

Curse of the “Genius” Label



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1. What is genius?

A common misunderstanding of “genius”

- The term “genius” can be used to mean a superior ability:
 - “He is a genius” → “he has a very high intelligence”
 - “Michael Jordan was a genius on the basketball court”

There is nothing wrong with the above meaning

- However, “genius” is often used to mean a superior ability that comes *naturally* to a person:
 - In other words, either you are born a genius or you are not
 - If you are not born Superman, you will never be bullet proof, be able to fly or have X-ray vision, regardless of how much you practise
 - Likewise, if you are not born with the relevant abilities then:
 - You will never be as intelligent as Albert Einstein
 - You will never play basketball as well as Michael Jordan

This commonly held understanding of “genius” is wrong

Thomas Edison

- Thomas Edison was a famous American inventor:
 - His inventions include the light bulb and the phonograph
 - He is widely regarded as a genius
- Famous quote from Thomas Edison:
 - “Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration”
- Important points to note about this quote:
 - It does *not* mention anything about being *born with* superior abilities
 - The 1% and 99% figures are inaccurate placeholders
 - More likely to be 1 unit of inspiration and 10,000+ units of hard work
 - Don’t assume he was being modest. Perhaps he was making an insult:
“I am called a ‘genius’ because I work hard. You are not called that because you are lazy”

The “genius” of stars

- Is Thomas Edison’s quote accurate?
 - Is it valid only for him? Or does it hold for many other geniuses too?
- The term “genius” is often applied to the best people in a field, such as sports, music, art, movies, business, ...
- Were such people born already being “the best”?
Or did they have to work very hard to become the best?
- The answer (at least for *most* geniuses) is: they worked hard
 - You can verify this by reading biographies of “the best” people
 - The book *Mindset* by Carol S. Dweck comes to the same conclusion
- Even young prodigies usually work very hard

The “genius” of stars (cont’)

■ Example of a sports genius:

- Michael Jordan is regarded as the best basketball player ever
- However, several basketball teams rejected him because he was not (yet) good enough
- His skill was “mediocre” initially. Hard work made it “good”, “better”, “great” and eventually “genius”.
- He had to continue working hard to *remain* at the “genius” level

■ So it seems Thomas Edison was right:

- Genius = a small bit of inspiration plus *lots* of hard work
- For tips on finding inspiration, see:
 - *The Status Quo is Flawed* chapter of slides
 - Edward de Bono’s *Six Thinking Hats* or *Lateral Thinking* books
 - *Why Not?* by Barry Nalebuff and Ian Ayres

2. Why the “genius” label can be a curse

“You are a genius”

- “You are a genius” is normally intended as a compliment
- When somebody calls you a genius they probably assume:
 - You were born with a superior talent or IQ
 - You don’t have to work hard to achieve excellent results
- These assumptions of you are likely to be incorrect:
 - You were *not* born superior
 - You *did* have to work hard
- These incorrect assumptions can cause you problems...

Problems with being called a genius

- People may develop unrealistic expectations of you:
 - They think “You’re a genius so you can do anything”
 - It is usually impossible to live up to their unrealistic expectations
 - So then people become disappointed in you
 - If one of these disappointed people is your manager then bonuses, pay rises and promotions may occur less frequently
- Many people think something developed by a genius must be complex:
 - “I’d have to be a genius to understand that”
 - So they won’t bother trying to understand your work
 - This makes it difficult for you to promote the results of your work
- These problems mean “You are a genius” is more of a curse than a compliment

Unrealistic expectations of a “genius”

■ Interesting article:

- *It Isn't Easy Being a Genius* by Jim Collins, New York Times, 19 September 2005
- http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/19/opinion/19collins.html?_r=1

■ Brief summary:

- The author was called a genius by the US national media
- As a result, people developed unrealistic expectations of him
- Family, friends and strangers asked him:
 - For investment advice, questions on unusual subjects
 - To listen to theories they had
- Friends were frustrated he wasn't better at playing Trivial Pursuit
- His young daughter was disappointed when he was no good at playing a children's card game
- Colleagues assumed his research papers were all accepted for publication

4. Advice and summary

Advice

- Banish “genius” from your vocabulary because of ambiguity:
 - Does it mean a high IQ or natural ability?
 - Or does it mean inspiration plus hard work?
- Instead, explicitly say what you mean. For example:
 - “You are very intelligent”
 - “That is a good bit of inspiration”
 - “I am impressed with how hard you worked on this”

Advice (cont')

- Treat the label “genius” as a curse rather than a compliment
 - Reject and fight this curse
- You can fight it through education (such as this presentation)
- Humour can help:
 - “I *used to be* a genius, but I’m retired now.”
 - “I *can’t be* a genius: I work only part-time.”
 - “You say I’m a genius? Thank you, and yes, I do work hard.”
- Such jokes are likely to receive a puzzled response:
 - This gives you an opportunity to educate people that “genius” refers to “hard work” rather than an innate ability

Summary

- The term “genius” is widely misunderstood:
 - It is *not* an *intrinsically* superior ability you are born with
 - Instead, you reach a state of genius (superior ability) through lots of practice and hard work
- The misunderstanding can cause problems. People will:
 - Dismiss your claims of having worked hard because “you are a genius”
 - Develop unrealistic expectations of you that you cannot live up to
 - Ignore your work because “only another genius could understand it”
- *Never* accept the label “genius” as a compliment
 - Its effects are like a curse that can hinder your career or goals