



# Tapping into Genius

A study of the mindsets of 500 business leaders when they were delivering their most extraordinary results

By Pontish Yeramyan and Eric Jackson

## SUMMARY

A large-scale study was conducted to investigate the mindsets of business leaders when they were at their most effective and delivering their best results. In-depth structured interviews were conducted with 503 executives over a ten-year period. When performing at their highest level, they were found to be governed by identifiable mindsets, or sets of attitudes and beliefs, that propelled them to their highest achievements. Eight distinct mindset themes were identified, and each leader revealed some combination of these eight mindset themes in ways that gave them the most power.

## INTRODUCTION

Executives' skills and talents do not vary greatly from day to day, but their level of satisfaction in producing strong results does vary greatly. For more than ten years, Gap International has been testing the hypothesis that the leader's mindset at any given moment in time has an overwhelming impact on their ability to be their best and deliver exceptional results in the business and with their people. Their mindset in any moment impacts their mood, their clarity of thinking, their sense of strength and well-being, and their capacity to influence others and accomplish great things.

Gap International's Leveraging Genius Institute is committed to studying and elucidating the mindset, or background thinking, of executives when they are at their best. In an evolving process of conducting in-depth structured interviews, we have succeeded in solving at least a part of the puzzle: why the same person creates great things in some settings and not in others, and on some days but not all the time. Along the way, these findings have resulted in numerous breakthrough business results for the executives we studied. This paper addresses common characteristics of leaders' mindsets that we have found to be associated with times of high accomplishment. We refer to this mindset, including the ideas and attitudes that are in play when a leader is most effective, as their Genius.

Data to be presented here represents a summary of the most prominent and influential ideas and attitudes that comprise the Genius of the most recent 500 executives we have studied in detail, by conducting and re-conducting sophisticated, structured interviews.

**TABLE 1**

Eight major mindset themes and their 25 subcategories

| MINDSET THEMES         | SUBCATEGORIES   |
|------------------------|---|
| Purposeful             | Impact on the world<br>God/Spirituality   |
| Other People           | Helping others, care of people, setting people up to win<br>Collaboration, contribution<br>Connection, love, relationships<br>Appreciation of others, people mattering and having potential |
| Me with Me             | Self-acceptance, self-awareness<br>Confidence, trust in oneself<br>Ownership, accountability<br>Integrity, wholeness, balance   |
| Positive Outlook       | Freedom, choice<br>Possibility<br>Optimism, positivity  |
| Experience of Life     | Fun, joy, ease, happiness<br>Environment, space<br>Appreciation, gratitude  |
| Maximize Possibilities | Finding solutions<br>Structure and logic<br>Optimize, make the most   |
| Growth/ Evolution      | Learning, curiosity, discovery<br>Innovation and creation<br>Risk, challenge, "going for it"  |
| Get it Done            | Perseverance, persistence, follow-through<br>Hard work, effort<br>Outcome focus, winning  |

## METHOD

### The development of the structured interview, the Genius Inquiry, and training of interviewers.

The process of studying the mindset of executives when they are being their best involved the development of a structured interview process called the Genius Inquiry and the training of consultants to perform the interviews. Over a period of several years the process was refined, with the output of each successful interview being a clearly defined description of the ideas and attitudes of the executives at times they were delivering some of their finest accomplishments. The language used by executives provided significant clues to their mindset, and interviewers were trained to listen to their language and interview further until they were able to map out an understandable and meaningful logic system that connects the various ideas and attitudes that make up the leader's mindset.

An intense training program for consultants was launched. Criteria for the successful conduct of the Genius Inquiry were established, and consultants were required to study and practice for 200 to 1,000 hours, sometimes more, until certified as proficient in demonstrating both the process and output of a successful Genius Inquiry. A total of 134 consultants have been certified to conduct Genius Inquiries, and certification is repeated annually.

### Data Collection

Collection of data was conducted at seven week-long Leveraging Genius Conferences between 2003 and 2014. These conferences were conducted in Switzerland, England and the United States, and included a total of 662 business executives. At each conference, two consultants conducted Genius Inquiries with four executives, giving extensive individual attention and commitment to high-quality collection of data.

Over time, the structured interview process evolved, and the collection of data became increasingly

reliable and replicable. Data from the most recent five conferences, with 503 executives, are included in this report.

The Genius mindsets of the executives revealed in the structured interviews were subsequently analyzed and codified and, in an iterative process, distilled into categories for study and display.

## RESULTS

In studying the Genius Inquiries of 503 executives, eight major themes were identified as overarching and highly influential components of the leaders' mindsets. Within those eight themes, 25 subcategories were identified. **TABLE 1** shows the themes and the subcategories, ranked in order of frequency.

Many other attitudes and ideas appeared in the mindsets as well; however, the eight listed in **TABLE 1** were determined to be the most influential overarching themes. Other components of the mindsets, and the logic systems that hold them together, will be addressed in later publications.

While all eight themes appeared frequently, there were two that predominated. Almost every executive included in their mindset a theme of one or both of the top two most common attitudes or beliefs:

1. Purposeful
2. Other People

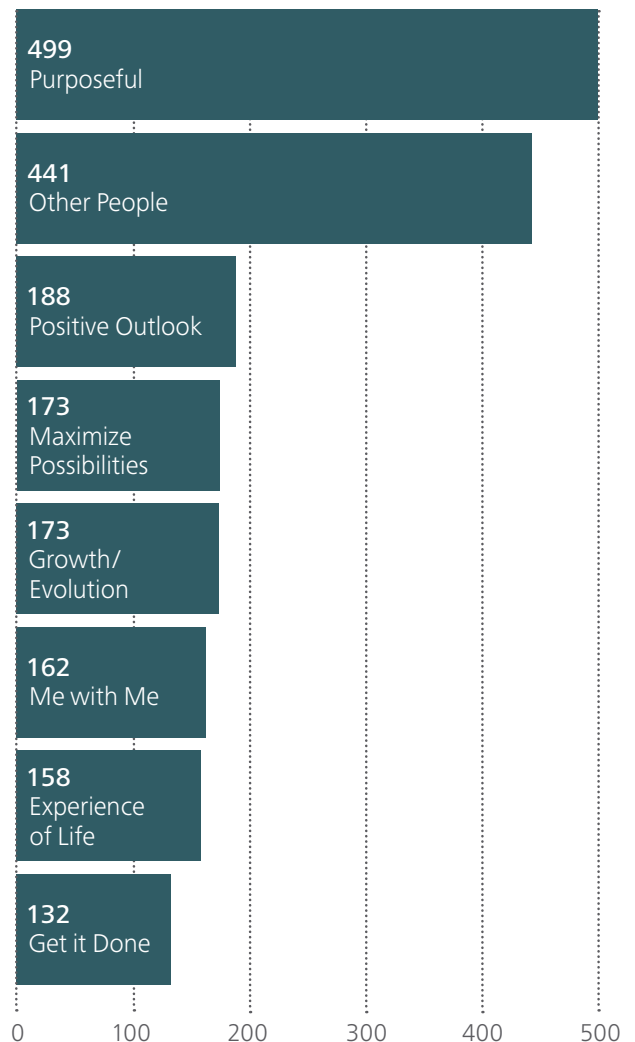
The frequency with which these themes occurred is shown in **FIGURE 1**.

## DISCUSSION

The importance of mindset on performance is widely appreciated. In sports, on the stage, in teaching and public speaking as well as business, people generally appreciate that a positive or a winning mindset can make an important difference in results. Mindset can affect motivation, tenacity and spirit, with direct impact on the outcomes.

**FIGURE 1**

The frequency of occurrence of the eight major mindset themes



What this work with business leaders reveals is that it is possible to study mindset systematically, and with sufficient rigor and feedback, interviewers can learn to tease out the elements of mindset that impact business performance. This is an important possibility, since it is not often the first place people look to improve their business results.

One of the most powerful findings has been that after the process of the Genius Inquiry was fully explicated and refined, the findings gathered from conference to conference were similar and showed an increasingly familiar and understandable profile of high-accomplishment mindsets in business.

It turned out that the profile of many highly successful mindsets had one or both of two consistent themes, 1. Purposeful, and 2. Other People. These sets of ideas and attitudes were overwhelmingly the most common, although it is also important to add that a significant number of highly successful executives had neither of these two themes as predominantly influential in their mindsets.

Still, these were the overwhelmingly most common, and they have a feature in common; which is that the attention of the high-accomplishing executive has an external focus that includes a sense of a greater purpose for their work and a significant attention on the success of other people in their organizations.

## 1. Purposeful

A large percentage of executives when at their best exhibited mindsets related to a sense of purpose and making a larger difference in the world. “Help others,” “impact the world,” “leave a legacy,” were typical elements of highly successful purposeful mindsets. What is notable is that sustaining that kind of mindset in the midst of difficult circumstances or even crises seemed to give executives a powerful perspective on making the kind of difference they want to make. It is speculated that the frequency, intensity and duration of a “purposeful” mindset provides

important context for decision-making and leading. Further analyses of the data may provide more evidence in this regard.

This overall finding seems to substantiate the claim that when a leader is connected to a larger purpose or something bigger than themselves—that is, the contribution they want to make to the world or to humanity—their Genius mindset is active.

## 2. Other People

Successful executives are sometimes thought of as self-absorbed high achievers, with a lot of attention on their own success. The mindsets of the leaders we interviewed revealed a different set of characteristics; namely, that their genuine commitment to the success of others seems to propel them to high levels of accomplishment.

Once elucidated, the finding makes sense. Exceptional outcomes require the contributions of others. The higher the level of a leader, the more they may have grown to understand the reward of and the possibility of being connected to others. We live in a business world of teamwork, so much more than the star individual achiever; however, such stars still exist and provide a lot of value. Although driving for results without caring much for people may have some success, the interview findings indicate that participants’ highest accomplishments come when they are focused strongly on the success of others.

Further research is being conducted. Data has been collected on:

- The next level of detail in understanding ideas and attitudes that flesh out anyone’s mindset
- The process of acquiring another person’s successful mindset and applying it to oneself
- Exploration of methods to increase the frequency and reliability of desired mindsets
- The study of mindsets that deliver weak results and low accomplishment

These research areas will be the topics of upcoming reports.

## CONCLUSION

This is a strong beginning to the study of high accomplishment in a non-traditional way. The study of the mindsets of leaders seems to have the potential to open up new avenues for research and executive development. Research is already under way on a variety of useful topics. The main conclusions to be drawn from this early work are that:

- It is possible to study executives' mindsets in a systematic way and collect valuable and applicable data
- Most leaders studied had a well-developed sense of their own purposefulness and a demonstrable commitment to other people

## THE LEVERAGING GENIUS INSTITUTE

The Leveraging Genius Institute provides research, insights, tools, and programs that support leaders to discover their Genius, develop their people, and grow their organizations to deliver exceptional results.

Our multi-disciplinary research team is dedicated to studying the science behind our concept of Genius and expanding its reach and application through products, programs and methodologies. Team members include researchers with advanced degrees in linguistics, psychology and neuroscience, who share the passion for all things Genius, and a dedication to bringing that knowledge to business performance and leadership.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### **Pontish Yeramyian** **Founder and CEO**

For more than 30 years, Ms. Yeramyian has worked with CEOs of Fortune and Global 500 companies in leading major growth initiatives that change the trajectory of performance. She has created groundbreaking programs in organizational alignment and leveraging the Genius of leaders and teams. She has dedicated her life to individuals and organizations making a difference in the world and going beyond the limits of what they see possible.

### **Eric Jackson, Ph.D.** **Chief Innovation Officer**

Dr. Eric Jackson leads The Leveraging Genius Institute, a team of multi-disciplinary researchers in the fields of linguistics, psychology and neuroscience. His creativity and leadership have been instrumental in developing new tools and approaches to accelerate business growth and impact leadership. Prior to his current role, Dr. Jackson led research and development for all of Gap International's programs and services.

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