

Is Your Genius on Purpose?

Determine your genius and purpose, and make sure they match.

By Dick Richards

WORKING IN THE TRAINING and development profession, you strive for noble purposes. Examples found in an ASTD manifesto include developing people, leading the learning and performance revolution, keeping spirit alive in the workplace, and giving back to communities. Purposes such as those are worthy of anyone's commitment, and can provide focus for your work and life. But your purpose alone, whether you subscribe to one of those above or to one unique to you, is not likely to fulfill all of your aspirations. The key to feeling satisfied in your daily work and making your best possible contribution lies not with your purpose but with your genius, the energy and spirit that you alone can bring to your work.

I use the term *genius* not in the modern sense of high intellectual capacity or extraordinary creative achievement, but in an ancient sense that is still alive, un-

der different names, in most cultural and spiritual traditions. In this latter sense, your genius can be thought of as the exceptional power that comes naturally to you and as the process in which you engage so spontaneously and easily that you may not even notice it. Your genius can also be thought of in a mystical way, as the energy of your soul, and as an answer to the question of why you exist.

On the other hand, I use the term *purpose* to refer to your personal mission, vocation, calling, or vision. In that sense, your purpose is a tangible assignment that life expects you to execute.

Four key questions can guide your pursuit of work that fulfills both your genius and your purpose:

- What is your genius?
- Is your genius at work?
- What is your purpose?
- Is your genius on purpose?

Clues to both your genius and your purpose can be found in your experiences. This article will offer brief explanations, examples, and a few exercises to help you answer the four key questions. But these are complicated questions with elusive answers that are often not quickly resolved. More resources to help you with this process are listed at the end of this article.

Recognize your genius

Your genius is your divine spark, the

essence of how you best express yourself. It is a gift to you and your gift to others. It attends you and only you and is not duplicated anywhere else on the planet. You are responsible for it and to it. It shows up, seeking expression, in everything you do. It is not your purpose; it serves your purpose. It is not your calling, but a power given to you to fulfill your calling. It is not your soul, but the energy of your soul. It is not out there somewhere in the future, but is present now. It has always been with you, and will always be with you. It will not change, though your understanding of it may grow.

Your genius nourishes your direction when that direction is worthy and alerts you when it is not. It is your natural power, coming readily and easily unless you get in its way by ignoring or dismissing it. A friend once told me, "Whenever I feel as though something is missing in my work, it is my genius that is missing."

Your genius has been a source of success and satisfaction during work that you have done in the past, and it will be a source of success and satisfaction during work that you do in the future. It is a major factor determining why some work situations feel just right while others feel just awful.

Most people find it useful to find a name for their geniuses. Experience has shown that the name for your genius

should contain a gerund (ends in -ing) and a noun. Examples are Making It Work, Straightening Up, Charting the Course, and Discovering Connections. If you arrive at a name that doesn't feel positive, it's not the right name.

You will find significant clues to your genius if you notice what you're doing when you're not noticing what you're doing. That may sound paradoxical and impossible, but your genius comes spontaneously, easily, and so naturally that you probably aren't aware of it.

For example, when asked to begin noticing what she was doing when she was not noticing what she was doing, a woman attending a career development workshop noticed that it was she who began passing a sheet of paper around the room to create a list of names and phone numbers. She felt compelled to do that even though nobody had asked for a phone list. This spontaneous act felt so natural and familiar to her that it seemed unremarkable and barely worth noticing. She said that her intent was to create a platform from which people could support each other in the future. She also took extensive notes, which she described as a platform for continued learning after the workshop.

Then she began to associate the phone list and note taking with other activities that she did routinely. Though not an avid seamstress, she did enjoy buying patterns and had a drawer full of them. She also enjoyed planning her garden far more than tending it. The phone list and notes, her patterns and garden plans, were all platforms to her—supports to guide some activity. She arrived at the name Building Platforms to describe her genius.

The woman then understood why she was excited about a recent work assignment. Her employer was a large corporation that was undergoing a great deal of turmoil. Although trained as a systems analyst, she had accepted a temporary assignment on a team formed to help the company through a complex change process. The team's work involved leading training programs and helping other teams become more effective. She loved the work because she saw

herself as helping to create a platform for her company's future. She then made a commitment to change the focus of her career from systems analyst to organization change practitioner.

There are other ways to find your genius besides noticing what you do when you're not noticing what you do. You might want to examine your frustration, which often signals that your genius isn't creating the result you had hoped for; your elation, which often indicates that your genius has succeeded; and your interests and hobbies, where your genius is usually given free reign.

When you recognize your genius, you will have answered the first key question, and the answer to the second—is your genius at work?—will probably be obvious to you. If the day-to-day processes of your work seem natural to you, if they generate a sense of spontaneity, ease, and rightness, the answer to the second question is “yes.” If they do not, the answer is “no.”

Discover your purpose

If you acknowledge your purpose, you can be more intentional and effective in fulfilling it. In addition, it can give focus to your life, directing decisions such as what work to do, where to live, whom to associate with, and what to turn away from.

Clues that point to your purpose most often lie in the events of your life and your reactions to them. Unexpected experiences and turning points can be especially fertile ground for such clues. For example, a sales manager who was unexpectedly fired did serious soul searching, and the experience became a major turning point in his life.

He now says, “I fired myself. In truth, I made it impossible for my employer to keep me. It was the wrong work for me.”

During his soul searching, he thought about his work history and read and talked with experts about the nature of work. The result is his current endeavor heading his own executive placement firm, and his purpose is to create organizations comprised solely of people doing their right work.

Clues to your purpose might also be found in ideas that recur to you in a

seemingly nagging way and in what others have asked of you because they sense your commitment to some cause, perhaps before you sense it yourself.

Integrate your genius and purpose

The woman who calls her genius Building Platforms has directed that energy toward the purpose of *creating workplaces that work for the people in them*. The man who describes his purpose as *creating organizations comprised solely of people doing their right work* calls his genius Surveying the Landscape, which he defines as a search for ideas, people, and opportunities. He too employs the energy of his genius to fulfill his purpose.

When you can link your genius and purpose in the way that they did, then you can answer “yes” to the final key question—is your genius on purpose? This question is a shorthand way of asking, Is the natural power that comes to you spontaneously and easily engaged in fulfilling the assignment to which you have been called?

Even if you're unclear about your genius and purpose, the following exercise can help you explore the extent to which your genius is on purpose currently.

Examine your calendar for the last month. List the work activities that consumed most of your time. Be specific about the activities rather than describing general duties and responsibilities. For example, “met with Joe to talk about the XYZ project” is more specific than “supervised employees.”

Determine whether your genius was engaged in each activity. Even if you are unclear about your genius, you can sense its presence in the form of an attraction to the activity. In short, were you enjoying yourself? Did the work come naturally to you?

Determine whether the activity was in support of your purpose. Even if you're unclear about your purpose, you can sense that the activity was on purpose in the feeling that it needed to be done and that it needed to be done by you. In short, was it worth doing? Did it have real meaning to you?

Identify those activities in which your genius was engaged in fulfilling your purpose—in other words, any activity in which you were enjoying yourself, the work came naturally, it felt worth doing, and it had

DEVELOPMENT

real meaning to you.

This exercise ought to provide a rough estimate of your overall satisfaction with the work that you have been doing and show you where your genius and purpose come alive. You can raise your satisfaction by any of the commonly known methods: talking with your boss about adjusting your responsibilities, seeking a new job in the same organization, finding new work with another organization, starting your own business, changing your career, and so forth.

Whatever method you pursue, you will be in a much better position to find the right work for you if you are clear about both your genius and your purpose. When you find that work, you will be able to answer “yes” to the final question. You will have laid the groundwork for the focus and aims that purpose provides, as well as for the day-to-day satisfaction and confidence that you are making your best contribution that come with recognizing your genius.

Dick Richards has implemented these principles in 50 organizations, including Exxon, Prudential, and Bank of America. He is also the author of *Artful Work* and *The Art of Winning Commitment*; dickrichards@ongenius.com.

Send submissions to **Development, T+D**, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043; development@astd.org.

MORE

This article is adapted from *Is Your Genius at Work? Four Key Questions to Ask Before Your Next Career Move* (Davies-Black Publishing, 2005).

The book contains more than 30 exercises to help you answer the four key questions.

Additional resources are available at the author's website and blog, www.ongenius.com and www.ongenius.com/blog.