

The Michelangelo Premise: Performance, Potential, and the Arts and Humanities

By

Dr. Raymond L. Forbes Jr.
College of Arts, Sciences and Technology
Franklin University
201 South Grant Avenue
Columbus, OH 43215

forbesr@franklin.edu

Abstract

What keeps us from becoming what we can be? Renaissance genius Michelangelo's ideas about sculpture are employed as a powerful metaphor for the release of our hidden performance potential. The actualization of inherent potential is viewed as a creative work performance that synergizes head, heart, and body. Potential is seen as closely related to the 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 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 realization of human potential has been a long-pursued Holy Grail. And, for the individual, there is the real possibility of enhanced future performance.

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Renaissance artistic genius Michelangelo was once asked to explain his remarkable ability to fashion beautiful statues from roughly hewn blocks of marble. He reportedly replied that all he was doing was chipping away the excess in order to release the image that was already there trapped in the stone. Michelangelo's premise is an apt metaphor for contemplating the untapped potential for greater performance resident in each of us. Is it possible for us to whittle away the impervious stone of self-ignorance that impedes the realization of our own latent promise? In other words, how can we discover and actualize the very best that is in us?

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? And, what determines our performance? Additionally, we will consider some possible responses to the questions posed and then summarize what it all might mean.

What is performance potential?

What Michelangelo saw in his mind's eye was a likeness of the potential inherent in the raw material of the uncut stone. To actually transform the mental image into physical being required Michelangelo to accomplish a creative work performance. Work performance is 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. Over the

period of our life-history we are apt to notice that we can perform some types of tasks with ease and grace. Alternatively, other kinds of tasks we seem to perform with some difficulty or, perhaps, not at all.

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 esteemed 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.

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. University of Utah professor Herbert Otto (1967) defined potential as "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 identified five such hidden qualities: 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.

What form does our 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. At the other end of the continuum might be the idiot savants, individuals who possess a very large amount of one particular kind of intelligence, but may be 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 potential or hidden capacities. According to psychological researcher Isabel Briggs Myers (1980), co-creator with Katharine Briggs of the widely used personality assessment the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or MBTI, 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.

Harvard professor Howard Gardner has described these gifts in terms of different multiple intelligences. He relates each type of intelligence to its ability to solve particular problems, or to fashion culturally valued products. Gardner (1999) has identified eight such capacities that are genetically based: logical-mathematical, linguistic, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, intrapersonal, interpersonal, spatial, and naturalistic.

For example, Gardner symbolically represents logical-mathematical intelligence with a computer scientist, employs a poet for linguistic intelligence, and uses 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.

These multiple intelligences appear to be widely distributed among persons who have selected disciplines in the Arts and Humanities as their fields of study and work.

Although most of us seem to have several of these genetic gifts in moderate to high degree, we may be largely unaware of them. In their 2001 book, *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton described these natural gifts as “Talents.” Reporting the results of a massive 25-year study that interviewed two million excellent performers, the two Gallup organization researchers identified some 34 of these

talents. They suggest that among the talent possibilities, five typically are dominant for each of us. Examples of Buckingham and Clifton's talent descriptors include: Achiever, Futuristic, Inclusiveness, Learner and Strategic.

What are the benefits of using more of our potential?

In his book, *In the Era of Human Capital*, management consultant and author, Richard Crawford expresses the possible payoff value of tapping into our potential. Crawford (1991) proposes that human talent, intelligence and knowledge have become the world's primary economic force. He cites current evidence that this new force has supplanted the traditional factors of money, labor, and physical resources in its overall economic primacy.

Robert Salmon, Vice-Chairman of the French cosmetics giant, L'Oreal, has reflected deeply on the value of releasing human potential. In *The Future of Management* (Salmon, 1994), he writes, "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 long-term investment, one that bears witness to the company's faith in its own future."

If Crawford and Salmon's thinking is at all true, then the release of greater amounts of performance potential should reap enormous practical benefits for us all, not just within business organizations.

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? Releasing more human performance potential may raise more questions for us than provides us with answers. Ian Cunningham, a respected thinker and practitioner in the fields of organization development and management learning, sees the release of potential as something of a puzzle. He has raised a red flag related to the possible dangers of an over-emphasis on releasing potential. Cunningham (1994) fears that releasing capability through action without the right wisdom could lead to unwise action and that having wisdom alone without the relevant capability can result in no action at all.

Futurist Richard Watson (Watson, 2010) has also expressed his concern regarding a future of more realized potential, “We have greater choice and more personalization, but concentrating on ourselves can reduce the opportunity for serendipitous encounters, with both people and information.”

Letting go of our closely held mental models may also be a source of concern in the release of potential. Senge (1990) defines mental models as deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations or images of how we understand the world and how we take action in it. However, eminent psychologist and consciousness researcher, Robert Ornstein, suggests that it is quite difficult to alter our assumptions even in the face of compelling evidence to the contrary. Ornstein (1977) saw this resistance to change as 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 need for stability.

How is potential measured?

Thomas Gilbert in his provocative book on performance, *Human Competence*, takes an engineering perspective on the measurement of potential. Gilbert proposes a formula to assess the potential for improving performance (PIP), which consists of a ratio of exemplary performance to typical performance. He states (Gilbert, 1978), “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.”

Psychologist Mary-Elaine Jacobsen suggests that part of the problem of measuring potential is our inability to know and explain it to ourselves. In her book, *Liberating Everyday Genius* (Jacobsen, 1999), she writes, “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.” Thus, one of the unexpected benefits of the measurement of potential may be an enhanced knowledge of our own specific gifts.

A very different perspective on the measurement of potential is provided by entrepreneur and author Gene Landrum in his book, *Profiles of Genius*, Landrum (1993), has identified thirteen present-day leaders who he feels have changed the world. These leaders, he believes, share in common many characteristics of the creative genius (such as

Michelangelo). Landrum states, “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.”

Modern neuroscience (Goldberg, 2009) does support the idea that the right hemisphere of the brain seems to be more specialized to handle novelty while the left hemisphere handles the routine. Interestingly, many organizations have developed primarily 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.

How can we maximize our potential?

Individual and organizational researchers have long been intrigued by the question of how to maximize human potential. Humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow (1971) wrote extensively on the subject and argued that our society’s benchmark for human performance was greatly misplaced. Maslow believed that the illness model (defining normalcy by comparing ourselves to the sickest members of our society) was a primary source for the misperception and diminution of our potential capabilities.

How much different could we be, Maslow wondered, if our benchmark for healthy functioning was, instead, the Olympic gold medal winners of the world? In this case, the comparative reference point for measurement becomes positive rather than negative. 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.

Maslow also felt that each of us experiences, whether consciously recognized or not, an inherent internal thrust toward actualizing our potential. In Maslow's concept, we all possess an impulse to self-release our own innate capacity; a capacity that is sturdily encased in the rough stone of our own perceived self-limitations. Today, psychologists might label this taking away of apparent self-restrictions as the advancement of credence in our own competency or "self-efficacy." "Be all you can be," the long-time recruiting slogan of the U. S. Army, seems to reflect the liberating power of realizing our potential and enhancing self-efficacy.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has studied excellent performers for many years. He (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) found from conducting a large number of research studies on very different kinds of people engaged in a wide variety of different activities that there is a state of optimal experience. Csikszentmihalyi called this condition "flow" or "being in the zone". This is a situation where seemingly effortless and effective performance occurs naturally. This particular mental 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 readily accessible to those deeply immersed in the activities of the Arts and Humanities such as dedicated artists, dancers, musicians and writers.

Professor Otto, in his role as the former Co-director of the National Center for the Exploration of Human Potentialities, has suggested that an inter-disciplinary approach should be utilized to better tap our wellsprings of potential. In his 1968 book, *Human Potentialities*, he wrote, “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.” Perhaps, Otto had the mental image of people such as Michelangelo in mind when he wrote these inspiring and optimistic words about our potential.

What does all this mean?

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, he could then replicate it in physical reality with his hands by removing the extra stone that surrounded 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 “Imagination is more powerful than knowledge.”

After reviewing the current evidence, I am more inclined than ever to the optimistic view of our latent potential as expressed by Michelangelo’s metaphor of the entrapped image in the stone. This six-hundred years old artistic premise 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.

The Arts and Humanities have long led the way in providing exemplars of what is possible in the field of human potential. Current researchers in the domain of human possibility intimate that latent human potential is both discoverable and realizable through our own deliberate efforts. With growing advances in our understanding of how our brains, minds, and bodies interconnect, we have just begun to uncover the tools that will help us better realize our implicit potential and shape the future.

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