

Catalyst

Catalyst is published every two months, for alumni of our seminars and workshops to remain connected, and for coaching clients, prospective clients, and other interested parties to learn about who we are and what we do. Also available electronically in Writings at www.DancingStar.com

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Gifted Executive “Addicts”

This is the fourth in a group of newsletters exploring issues around gifted adults in business.

When exploring the issue of gifted adults in business, the question arises of whether there’s a link between unsupported giftedness (see previous issues Volume 6 Issues 3 and 4; Volume 7 Issue 1) and addiction.

To paraphrase Dr. Deborah Ruf, “*gifted children often communicate differently, may move faster and more often, seem bigger and more intense. Too often they get the message ‘fit in, be different than you are, be more like us’. They can’t get accurate feedback on their acceptability and lovability under these circumstances. If their profile includes depression, this can be a determinant of who gets caught by addiction later in life.*”

Addiction is never one person’s alone. It is systemic – powerfully affecting all who come in contact with it. It has huge financial impact on organizations, both in terms of absenteeism and – increasingly recognized as an issue – “presenteeism”. One estimate puts the cost to American business due to alcoholism on the order of \$110 billion. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimated in 2001 there were 10.2 million drug users employed full or part time. Clearly this issue is real, and can be destructive. It therefore behooves us to

first understand addictive behavior and its impact.

Addiction is fundamentally about medicating pain. Whatever the substance, person, or process, it is about using something or someone to lessen the discomfort a person feels in their lives. The greater the pain, the higher the likelihood of addictive behavior.

To put it a bit more gently, addiction is a way to get some needs met; to create a sense of well-being, lovability and acceptability, of “fitting in”. However, when an addictive process is in full flower, other needs get overlooked.

Addiction is, to draw from the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, “cunning and baffling”, a “dis-ease” – or lack of ease – for which there is no real cure. As the disease progresses, addicts use denial, deception, manipulation, and control in order to keep the “medication” or “fix” coming. What was a pleasurable way to release oneself from tension or to add a little excitement to life can become a painful trap, particularly when attempts to put the behavior or substance aside fail.

Now for the good news. Whether it is your own or others’, there is a huge range of help for it, and we are learning more all the time about the causes of addiction and how to successfully intervene in the process.

Now, to explore the connection with giftedness further, look around

at executives around you. Do you see people whose behavior doesn’t make sense? Do you wonder what it is that drives her or him to do the dysfunctional things they do, when they have so much obvious talent, intellect, and ability? Here’s a place to look. Being gifted equates with being different. That can be painful.

As Ruf says, “*I see a connection between very bright people not recognizing or understanding how their abilities, ways of processing life, and sensitivities affect their social and emotional adjustment. This can, and very often does, lead to depression and/or substance abuse. Such abuse can become addictive.*”

To reach top levels in business or even that corner office, one clearly needs great gifts. Living with those gifts and the attendant intensity, complexity, and drive – characteristics for which others often tease, berate, misunderstand, or simply ignore you – can create intense pain in childhood, often suppressed. That pain will surface at some point in life, sometimes in highly dysfunctional ways.

Many gifted adults have no issues with addictive behavior, probably the majority, though it is hard to put a number to the proportion.

However, for those who are not so lucky, helping them understand their gifts could well be a key to helping free them from the painful grip of addiction.

– Deborah Huisken

ARE YOU UP FOR IT?

If you and your company are committed to having an impact in the world, and can use the services of a block-busting coach, consultant, or team facilitator to help you stay on target amid myriad demands, contact Dancing Star International, US landline: +1 413.367.9416; UK cell: +44 798 521-4520; e-mail: info@DancingStar.com, or find us on the web at www.DancingStar.com.

In choosing not to address an issue, at best the result will be a standstill. The next generation will pay dearly for it.

– Carl Gustav Jung



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*One must embrace the chaos within to give birth
to a dancing star – adapted from Nietzsche*

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RESOURCES

– Sharon Wegscheider's **Another
Chance – Help and Hope for the
Alcoholic Family** describes the
impact of alcoholism on families.

– Anne Wilson Schaeff & Diane
Fassel describe the impact of addic-
tions in business in **The Addictive
Organization**.

Both can be ordered at [www.danc-
ingstar.com](http://www.danc-
ingstar.com).

Deb's Corner



*A gifted colleague who
has dealt with addic-
tion shared this story:*

As a pre-schooler, I
taught myself to read
by listening to my
mother teach my older

brother. I skipped kindergarten, spent
3 months in first grade, then moved to
second grade.

It was the beginning of a lifetime of
feeling 'different', without a context.
Was different good or bad? Should I
do anything about it? In the 1950s in
my small town there were few
resources for gifted children, and I
had no family support in this realm.

Essentially on my own, I guessed at
what was normal, and floundered
through school. I took 5 years to get
through high school, yet I was still
younger than everyone else. I amassed
a record number of detention hours;
one summer I was sitting there in July.

I discovered idealism as a coping
strategy, in the face of overwhelming
evidence that it did not work. I also
discovered alcohol and drugs, and
freewheeled through the '60s.

I bounced from job to job – first
construction and tree climbing, then
after graduating from a small college
wandered the world in international
business, later taking an MBI in the
subject. I had no business in business
– mental horsepower and Valium saw
me through.

I worked in the oilfields of Egypt,

Venezuela, Colombia; out on the
drilling rigs, in war- and guerilla-held
zones, as a Senior Project Engineer
for a major oil company – this with a
BA in Liberal Arts.

I landed in New York City with a
major bank. After five years of all-day
nausea, a therapist told me this was
my body telling me I did not want to
be there. That year I quit drinking and
the job, divorced, and painted houses.

I continued wandering, but now
with more purpose. I studied personal
development and meditated while
working as a consultant in oil and gas
in South America. At least now I was
paying attention to my inner signals.

Eight years ago I started mentoring
junior employees and clients, which
awakened my "truth" – that my mileu
is teaching, counseling, and coaching.
The earlier, "lost" years inform my
work, as I can relate to clients who are
confused and lost. My experiences as
a gifted person in the corporate world
who spent years medicating before I
finally got in touch with the real me
are also invaluable.

I want to live in the larger world.
For me, this means being as self-
aware as possible, and incorporating
my gifts as differentiators in the mar-
ketplace. I do not want nor expect
special treatment. I do want to be val-
ued for the unique contributions I
make. Yes, I do have a rich interior
life, and I do live in my head more
than most. Turns out, it works for me!

LETTERS

Response to article by Jim Earley, MCC, Vol. 6 (4). As an expert on the psychology and life issues of gifted adults, and also an executive coach and international consultant, I am compelled to respond to Mr. Earley's article *Diversity and "Gifted" Adults*, July, 2004. Although most of the characteristics of gifted individuals taken from M.K. Streznewski's book are validated in the professional literature, I'm concerned about one statement in particular: *Being super smart can lead to trouble because of the lousy social/interpersonal skills typical in this group.* This inflammatory statement is not supported in the literature. It is, unfortunately, a widely held stereotype that professionals in my field are trying very hard to correct. In truth, many gifted adults have exceptional relationship skills and insights, and are often highly charismatic leaders who elicit excellence from their colleagues. Nevertheless, outdated unsupported beliefs and exaggerated movie characters continue to infect our perceptions. Far too often, gifted individuals are portrayed as badly-dressed temperamental bunglers oblivious to social cues and devoid of finesse in interpersonal interactions. Sadly, even professional people fail to understand that this view pertains to only a handful of gifted people – and to many who are not gifted as well. The vast majority of my gifted adult clients and international consultees have struggled their whole lives with unwarranted demeaning remarks from others who label them erroneously and insultingly. As professionals we are called upon to paint accurate pictures of groups of people, including the gifted. If the goal is to increase our understanding and acceptance of individual differences, then we must take care to avoid making biased assumptions and typecasting gifted adults in this manner.

- Dr. Mary-Elaine Jacobsen