

Unleashing the Genius in Your Workforce

Scrap that employee bell curve. Stephanie Chick advises managers to set expectations higher and tap the creativity—not just the talent—in their workers

By [Marshall Goldsmith](#)

Stephanie Chick is a colleague and friend whose personal mission is to help corporate employees unleash their personal genius inside the workplace and beyond. While she has [specialized in the area of African-American women](#) (BusinessWeek.com, 3/14/07), her thoughts apply to a wide range of corporate employees. Recently we had an insightful discussion on why unleashing employee potential is critically important in today's challenging business environment. Edited excerpts of our conversation follow:

Why do you feel it's critical that companies focus on unleashing employee potential right now?

Times are extremely tough. Companies are facing multiple challenges: a 24/7 global economy, explosive growth from emerging markets, and pressure from impatient shareowners who are constantly pushing for greater profitability. The business motto of today is 'perform or perish.'

To meet these challenges, hiring managers are focused on finding talented employees—people with the right skills, knowledge, and experience who can help their companies compete effectively in today's marketplace.

But the hard truth is that talent alone won't help you sustain success in today's business environment. Leaders have to look beyond skills, knowledge, and experience and unleash the latent talent and potential that exists within their organizations if they want to survive and thrive. That potential is what I call genius.

That's an interesting perspective. How do you distinguish between talent and genius?

It's a subtle yet significant shift in thinking. Every employee has talent of some kind: He or she is skilled at being able to analyze numbers, bring products to market, or close sales deals. But talent is just the starting point. Genius is talent unleashed. It's the ability to exploit each employee's unique values, passions, strengths, curiosity, and intuition so they can add greater value, transforming themselves and their organizations. Every employee possesses a personal genius. It just has to be set free.

Here's how I really distinguish talent from genius. Talent creates, but genius innovates. Talent excels while genius exceeds. To quote German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, "talent hits a target no one else can hit, while genius hits a target that no one else can see."

There's so much human potential that lies dormant within organizations—potential that companies aren't tapping into that could help them achieve greater success. Instead of tackling the talent gap, companies need to focus on unshackling the genius inside their organizations because it will give them far greater gains.

This shift in thinking is probably easier said than done. How do you get started?

An important first step is to reset expectations about employee potential. Inside most companies, the bell curve is the barometer for success. Many leaders think that only 10% of their employee population can contribute at a high level. That kind of thinking creates a culture of mediocrity and marginal achievement. It's my viewpoint that beliefs impact

behavior. What you achieve is a direct result of what you believe. If every leader and manager could embrace the fact that every employee, regardless of their ethnicity, gender, or educational background, is capable of greatness and possesses personal genius, can you imagine how that might change employee attitudes and actions on the job?

How does this concept resonate with different types of employees?

Deep within, I think that most employees want to fulfill their potential. Life is short and everyone wants to make the most of their lives, professionally and personally. Inside organizations I've noticed that women and people of color really respond to the concept of unleashing genius. They're hungry and ready to achieve more in their jobs. According to Catalyst, in 2007 women held only 15% of corporate officer positions, women of color held just 2%. The inability to exploit their abilities is one of the key reasons that more women are leaving their companies and starting their own businesses.

I'm also noticing that my Generation Y clients have very different expectations from Corporate America than their baby boomer predecessors. They have an immediate desire to unleash their power and potential. During a recent *60 Minutes* segment, a Generation Y interviewee commented, "We're not going to settle. Because we saw our parents settle." Younger generations are impatient and won't wait years to achieve what it took baby boomers to accomplish. For them, unleashing genius is not optional: It's essential.

As you work with companies and their employees to unleash genius, have you run into any significant challenges, or is it all smooth sailing?

The short answer is that it takes work. Talent is a given. Everybody needs it to get in the door. Unleashing genius takes more time and effort and is a messy process. It's a process of trial and error, and success doesn't happen overnight. It really requires companies to be committed to figuring out what really drives and motivates their employees and to be patient with the process of self-discovery. Because unleashing employee potential doesn't follow a linear path.

You must also provide an open and trusting environment that embraces creativity, flexibility, and self-expression. And finally, you've got to be willing to strike a balance between performance and permitting employees to learn from mistakes. Genius is the byproduct of continuous learning and growth and failure is part of learning. So the key advice that I would give companies is to be clear about the realities before taking the plunge. But if they are committed and stay the course for the long haul, the rewards of better employee engagement, improved performance and results, and retaining top employees will be well worth it.

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Readers: What percent of your potential is being realized at work? What can your company do to increase this number? Your reflections, comments and suggestions are greatly appreciated.

*Goldsmith's new book, [What Got You Here Won't Get You There](#), was recently listed as America's best-selling business book in *The Wall Street Journal*. He can be reached at Marshall@MarshallGoldsmith.com, and he provides his articles and videos online at MarshallGoldsmithLibrary.com.*

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