

THE 46 RULES OF GENIUS

An innovator's guide to creativity

MARTY NEUMEIER



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*Text and
illustrations
by
Marty Neumeier*

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AN INNOVATOR'S GUIDE TO CREATIVITY

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*In honor of
Saul Steinberg
and
E. B. White*

WHAT IS A GENIUS?

To most people, a genius is someone with a towering IQ—say 140 points or higher. This is simplistic. A genius is more than that, but also less. In practice it only takes an IQ of 125 to become a genius. What you need beyond that is a facile imagination and the skills to apply it, driven by a passionate will toward a focused goal.

A genius doesn't start out as a genius at *everything* but a genius at *something*. For example, you can be a genius at molecular biology, or a genius at reading people's feelings. You can be a genius at programming software, or a genius at broken-field running. This puts genius-hood within the reach of nearly everybody. Over time, a genius may connect several *somethings* into a semblance of *everything*, but this is optional in the definition of genius.

In my recent book *Metaskills*, I laid out five talents we'll need to thrive in an age of increasing man-machine collaboration. These talents, which I've called metaskills, are *feeling*, or empathy and intuition; *seeing*, or systems thinking; *dreaming*, or applied imagination; *making*, or design talent; and *learning*, the ability to acquire new skills. None of these needs a high IQ. What they need is a high regard for creativity. The rules in this book

are creative rules. They're general guidelines to help you envision, invent, contribute, and grow.

Then what's a genius? Here's my working definition: A genius is any person who turns insight into innovation, and in the process changes our view of the world. In other words, it's *someone who takes creativity to the point of originality*. The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer said it best: "Talent hits a target no one else can hit; genius hits a target no one else can see."

The rules in this book are as timeless as they can be. None of them are new, yet they can help you *create* something new. Michelangelo didn't invent the hammer and chisel, but by using these tools he sculpted the *Pietà*. Just as you can't shape a block of marble with your bare hands, you can't shape ideas with your bare mind. You need rules. Rules are the tools of genius. Use them when they help; put them aside when they don't.

I've purposely written a concise book. Most of the creative people I know are consumed by their projects, and reading a long book is a luxury they can't always afford. So here's a slim volume with bite-size advice. You can reach into it randomly, underline its salient points, return to the rules as needed.

I make no claims of completeness for *The 46 Rules of Genius*. Instead, I've chosen to focus on the principles most often ignored, forgotten, or heedlessly broken. It starts with some advice on strategy—or how to get the right idea. It continues with practical tips on execution—how to get the *idea right*. From there it moves to building your creative skills over time, and finally to putting your brilliance to work in the larger world.

Caution: *The 46 Rules of Genius* is not for everyone, for the simple reason that not everyone can be a genius. This is not usually a failing of native intelligence. It's more likely a lack of a) will, or b) skill. I presume you have a good supply of a), or you wouldn't have this book in your hand. As to b), you'll need a little help—and a healthy appetite for work. Happily, work is not really work when you're investing in what you love.

My fondest wish is that you'll combine the desire you already have with these time-tested principles to ignite an endless cycle of creative growth: your desire will drive your learning, and your learning will fuel your desire. This is the magic that makes a genius. If you accept this as a central premise, the rest will follow.

—Marty Neumeier

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*There is
no great genius
without a mixture
of madness.*

—Aristotle

Rule 4 **SEE WHAT'S NOT THERE**

One of the skills that separates a leader from a follower is the ability to see what *might* be, but so far *isn't*. Most people can see what's already there. You don't need magic glasses to see that the Eiffel Tower is a popular tourist destination, or that the area of a rectangle is the product of its height and width, or that millions of people will pay extra for a fancy cup of coffee. But you do need magic glasses to see what's still missing from the world, since by definition what's missing is invisible.

The trick is to notice what artists and designers call *negative space*. It's the plain background of a painting, the white space on a printed page, the silence between lines of a play, or the rests within a musical score. In the world of art, these are purposeful elements of composition. In the marketplace, these are crevices that harbor opportunity.

Try these three techniques for discovering the negative space in a marketplace, a problem, or a situation.

Sift through threats for hidden possibilities. Every threat carries with it the potential for innovation. The problem of obesity contains the possibility of new kinds of nutrition. The problem of global pollution contains the possibility of new energy

sources. The problem of high unemployment contains the possibility of new educational models. The list is endless, if you can learn to see what's not there.

Examine sectors for uneven rates of change.

The future is already here, goes the saying—it's just distributed unevenly. Look for areas that have changed, then look for similar or adjacent areas that haven't changed. Search for pockets of resistance to successful new ideas. Chances are, it's only a matter of time before change comes. Why not be the catalyst?

Imagine how a growing trend might affect an established norm. Make a list of nascent and dominant trends, then mentally apply them to industries, businesses, and activities that haven't changed for a long while. What will the trend toward organic farming mean for fast-food restaurants? What will mobile payments do to retail shopping habits? How might nanotechnology change the energy market? How will always-on computing change the college experience?

To find out what's not there, look for the job *not* done, the road *not* taken, the product *not* made. These are the magic glasses that let you see the invisible and conceive the inconceivable.