

Do You Have “Superstar” Potential?
Penelope Trunk | July 12, 2011 4:41am PDT

It's easy to know what the superstar looks like after the person's star already is shining. But it's much harder to identify that diamond in the rough. BusinessWeek reports that 90% of managers believe they are in the top 10% in performance.

This is hilarious. Until you are working with one of those people. And then you start to ask yourself: Am I like this? Am I delusional? How strong a performer am I really?

It's hard to look at yourself objectively, but a while back, I noticed that I was good at recognizing talent. The last company that I founded, Brazen Careerist, focuses on identifying high performers for companies, and helping people early in their career reach their potential. So I have a lot of experience in this area, and I've noticed that there are a few telltale signs of “star” potential.

You bet big on yourself.

Today, I live on a farm, and Brazen Careerist is run by Ryan Healy, a guy I partnered with when he was just a year out of school. When I met him, our fights were mostly about me thinking he's immature. After three years of working together our fights got really interesting because he was my equal. (There's an extra piece of advice: you can judge your co-workers by how well they fight with you.)

One of things that made Ryan stand out to me was his willingness to take risks. He started a blog when few people were blogging. He left a great job at IBM to do a startup. He moved across country with no money in his pocket. He was willing to bet on himself, which made other people want to bet on him.

You take alternative paths.

Being great means being different from everyone else. So you are not likely to stand out if you are on that common path. Instead, you are likely to go to a common place.

The way you can tell if you are taking an alternative path is by how many people are telling you you're an idiot. Today entrepreneurship is the new safety net, moving back with your parents is totally acceptable, and job-hopping is the default. So if those are your ideas of alternative, forget it.

Alternative is something people have no patience for because it sounds so self-destructive to the mainstream.

You're overly focused.

The recent star-worthy twentysomething I've started working with is Melissa. She quit her high-flying job in Asian finance to be a photographer. While she was making a lot of money at finance, she decided she would never be truly great at it. Whereas she believes she does have a chance at being world-renowned as a portrait photographer. Maybe she will be, maybe she won't. But part of being a star is taking a path that looks loony because it's intrinsically limiting - you end up having a longer list of what you don't do than what you do.

You were a mediocre student.

Stellar students spend their 20s in complete shock and indignation that school rewards rule followers but work does not. Life is not fair. (Luckily you can rescue your own children from this pitfall by unschooling them.) There is reams of evidence to show that good grades do not correlate to good careers. And, many mediocre students have a sixth sense about what matters and what doesn't matter, and they kick into really high gear when it's about what they are interested in and not about grades. It's a sign that you have star potential in the business world if you did not have star potential at school.

You read. A lot.

It doesn't matter what you read. But unproven hotshots spend a lot of time reading because they have a natural curiosity and level of engagement. It's true that not everyone is a reader, but this is an odds game, and you make your odds of being a workplace hotshot by reading a lot. You can read comics, car specifications, Garden & Gun magazine - you can read anything. (Also, click that last link. I love that magazine. I subscribed because the title sounds so ridiculous. I keep reading because the writing is totally great... actually, maybe Melissa should take photos for them.)

Your goals align with your Myers Briggs score.

You can only be a star in a field that matches up with your Myers Briggs score. (You can check out your own Myers Briggs score here.) If you're an ENTJ, for example, you absolutely must have people to lead. There is no way around it. There are no ENTJs who are hotshot designers locked up alone in a room lit only by a disco ball. That doesn't happen. Or at least it doesn't happen without some long-term psychic cost to either the worker or the co-workers or both. People need to do what their personality was born to do.

Another no-go: An INFP can't manage other people. You might envision your great ascent up the corporate ladder, but if you're an INFP, managing corporate goals and mediating other peoples' interpersonal issues, will eventually drive you to insanity.

So you lack star potential?

You might not actually have the temperament to be a star at work. Your star power might lay somewhere else - like home with kids. But that's okay. You can only be who you are. It's just nice to know who you are while you work toward becoming it. You know how your kindergarten teacher told you the whole class is full of bright stars? It's true. It's just that some of you were meant to work the monkey bars.