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Meet the MasterMinds: Discovering the Genius of Michael Gelb



Michael Gelb is an internationally recognized author and pioneer in the fields of creative thinking, accelerated learning, and innovative leadership. He brings more than 20 years of experience as a professional speaker, seminar leader and organizational consultant to his diverse clientele, including BP, Compaq, IBM, Microsoft, the FBI, Dow Jones and KPMG.

He has appeared on *Good Morning America*, CNN's *Business Unusual* and on countless radio programs, including live interviews with NPR and the BBC World Service. In the words of Eddie Oliver, Senior Partner, KPMG, London, "Michael Gelb is to the development of human potential what Buddy Guy is to the blues guitar, simply the best there is."

Gelb's book *How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci: Seven Steps to Genius Every Day* is a *New York Times* best seller that has been translated into 18 languages. His latest book, *Discover Your Genius: How to Think Like History's Ten Most Revolutionary Minds*, examines the nature of genius and shows us how we can tap into our own genius.

MCNews caught up with Gelb recently to talk with him about *Discover Your Genius* and to find out what consultants can learn from his "genius dream team."

MCNews: What inspired you to look more deeply at the subject of genius and to write *Discover Your Genius*?

Gelb: After writing *How to Think Like Leonardo*, I traveled the world talking to people about the seven principles for thinking like Leonardo, and helping them apply those principles to their business and personal development. One of my favorite things to point out is that Leonardo invented the parachute long before anybody could fly! That's just a perfect example of thinking ahead, which is what all my clients want to be able to do.

And, in talking to people, I sensed how this message really struck a deep chord. I still get emails from people all over the world about how the *Leonardo* book changed their lives, how they applied it to their companies, and taught it to their kids. And, it occurred to me that other geniuses throughout history represent specific qualities that could round out and expand on what I'd introduced in *Leonardo*.

MCNews: I'm sure people ask you this all the time, but how did you pick the ten geniuses for *Discover Your Genius*?

Gelb: I had to come up with specific criteria: first, they had to have revolutionized the way we look at the world, they had to have universal influence, and they had to be timeless in their influence.

Reflecting on the idea of revolutionary genius, I thought of things like the invention of the wheel and harnessing fire. But, those can't ever be attributed. So, another criterion was that the breakthroughs had to be reasonably attributable to a given individual.

The most important criterion was that the breakthroughs had to be **useful** for my readers. So, with those criteria, I looked at all of human history. And, that took a while!

I immersed myself in reading intellectual histories, philosophy and the evolution of ideas and consciousness. And, I consulted with a lot of very brilliant people. I also stimulated a lot of conversations at dinner parties. That's one of the really fun things about this book. Once you lay out the criteria, it can become a very lively conversation.

It's amazing how many nominations were based purely on emotion, or because people liked somebody who clearly didn't fit the criteria. Or, they wanted more representatives of one group or another on the list. But, the criteria reigned supreme, and the ten emerged pretty clearly, with some close calls.

I've been asked many times if I regret leaving out other brilliant people, but I stick by my ten. Having said that, I encourage all my readers to make up their own lists. One of the points I like to make is that the title of the book has an intentional double meaning. **We are all gifted with the potential for genius at birth, so discover your own genius.** One way to do that is to discover the people you think have done the best job of realizing their potential, and learn from them.

MCNews: What are the key principles a consultant can glean from the life of just one of your geniuses, Christopher Columbus?

Gelb: First of all, **Columbus can teach anybody the importance of absolute persistence, ingenuity and client focus in getting a project approved.** He spent nine years getting his project approved and funded. In those years, he learned to speak, not just the languages of all the courts of Europe, but the dialects of the upper classes. He himself came from a common background--his father was a weaver. So, he was self-educated.



But, he learned to speak the upper class dialects because he had to win over the counselors to the kings and queens of Europe who would ultimately make his case for him. So, to bond with them and be heard, he had to come across as a peer. **It's just a phenomenal story of a winning presentation, of getting comfortable in the 'client environment.'**

Then, there's the metaphor that Columbus was the first explorer to go perpendicular to the coastline, to go out into the depths in order to discover a new world. So, **when you're looking at an organization, or an individual, what is the greatest point of leverage to depart from the coastline of habit?**

This is the real spirit of innovation, of creativity, that everybody talks about: identify the single most potentially powerful point of leverage for departing from your habitual way of doing business. Which means that **you have to be willing to tolerate being out in the depths, having lost sight of the shore.** And, you also have to be open to the idea that although you have an objective to discover a new world, the new world you discover might be different from the one you set out to find.

People criticize Columbus because he didn't discover India. But, he shows us the importance of a bias to action. He didn't just go sailing out into the middle of nowhere. He did a lot of research: he studied geography and cartography; he was a master navigator, and captain; he was highly

experienced, had navigated many challenging waters before, and was a tremendous student of the winds, which he knew he had to figure out in order to get home.

MCNews: He tackled a high-risk endeavor against all odds with skill, courage and conviction.

Gelb: Right. So, he demonstrates the importance of a bias to action. **Columbus also teaches us the power of optimism.** All the geniuses are examples of this, but Columbus is perhaps the strongest optimist of the ten.

Martin Seligman did some studies that show that optimists get better results across the board, but especially in sales. He did one experiment with MetLife in which he got them to hire the people who had scored high on his optimism profile, but who had been disqualified for sales jobs because they didn't meet the regular hiring criteria. Over a year, this special optimism group outperformed the people who were hired based on the regular criteria by 60%.

An important element is what Seligman calls optimistic explanatory style. How do you talk to yourself when things go wrong? And, do you orient yourself to learn from the experience, to do it better next time, to look at the benefits and positive elements in your life so that you're encouraged and you keep on trying? This is not just to feel good, but for a very practical reason. Your hundred billion brain cells are designed to be the most profoundly powerful problem-solving mechanism in the known universe. So, they're ultimately going to come up with something if you keep your brain engaged!

MCNews: Speaking of engaging your brain, if you have a seemingly insoluble problem, which of your ten geniuses would you look to for help in finding an answer?

Gelb: For problem solving in general, without reference to specifics, I'd definitely say Einstein. His approach is just the textbook model for creative problem solving, which is the principle he represents in *Discover Your Genius*.

Now, **if I had a political problem, I'd call on Elizabeth I.** Because she was all about the balanced and effective use of power, she is actually the most useful ally in my corporate consulting. If I had a personal problem, I'd look to Shakespeare. For a construction problem, I would consult Brunelleschi. If the problem called for courage or exploring it would be Columbus, of course.

But, **for problem solving in general, I would turn to Einstein's methods:** generate lots of ideas, use your imagination, play with the ideas and make new combinations with your ideas; and, make things as simple as possible, not simpler. In fact, that was my guiding principle in writing this book.

MCNews: In consulting, often the challenge is to make the complex simple, without making it simplistic.

Gelb: Right--not dumb it down. But, not fill it with gobbledygook either, which is just obfuscation. That can be a problem in academia because some academics think if anybody can understand this, I must not be smart enough.

MCNews: What are you reading these days?

Gelb: I'm a fanatic of sorts and get into things in a passionate way. Right now, that's Shakespeare. I'm re-reading Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, reading the plays, and listening to them in my car.

One of the great benefits I got from working on ***Discover Your Genius*** is that I really fell in love with Shakespeare. You could spend your life studying Shakespeare and never get close to the full depths of what he wrote. When I was a kid in school, Shakespeare was medicine, which is unfortunately the experience of many people. Now, I've fallen in love with the genius of his writing and all the lessons there for us.

I'm passionate about all ten of these geniuses. Actually, **my favorite genius in the book is Thomas Jefferson**, because freedom makes everything else possible. But for reading at the moment, it's Shakespeare, Shakespeare, and more Shakespeare.

MCNews: It was great talking to you today. Thanks.

Visit Michael Gelb at www.michaelgelb.com. Also, note that Gelb's book, ***Discover Your Genius***, has a companion CD with ten of history's most brilliant musical geniuses.