

# **The Michelangelo Premise**

## **Performance, Potential, and Business Psychology**

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### **Abstract**

This paper relates the wisdom contained in a renaissance metaphor with current notions of potential, performance, and the field of Business Psychology. 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 years to come. For business 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 discipline of Business Psychology, the realization of human potential in the context of a business setting has been a long-pursued Holy Grail. And, for the individual manager there is the real possibility of enhanced future performance with an associated economic payoff.

**Keywords:** Michelangelo, performance, potential, business psychology

### **Introduction**

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 sculpting premise is an apt metaphor for contemplating the untapped potential for greater performance resident in each of us. Is it really possible for us to chip away the impervious stone of self-ignorance that hides 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, some possible responses to these questions will be posed followed by a summary of what it all might mean.

### **What is Performance Potential?**

What Michelangelo saw in his mind's eye was a likeness of the realized 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 require different kinds of performances. For example, successfully balancing on a bicycle requires a different work performance than successfully balancing the books of a business. 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 acclaimed 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 (1970: p. 12) 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 Hidden 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 eight multiple intelligences also appear to be well distributed among those of us who have selected the disciplines of Business and Psychology as their chosen 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 (2001) 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 within 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* (1994: p. 128) 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 additional human performance potential may raise more questions for us than it 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 (2010: p. 7) 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 an obstacle for the release of hidden potential. Organizational thinker Peter Senge (2006) defines mental models as deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations or images of how we understand the world and how we take action in it. Further, 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 powerful need for cognitive stability.

### **How is Potential Measured?**

Performance specialist Thomas Gilbert offers a thoughtful 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. Gilbert states (1978: p. 31), “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* (1999: p. 12), 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 (all of them business Chief Executives) who he feels have changed the world. These leaders, he believes, share in common many characteristics of the creative genius (such as Michelangelo). Landrum (1993: p. 57) 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, according to neuropsychologist Elkhonon Goldberg (2009), supports 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 Latent Potential be Actualized”**

Individual and organizational researchers have long been intrigued by the question of how to maximize human potential. Humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow (1998) studied successful businesses and wrote extensively on the relationship between good management and the actualization of potential, calling it “Eupsychian Management.” He 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. This is the economic equivalent of using the companies who fail to survive their first year as a comparative business benchmark.

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 person experiences, whether consciously recognized or not, an inherent internal thrust toward actualizing his or her potential. In Maslow’s concept, we all possess an impulse to self-release our own innate capacity; a capacity that too often is sturdily encased in the rough stone of our own perceived self-limitations. Today, psychologists might label this removal of apparent self-restrictions as the advancement of credence or belief in our own competency or “self-efficacy.” “Be all you can be,” the upbeat, 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 extensively studied excellent performers for many years. 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 mind that appears to equate to creating optimum performance. Csikszentmihalyi called this condition “flow” or, more colloquially, “being in the zone”. This is a situation where seemingly effortless and effective performance occurs naturally without any time-conscious sense of striving. This particular mental, emotional, and physical 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 most readily accessible to those deeply immersed in the activities of the task undertaken.

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 hidden potential. In his book, *Human Potentialities* (1968: p. 5), 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 realizing our potential.

### **What Does it All Mean?**

Just what made Michelangelo such an outstanding painter and sculptor? Was it his native ability or the particular circumstances of his time 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 and obscured 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.”

A review of the current evidence suggests the value of a more optimistic view of latent human potential as expressed by Michelangelo’s metaphor of the entrapped, striking image, in the stone. This six-hundred year 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.

Business and Psychology have long led the way in providing exemplars of what is possible in the field of human potential. In the early 1900s American psychologists Walter Dill Scott (1910) and Hugo Munsterberg (1917) demonstrated the potential for a strong connection between the two fields. Current researchers in the domain of human possibility intimate that latent human potential is both discoverable and realizable through our own deliberate efforts.

Jim Clifton, the Chairman and CEO of the Gallup polling organization, has summed-up the case for human potential nicely (2011: p. 107), “Technology is exploding because human development has caused it to explode. As Thomas Edison said, ‘We don’t know one-millionth of one percent about anything.’ And that’s absolutely true of maximizing human potential too.” 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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English Abstract

# The Michelangelo Premise

## Performance, Potential, and Business Psychology

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### Abstract

This paper relates the wisdom contained in a renaissance metaphor with current notions of potential, performance, and the field of Business Psychology. 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 years to come. For business 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 discipline of Business Psychology, the realization of human potential in the context of a business setting has been a long-pursued Holy Grail. And, for the individual manager there is the real possibility of enhanced future performance with an associated economic payoff

**Keywords:** Michelangelo, performance, potential, business psychology

French Abstract\*  
The Michelangelo Premise  
Performance, Potential, and Business Psychology

## Le principe de Michel-Ange Performance, Potentiel, et Psychologie d'entreprises

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### Résumé

Cette contribution relie la sagesse qui est contenue dans des métaphores de la Renaissance aux notions actuelles de potentiel, de performance et au domaine de la psychologie d'affaires. Les idées du génie de la Renaissance, Michel-Ange, en matière de sculpture sont utilisées comme métaphore puissante qui permet de libérer notre potentiel de performance cachée. L'actualisation du potentiel inhérent est considérée comme une performance de travail créatif qui met en synergie la tête, le cœur et le corps. Le potentiel est considéré comme étroitement lié aux notions de talent et d'intelligences multiples. Pour l'économie mondiale, l'emploi efficace des talents, de l'intelligence et des connaissances sera la force motrice principale pour les années à venir. Pour les organisations professionnelles, les investissements dans la réalisation du potentiel humain constituent une valeur durable et une source continue d'avantages concurrentiels. Pour la discipline de la psychologie d'affaires, la réalisation du potentiel humain, dans un contexte d'entreprise, a été une quête du Graal longtemps poursuivie. Pour le manager individuel, il y a une réelle possibilité de renforcement de la performance future avec un gain économique associé

**Mots-clés** : Michel-Ange, performance, potentiel, la psychologie d'affaires

\* Translated by: Johannes Schaaper, Senior professor in International Management, BEM Bordeaux Management School

German Abstract\*  
The Michelangelo Premise  
Performance, Potential, and Business Psychology

# Die Michelangelo Prämisse

## Performance, Potenzial und Wirtschaftspsychologie

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### **Zusammenfassung**

Diese Arbeit bringt die Weisheit einer Renaissance Metapher mit gegenwärtigen Vorstellungen von Potenzial, Performance und dem Bereich der Wirtschaftspsychologie in Verbindung. Die Ideen von Renaissance Genie Michelangelo über Bildhauerei werden als eine mächtige Metapher für die Freigabe unseres versteckten Performance-Potenzials angewendet. Die Verwirklichung des inhärenten Potenzials ist als eine kreative Arbeits-Performance gesehen, die Kopf, Herz und Körper vereint. Potenzial wird als eng verbunden mit den Talent-Konzepten und der multiplen Intelligenz angesehen.

Für die Weltwirtschaft stellt der effektive Einsatz von Talent, Intelligenz und Wissen eine primäre treibende Kraft für die nächsten Jahre dar. Investitionen in das Humankapital haben für Wirtschaftsunternehmen einen nachhaltigen Wert und stellen die Quelle eines Wettbewerbsvorteils dar.

Für die Disziplin der Wirtschaftspsychologie ist die Realisierung des Humanpotenzials in Unternehmen ein lang angestrebter Heiliger Gral. Für den einzelnen Manager besteht zudem die Möglichkeit einer größeren zukünftigen Performance, die mit einer wirtschaftlichen Auszahlung einhergeht.

**Keywords:** Michelangelo, Performance, Potenzial, Wirtschaftspsychologie

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Spanish Abstract\*  
The Michelangelo Premise  
Performance, Potential, and Business Psychology

# La Premisa de Miguel Ángel

## Rendimiento, Potencial y Psicología de los Negocios

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### Abstract

Este trabajo está relacionado con la sabiduría contenida en una metáfora del renacimiento conectada con las nociones actuales de rendimiento potencial y el campo de la Psicología de los negocios. Las ideas del genio renacentista Miguel Ángel sobre la escultura son empleados como una poderosa metáfora de la liberación de nuestro potencial de rendimiento oculto. La actualización del potencial inherente se presenta como un rendimiento en el trabajo creativo que genera sinergias entre la cabeza, el corazón y el cuerpo. El potencial se ve como estrechamente relacionado con los conceptos de talento e inteligencia múltiple.

Para la economía global, el empleo eficaz del talento, la inteligencia y el conocimiento se proyecta como una fuerza motora para los próximos años. Para las organizaciones empresariales, la inversión en la realización del potencial humano tiene un valor duradero y se considera que es una continua fuente de ventaja competitiva. Para la disciplina de la Psicología de negocios, la realización del potencial humano, en el contexto de un ambiente de negocios, ha sido algo largamente perseguido por el Santo Grial. Y, para los gerentes de personal, existe la posibilidad real de mejorar el rendimiento futuro con una rentabilidad económica asociada.

**Keywords:** Miguel Ángel, rendimiento, potencial, psicología empresarial

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Arabic Abstract\*  
The Michelangelo Premise  
Performance, Potential, and Business Psychology

**افتراض مايكل أنجلو**  
الأداء، الامكانيات، وعلم نفس الأعمال

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**ملخص**

هذه الورقة تربط الحكمة الواردة في التشبيهات المجازية في عصر النهضة مع المفاهيم الحالية للأداء، والإمكانيات، و علم نفس الأعمال. حيث تقوم باستخدام أفكار عبقري النهضة مايكل أنجلو حول النحت كرمز قوي لاطلاق إمكانيات الأداء المخفية لدينا كأفراد. حيث ينظر إلى ادراك الإمكانيات الكامنة كأداء عمل إبداعي ينسجم الرأس، القلب، والجسد فيه بشكل متنازر. وينظر الى الامكانيات المحتملة على أنها مرتبطة ارتباطا وثيقا بمفاهيم الموهبة والذكاء المتعدد. بالنسبة للاقتصاد العالمي، ينظر للتوظيف الفعال للمواهب، والذكاء، والمعرفة على أنه سوف يشكل القوة الدافعة الرئيسية لسنوات قادمة لمنظمات الأعمال، ينظر للاستثمار في تحقيق الإمكانيات البشرية على أنه استثمار ذو قيمة دائمة و مصدرا للميزة التنافسية المستمرة. لعلم نفس الأعمال، تحقيق الإمكانيات البشرية في سياق إطار الأعمال التجارية كان دائماً الغاية والمبتغى. و للمدير هناك إمكانية حقيقية لتعزيز الأداء في المستقبل مع مردود اقتصادي.

**الكلمات الدالة:** مايكل أنجلو، الأداء، الامكانيات، علم نفس الأعمال

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Italian Abstract\*

La Premessa di Michelangelo  
Prestazione, Potenziale, e Psicologia nel Business

# La Premessa di Michelangelo

## Prestazione, Potenziale, e Psicologia nel Business

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### Abstract

Questo documento si relaziona con la saggezza contenuta nella metafora del rinascimento con le nozioni attuali di potenziale, prestazione e il campo della psicologia nel business. Le idee del genio del rinascimento Michelangelo riguardo alla scultura possono essere utilizzate come una potente metafora per sprigionare il nostro potenziale nascosto. La manifestazione di questo potenziale inerente è vista come una prestazione creativa a lavoro che fa sinergia tra testa, cuore e corpo. Il potenziale è visto come molto vicino ai concetti di talento e intelligenze multiple.

Per l'economia globale, l'efficace impiego di talento, intelligenza e sapere sono considerati essere le forze primarie di propulsione per gli anni a venire. Per le aziende investimenti nell'espressione del potenziale umano sono visti come aspetti che durano nel tempo e considerati di essere una fonte continua di vantaggio competitivo. Per la disciplina della psicologia applicata al business, l'identificazione del potenziale umano nel contesto organizzativo è da tempo stata cercata come il Calice Sacro. E, per il manager-individuo c'è concretamente la possibilità di incrementare le prestazioni future con i benefici economici che ne sono associati.

**Keywords:** Michelangelo, prestazione, potenziale, psicologia nel business

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