



# 10 TRAITS OF THE GREATS

BY BOB KODZIS

*So you want to be a creative genius...*

If you really want to become a creative genius, my first advice for you is: surround yourself with creative geniuses for a few years. Work with them, play with them and take great notes. If you're short on time and Spielberg refuses to return your calls, take my second advice: Read this column.

During the last 20 years, I've had the good fortune to work closely with dozens of brilliant and successful creative people. I've also studied the lives and works of many early creative geniuses — pioneers of the arts, science, exploration and business. I can't read enough about people like Edison, da Vinci, Hawking, Jobs and Mozart. In studying these innovators, in person and on the page, I'm constantly looking for the traits, attitudes and actions that set them apart from their contemporaries. I am a prospector panning for creative gold. This is no fool's gold; this is genius gold — creative currency. I'm far from done with my quest, but here's a glimpse at some of the nuggets I've uncovered so far. Keep in mind that this is a living list that will evolve as I continue to read, listen and learn. Call it a starter set. I call it the Traits of the Great Creatives.

## 1. Optimism. *They believe most things are possible.*

***"The thing always happens that you really believe in; and the belief in a thing makes it happen."***

— Frank Lloyd Wright

Every great creative mind I've ever encountered has been optimistic. I don't mean that they were starry-eyed and Pollyanna. They all approach their challenges believing that a brilliant solution can and will be found; a breakthrough discovery will be made.

This optimism includes confidence in their abilities. Joe Rodhi, the Imagineer responsible for designing Disney's Animal Kingdom, once told me that optimism was a key ingredient of the creative ego: "We first have to believe that it can be done. Then we have to believe that we are the ones who have the power to do it. If we don't believe those two things, the battle is lost before we start."

## 2. Persistence. *They never give up.*

***"Obstacles cannot crush me. Every obstacle yields to strong resolve. He who is fixed to a star does not change his mind."***

— Leonardo da Vinci

Throughout history, great creatives have shown that persistence is a personality trait that can move mountains. Two good examples revolve around light and flight.

Thomas Edison spent 52 years perfecting the incandescent light bulb. In the process, he extended the life of the average light bulb from 40 hours to 1,500 hours. That progress took persistence and stamina. If he had given up after 50 years, you might be reading this magazine by candlelight.

Da Vinci executed the designs on dozens of flying machines because he desperately wanted to fly. As each design failed to get off the ground, he'd immediately begin working on the next concept. He continued to pursue flight until his death in 1519. Although he never achieved flight during his lifetime, da Vinci's ideas have contributed to the development of several working flying machines, including the modern helicopter.

## 3. Imagination. *They see all of the possibilities.*

***Teacher: What are you drawing, Amy?***

***Amy (age 5): God.***

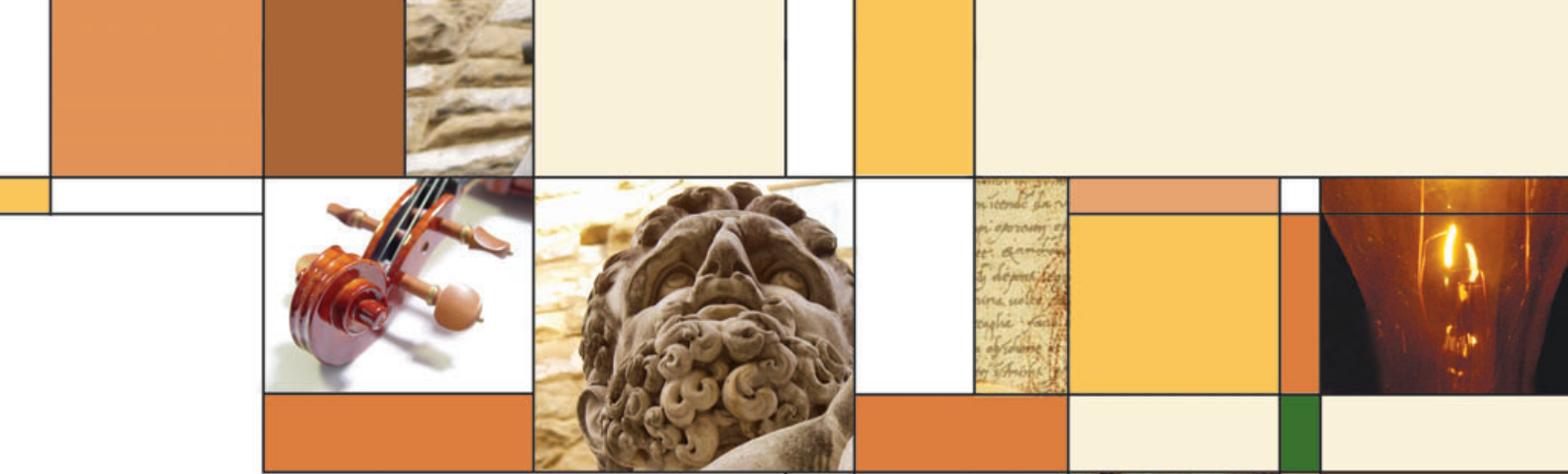
***Teacher: But Amy, nobody knows what God looks like.***

***Amy: They will when I'm done.***

So many of the great minds I've worked with and so many famous creators throughout history refer to the power of the imagination with great reverence and respect. And no imagination gets more respect than that of a child. I've heard so many gifted people refer to the minds of kids with a sense of awe and wonder. Some creative geniuses, like Picasso, considered the child's imagination to be an absolute benchmark of creativity.

Imagination is the talent that allows us to see our ideas before they are realized. It's an ever-changing set of mental blue prints and emerging concepts. For the creative genius, the imagination is a mental gymnasium where they can work out their ideas.

Einstein bolstered many people's perception of the value of imagination when he said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge."



#### 4. Passion. *They love what they do.*

***“Neither a lofty degree of intelligence, nor imagination, nor both together go to the making of genius. Love, love, love, that is the soul of genius.”***

– Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

There is no creative genius without passion. It’s a driving force and the buoy that keeps creators afloat through failure and adversity. It’s what keeps them awake at night.

Passion is both a driver for the creator and an irresistible force which attracts people to follow and support their creative efforts. It’s an essential trait of the greats and it is also one of the sources of their often abundant supplies of energy.

Annie Leibovitz talks of loving the people she photographs. Einstein spoke of his love of mankind and Shakespeare wrote sonnets to express his passions.

#### 5. Energy. *They keep going and going and going...*

***“My mind is always going a thousand miles an hour. My body feels a need to try to keep up.”***

– Jonathan Bailey

Another trait that seems to connect the vast majority of successful creative people is high energy. It’s rare to find a lethargic creative genius. I’ve yet to meet one. This may explain some of the extraordinary productivity that so often accompanies creative genius.

I once commented on the endless physical energy of Jonathan Bailey, a brilliant young architect whose structures are changing the face of the planet. He’s not alone.

Edison was renowned for his energy often working 18 hours a day, surviving on catnaps and four to five hours of sleep per night.

An over-the-top example of pure creative energy is the frenetic force of Robin Williams. Thankfully, not all great creative thinkers bounce off the walls like Williams, but his energy is a reflection of his mind – in speed, versatility and endurance. It’s an enviable gift.



#### 6. Curiosity and Learning. *They want to know more.*

***“We keep moving forward, opening new doors, and doing new things, because we’re curious and curiosity keeps leading us down new paths.”***

– Walt Disney

The brightest minds I have ever known have also been the most curious minds. Creative minds are often insatiable, hungrily consuming information related to their passions.

I have never met a creative genius who was not actively in the process of learning something new. The greats are lifelong learners. At the height of his success as a sculptor and a painter, Michelangelo told his patrons “I am still learning.” It’s both humbling and inspirational in the same breath.

#### 7. Focus. *They choose a target and get lost in their work.*

While I was working on a project for the Kennedy Space Center, Story Musgrave, a 30-year NASA veteran and astronaut on six space shuttle flights, told me that a rocket was really nothing more than a controlled explosion. He said the difference between a rocket and a bomb is that the rocket focuses its explosion in one direction.

I know several creative people who have learned to harness the explosive power of their minds in a similar way. They have an ability to aim all of their high-powered brain cells toward a specific challenge at a specific time and the result is “Lift Off!”

When we think of creativity, we tend to think of free flowing ideas, originality and divergent thinking. We don't typically think of focus. Yet focus is clearly a cornerstone of creative genius.

Many of the greatest minds I've encountered have the ability to control their focus like a mental zoom lens, making the shift from big picture to infinitesimal detail with ease.

## 8. Courage. *They reach beyond the boundaries of fear.*

***"I'm not funny. What I am is brave."***

– Lucille Ball

Great creatives are courageous spirits. They put their reputations and successes on the line everyday in pursuit of the next great idea. They are known for breaking the rules, ignoring conventional wisdom and forging into uncharted territory.

The path to creative genius is paved with insecurities, misunderstanding, rejection, ridicule, and in some cases, outright hostility. Consider the fate of Galileo who was deemed a heretic long before history reclassified him as a scientific genius.

Most of us are only risking our careers and reputations when we leap out of the box. People like Galileo were risking their lives. The basic rule stands true in creativity as it does in the real world: No guts, no glory.

## 9. Communication. *They teach the value of their ideas.*

I remember struggling to communicate an idea to my dad when I was 10 and failing miserably. He told me then, "It doesn't matter how great your ideas are. If you can't effectively communicate their value to the people, who will benefit?" Dad's not a creative genius, but he introduced me to one of the more valuable tools of the trade: communication.

Da Vinci's hundreds of schematic drawings are legendary because they so effectively communicate both the value (why) and the mechanics (how) of his ideas. There are enthusiasts today who entertain themselves by building da Vinci's machines using his original drawings as blueprints.

For a more contemporary example of brilliance, watch Steve Jobs on stage at the next Apple product launch. He uses the full power of his mystique, his environment, and his technology to show people how Apple's latest innovations will change the world.

## 10. Bias for Action. *They don't just think, they do.*

***"The way to get started is to quit talking and begin doing."***

– Walt Disney

Most of the great people throughout history have been people of action. Great creatives are no different. In fact, all acts of creation require action. This is another reason that creative geniuses tend to be very prolific during their lifetimes. Most share a compulsion to create.

Picasso didn't just sit in the Paris cafés thinking about painting; he painted – sometimes all day and night. "Sometimes I don't want to paint." Picasso would tell his friends "Sometimes I must to paint."

Jobs and Steve Wozniak physically built the first Apple computer in that legendary garage because having the great idea wasn't enough. They had to do something with it.

Action is not an option for the creative genius. It's a vital part of the formula.

There is no one formula for creative genius, but these 10 traits represent some of the most important ingredients. Keep stretching, keep searching, and until next time, stay inspired!

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