



How to... Live like a genius

Michael J. Gelb has identified the seven essential aspects of Leonardo da Vinci's Genius. Here, he explains how to harness your own inner renaissance Man.



GQ Australia - Michael J Gelb feature June July 2011

Michael J. Gelb is a world authority on the application of genius thinking to personal and organisational development, with a client list that includes IBM, Microsoft and Nike. Himself a pioneer in the fields of creative thinking, accelerated learning and innovative leadership, Gelb had long been fascinated with the achievements of polymath prodigy Leonardo da Vinci, so he decided to analyse the great man's thought processes. Unfortunately for Gelb, the tome that grew out of his research didn't have quite the impact as that other book with 'da Vinci' in the title; fortunately for the rest of us, it contains far more useful information. Gelb, who's visiting Australia in mid-June to speak at the Happiness and Its Causes Conference, has identified seven da Vincian principles we should all embrace.

1.) **Curiosità:**

An insatiably curious approach to life and an unrelenting quest for continuous learning.

Every child is born with passionate curiosity and a natural love of learning. But once we go to school, answers seem to become more important than questions and the fear of failure becomes stronger than the passion to explore. One of the best ways to foster curiosity as an adult is to keep a notebook. Leonardo carried one around so he could jot down ideas and observations as they occurred. The exploratory, free-flowing and non-judgmental practice of keeping a notebook encourages freedom of thought and expansion of perspective.

2.) **Dimostrazione:**

A Commitment to test knowledge through experience and a willingness to learn from mistakes.

Leonardo was one of the least pious and superstitious thinkers of his time. At a time when few questioned anything, he questioned everything. He taught himself Latin at age 40 to read the classics, but remained wary of "bookish prejudices". He struck up friendships with other great minds — such as Machiavelli — but critically evaluated their theories against his own experience. Most importantly, he recognised that to challenge the dominant worldview, you must first challenge your own preconceptions, declaring: "The greatest deception men suffer is from their own opinions."

3.) **Sensazione:**

The continual refinement of the senses as the means to enliven experience.

"The average person looks without seeing, hears without listening, touches without feeling, breathes in without awareness of fragrance, eats without tasting and talks without thinking," wrote da Vinci. Like Leonardo, you should endeavour to create an aesthetically uplifting working environment. Contemporary research demonstrates that the quality of your surroundings significantly affects the way your brain functions. Also, we are fortunate to live in an age where we have easy access to beautiful music, great literature, uplifting art and fine food. You can enrich your life and inspire more happiness and creativity by appreciating sensory delights. Visit a museum, listen to Mozart or read up on your favourite artist today.

4.) **Sfumato:**

A willingness to embrace paradox and strengthen intuition.

Sfumato represents a distinguishing characteristic of highly creative individuals: the ability to embrace uncertainty. You can strengthen your intuition by understanding its body and emotion-centred nature. Every culture uses terms like "I knew it in my gut." But the gut doesn't send text messages or emails. Learn to pause, breathe and listen within. And remember — poise in the face of paradox is the key not only to effectiveness, but sanity in a rapidly changing world.

5.) **Arte/Scienza:**

The balance between logic and imagination.

In addition to creating great art, Leonardo was a trailblazer in the fields of anatomy, architecture, cartography, engineering, geology and mathematics. In his notebooks, Leonardo explains his creative process: "Letting the mind go free... to think of thousands of things... which you may then reduce to their complete and proper forms." In modern parlance, Leonardo is stimulating the imagination (right brain) to generate ideas then using analysis (left brain) to organise them. Mind mapping — creating diagrams with ideas arranged around a central concept or word — is a contemporary, practical version of this process.

6) **Corporalità:**

The cultivation of grace, fitness and poise.

For all his intellectual brilliance, Leonardo was by no means an effete egghead. Renowned as the strongest man in Florence, he was much admired for his grace, poise and good looks. He counsels us that health can be preserved by efforts to "avoid grievous moods and keep your mind cheerful". He also advocated a diet of fresh, wholesome food and a moderate intake of red wine.

7.) **Connessione:**

An appreciation for the interconnectedness of things.

Leonardo believed that "everything connects to everything else". If you want to increase your understanding of, and ability to function effectively in, your workplace, ask yourself connection questions, such as: what are the roles of all the stakeholders associated with my workplace? How are their roles interdependent? What happens to the group's dynamics under stress? How do the patterns of functioning I learned in my family affect the way I operate at work?

A Da Vinci notebook exercise

- *Make a list of 100 questions.*
- It can include any question as long as it's something significant — anything from 'How can I be happier?' to 'What is the purpose of my life?'
- *Do the entire list in one sitting.* Write quickly and don't get hung up on spelling. The first 20 or so will be off the top of your head. In the next 30-40, themes usually begin to emerge. When generating the last 30-40 questions, you may discover unexpected and profound material. When you have finished, read your list and identify the common threads. Are most of your questions about relationships? Business? Fun? Happiness? choose the ten questions that seem most significant and rank them in order of importance.
- *Don't attempt to answer them right away,* just invite them to stimulate your curiosità.