously increased creative productivity, 4. the potentiality for developing and exercising social concern and responsibility and for developing the capacity for leadership in matters which affect the community, and 5. the potentiality for a more vital vibrant and life-affirming existence (Otto 1970). How many of these qualities, do you think, are addressed in the typical undergraduate arts and humanities curriculum?

3. WHAT FORM DOES OUR HIDDEN POTENTIAL TAKE?

On one end of the spectrum of human potential are polymaths such as da Vinci and the eighteenth-century English physician and scientist Thomas Young. Of Young, who deciphered the Rosetta stone and developed the wave theory of light, it has been said that he was the last person to know everything there was to know. Polymaths are individuals who have been naturally endowed with a number of capabilities in great degree and have made significant contributions in several disciplines. Developmental psychologists place idiot savants at the other end of the human capabilities spectrum.

Idiot savants are individuals who possess a very large amount of one particular kind of intelligence, but may be nearly non-functional in the other areas. This one extraordinary capability appears to dominate and diminish all the others. For example, an idiot savant might be able to speedily and accurately calculate the product of two, four-digit numbers in his or her head or effortlessly play a musical composition after hearing it only once, but might need assistance to walk, eat, converse and tie shoelaces. Each of us, it appears, has been endowed with a particular genetic makeup and a unique set of life experiences that help constitute our latent potential or hidden capacities. It appears that no two of us are exactly alike in the gifts of potential we have been provided by nature or the ways by which they may have found expression in our lives (Myers 1980). These capacities may also affect our thinking, problem solving, and behavior outside our conscious awareness through the mechanism of the unconscious mind (Kahneman 2011).

Rather than a single generalized capacity there appear to be many. These gifts or capacities can also be described as forms of different multiple kinds of intelligences. Each type of intelligence can be related to its particular ability to solve distinctive types of problems or to fashion culturally valued products. Eight such capacities have been identified that are genetically based: logical-mathematical, linguistic, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, intrapersonal, interpersonal, spatial, and naturalistic (Gardner 1999). For example, logical-mathematical intelligence can be symbolically represented by a computer scientist, a poet for linguistic intelligence, and a salesperson or clinical psychologist for interpersonal intelligence. A biologist represents naturalistic intelligence, or the ability to recognize and classify various species of animal and plant life. Architects might be chosen to represent the spatial, ballet dancers for the bodily-kinesthetic, and autobiographers for the intrapersonal forms of intelligence.

Although most of us seem to have several of these genetic gifts in moderate to high degree, we may be consciously unaware of them. Research into human potential has described these natural gifts as "Talents." Reporting the results of a massive 25-year study that interviewed two million excellent performers, Gallup organization researchers identified some 34 of these talents (Buckingham and Clifton 2001). The study results suggest that among the various talent possibilities five typically are dominant within each of us. Examples of these talent category descriptors include: Achiever, Futuristic, Inclusiveness, Learner, and Strategic.

4. WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF USING MORE OF OUR POTENTIAL?

Almost ten years ago some prescient business researchers suggested that human potential was supplanting the traditional factors of money, labor, and physical resources in overall economic primacy (Crawford 1994). It is now much more apparent that human talent, intelligence and knowledge have become one the world's primary driving economic forces. One thoughtful international chief executive has reflected deeply on the value of releasing human potential, declaring that "Technological success is necessarily fleeting, and all organizations are doomed to entropy. They must be constantly regenerated. The only competitive advantage that makes that possible, and that thereby appears to have lasting value, is the quality of the people involved. Developing human potential is a long-term investment, one that bears witness to the company's faith in its own future (Salmon 1994)".

5. WHAT CONCERNS ARISE FROM RELEASING MORE OF OUR POTENTIAL?

What unexpected consequences might have arisen if Michelangelo had uncovered even more of his greatness in his own time? Would his towering genius have been extended into other areas or would

have he have become excessively demanding and overbearing to the less gifted? Do strengths greatly over-extended and over-applied become weaknesses?

Research by personality theorists shows that hyper-extended strengths can lapse into weaknesses (Bolton 1984). Additionally, some respected thinkers and practitioners in the fields of organization development and management learning see the greater release of potential as something of a dilemma (Cunningham 1994). Hidden dangers may lie unsuspected in an over-emphasis on releasing human potential.

Liberating capability through direct action without the right wisdom could lead to unwise action. Having wisdom alone without the relevant capability can result in no action at all. "We have greater choice and more personalization, but concentrating on ourselves can reduce the opportunity for serendipitous encounters, with both people and information (Watson 2010)." Letting go of our closely held mental models may also be an obstacle for the release of hidden potential. Mental models act as frameworks to organize deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations or images of how we understand the world and how we take action in it. Once in place, these mental scaffolds appear to be quite difficult to change.

We tend to hold our assumptions even in the face of compelling evidence to the contrary (Ornstein 1977). This resistance to change may be the ongoing price we pay in order to gain a measure of stability in our personal consciousness. Therefore, activities aimed at the release of potential may actually create dissonance and disrupt this powerful need for cognitive stability.

6. HOW IS POTENTIAL MEASURED?

Historically, measuring performance potential has been difficult at best. However, one method that has gained credence to assess the Potential for Improving Performance (PIP) consists of constructing a ratio of exemplary performance to typical performance. "You will note that the PIP is a measure of opportunity, the very stuff that human capital is made of. The PIP does not assign feeble limitations to people as the IQ does, but takes the humane and practical view that poor performers usually have great potential (Gilbert 1978) ."

Part of the problem of measuring potential is our inability to know and explain it to ourselves. "Most gifted people are not able to articulate that it is their First Nature that makes them extraordinarily aware, compels them to make things 'just so' or makes them so dissatisfied when things are not that way (Jacobsen 1999)." Thus, one of the unexpected benefits of the measurement of potential may be an enhanced knowledge of our own specific gifts.

One alternative perspective on the measurement of potential involved the use of exemplars. The accomplishments of thirteen present-day leaders (all of them business Chief Executives) who appear to have had a major impact on society were analyzed. These leaders shared many characteristics of the creative genius (such as Michelangelo). "The innovative genius is almost always a qualitative mentality who is right-brain driven while living in a quantitatively driven left-brain world. He uses inductive logic to realize holistic solutions while the establishment world is striving for a deductive reality using mechanistic solutions to maintain the status quo (Landrum 1993)."

Creative potential may reside largely in one-half of the brain. Although it is massively interconnected, modern neuroscience supports the idea that the right hemisphere of the brain seems to be more specialized to handle novelty while the left hemisphere deals with the routine (Goldberg 2009). Interestingly, many organizations have developed primarily routinized left-brained systems that pay

to reward performance and promote to recognize potential. Given this particular approach to incentives, one might wonder just how Michelangelo would have fared if the reigning pope had required him to operate within a Management By Objectives (MBO) system for painting the Sistine Chapel.

7. HOW CAN WE MAXIMIZE OUR POTENTIAL?

Individual and organizational researchers have long been intrigued by the question of how to maximize human potential. The relationship between good management and the actualization of individual potential has been extensively studied. This successful relationship has been called "Eupsychian Management" or "good-psychology" management (Maslow 1998). Positive Psychologists have argued that the illness model (defining normalcy by comparing ourselves to the sickest members of our society) has been a primary source for the misperception and diminution of our potential capabilities. This is analogous to using the companies who fail to survive their first year as a comparative business benchmark for determining what constitutes business success rather than companies who have profitably sustained their performance over many years.

How much different could we be if our benchmark for healthy functioning was, instead, the equivalent of the Olympic gold medal winners of the world? In this case, the comparative reference point for measurement becomes positive rather than negative; excellent performance rather than the mere absence of poor performance. It shifts our thinking to a wellness standard for normalcy using the best performers our society has to offer as the point of departure, and it offers us a more optimistic benchmark for gauging human possibilities. Therefore, Michelangelo's work becomes the reference for artistic performance rather than that of the local starving artist.

Some humanistic psychologists have asserted that whether consciously recognized or not, we experience an inherent internal thrust toward actualizing our own potential. This means that we all possess an impulse to self-release our own innate capacity; a capacity that too often is sturdily encased in the rough stone of our own perceived self-limitations. Today, psychologists might label this deliberate removal of apparent self-restrictions as the "advancement of credence" or a belief in our own competency termed "self-efficacy." "Be all you can be," the upbeat, long-time recruiting slogan of the U. S. Army seems to reflect an institutional belief in the liberating power of realizing individual potential and enhancing self-efficacy.

A large number of research studies on very different kinds of people engaged in a wide variety of different activities have demonstrated that there is an achievable state of optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). This state has been labeled "flow" or, more colloquially, as "being in the zone." Flow appears to be a condition where seemingly effortless and effective performance occurs naturally without any time-conscious sense of striving. This particular mental, emotional and physical state seems to occur most frequently when the challenge of the task we have undertaken closely matches our ability to perform it. Therefore, the flow condition appears most readily accessible to those deeply immersed in the activities of the task undertaken.

It has been suggested that an inter-disciplinary approach should be utilized to better tap our wellsprings of hidden potential. "While we reach for the stars, we should be plumbing the depths of man to unfold the hidden capacities and possibilities of his inner universe-his potential. For, unquestionably, the history of man is the unfolding of his potentialities- it is also the key to his future (Otto 1968)." Perhaps, the author had the image of people such as Michelangelo in mind when he wrote these inspiring and optimistic words about realizing our potential.

8. CONCLUSION

Just what made Michelangelo such an outstanding painter and sculptor? Was it his native ability or environmental circumstances that allowed him to create such outstanding pieces of art? Part of Michelangelo's greatness as a sculptor appears to have been his exceptional ability to imagine in exquisite detail the final artistic product in his mind. Holding his mental picture as a point of departure, Michelangelo could then replicate it in physical reality with his hands by removing the extra stone that surrounded and obscured it. By using his imagination as a guide, Michelangelo was

able to effectively shape and transform what currently existed in the present into what could be in an envisioned future. Some five centuries later, another acknowledged genius Albert Einstein, reputedly commented that knowledge was limited whereas imagination embraced the entire world, stimulated progress, and give birth to evolution.

After reviewing the current evidence, I am more inclined than ever to the optimistic view of our latent potential as expressed by Michelangelo's striking metaphor of the entrapped image in the stone. This six-hundred years old artistic message reflects the internalized potential for the extraordinary in all of us. It is a striking vision of hope, an image that promises that somewhere in each of us resides a transcendent form of beauty and power just waiting to be uncovered.

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