

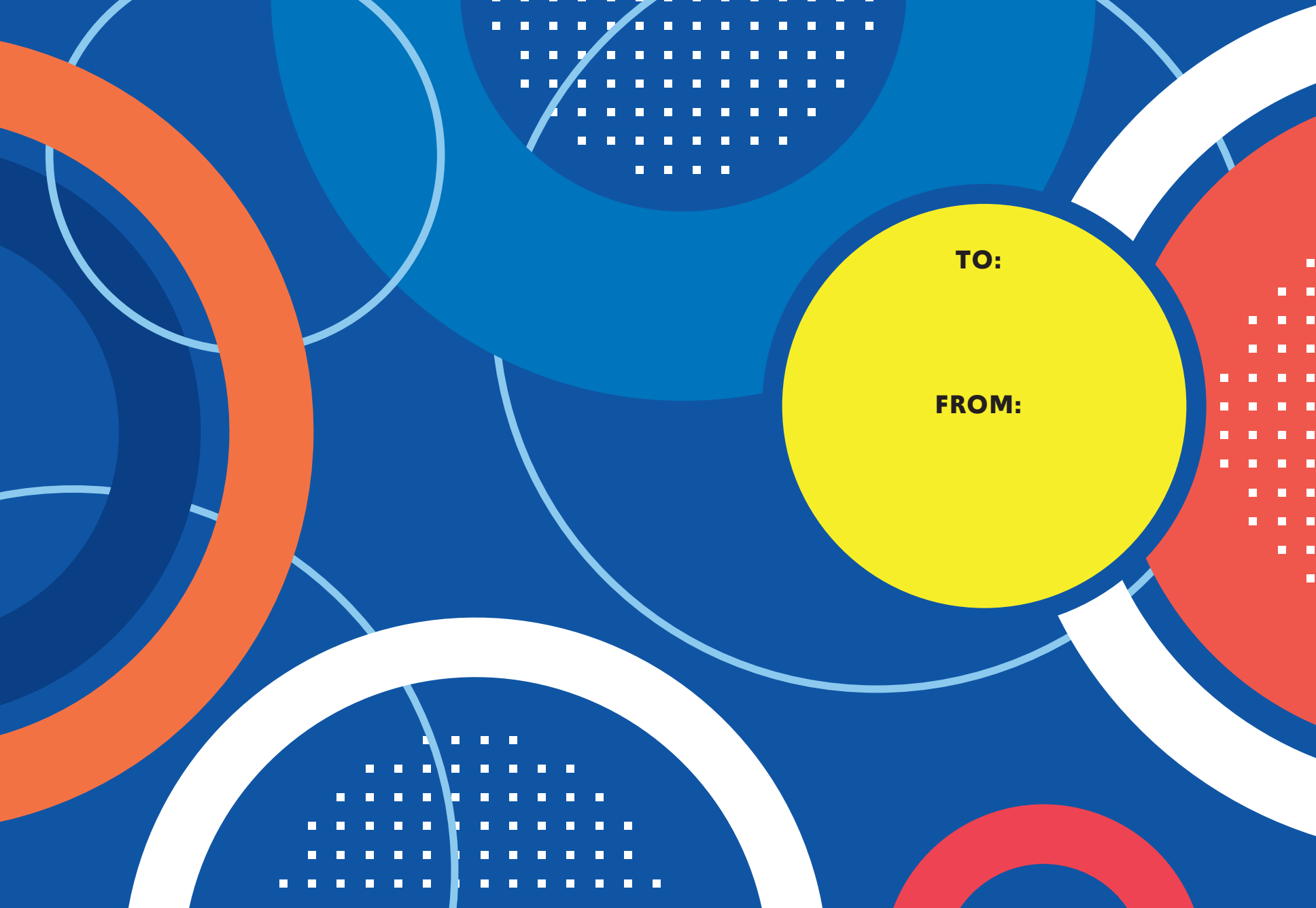


FIND YOUR **ZONE** *of* **GENIUS**

How to

- **REDEFINE INTELLIGENCE**
- **BECOME AN EXPERT ON YOURSELF**
- **AND MAKE GREATNESS A GIVEN**

LAURA GARNETT



TO:

FROM:

Praise for **THE GENIUS HABIT**

"Give yourself the gift of genius—not through inborn luck but through Laura Garnett's powerful, practical system to build a lifelong Genius Habit. Bored at work? Instead of berating yourself, consider that your plateaus are signals pointing toward greater purpose. This book will help you dismantle barriers to find what really lights you up as you click into the contagious joy of doing the work you—and only you—were born to do."

—**JENNY BLAKE**, author of *Pivot: The Only Move That Matters Is Your Next One*

"Work doesn't have to feel like, well, work. With Laura's advice, you can find your Zone of Genius, accomplish more, and stop counting the minutes until quitting time."

—**LAURA VANDERKAM**, author of *Off the Clock: Feel Less Busy While Getting More Done*

"Laura Garnett has written a powerful guide to finding and sustaining success and joy in your work. She has helped me and many other people get in touch with our essence and our unique gifts and coached us on how to live and work in that zone for an ever-growing proportion of our lives. The results are nothing short of astounding on all fronts. Life can hold so much more satisfaction and delight than we can imagine, and this book shows us how to unlock that."

—**RAJ SISODIA**, cofounder and chairman emeritus of Conscious Capitalism International

"Among the most hopeful—and useful—ideas detailed in this book is that genius is a habit one can cultivate and a process one can commit to. Whether you are a young professional just starting your climb up the corporate ladder, an evolved businessperson, or a midcareer expert who wants to be an entrepreneur, Laura Garnett's book is the voice of a patient, highly intelligent mentor who can significantly expand your own capabilities."

—**VINEET NAYAR**, founder and chairman of the Sampark Foundation and bestselling author of *Employees First, Customers Second*

"Loving your job and career shouldn't feel like a struggle. Instead, it should be about finding and harnessing your true greatness. In *The Genius Habit*, Laura Garnett shows you exactly how to do this while inspiring and helping others along the way."

—**DORIE CLARK**, author of *Entrepreneurial You and Stand Out*

"Laura Garnett's genius is that she not only understands that careers are nonlinear, but she provides the GPS to discovering your purpose and your genius, which will unlock your gifts and make work an inspiring journey."

—**DAVID S. KIDDER**, cofounder and CEO of Bionic and New York Times bestselling author of *The Intellectual Devotional* and *The Startup Playbook*

"There is a genius hiding in all of us, and if you haven't found yours, you are probably dreading every Monday morning drive to work. Most of us go a lifetime searching for joy at work. Finding your genius is the key. It turns out there is a genius habit you can develop, and Laura Garnett shows us how. In following her timeless advice, we can get to the joy we always dreamed was possible and become the person we were destined to be."

—**RICH SHERIDAN**, author of *Joy, Inc.* and *Chief Joy Officer*

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**FOR ZOE,
thank you for giving me the
gift of witnessing you cultivate
your own Zone of Genius**



**"The privilege of a lifetime
is being who you are."**

—JOSEPH CAMPBELL

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→ INTRODUCTION

I was watching yet another documentary about a super successful person (my favorite genre). This time, it was about Bill Gates, in the documentary called *Inside Bill's Brain*. During the interview, Bill talked about how he knew as a kid that he had the ability to rapidly digest lots of information and synthesize it to come up with ways to solve really complex problems. The more complex, the more energized he seemed to be. He started doing this when he was eight. He was solving complex problems for schools and for other companies.

I watch documentaries like this all the time, and this was probably one of the most obvious examples

of someone knowing what their genius is—the thinking or problem solving they’re best at—valuing it, and then using it all the time. In fact, he described being really obstinate and against rules. He fought regularly with his mother, and as he matured, he opted out of environments that prevented him from working in the way he wanted to, such as college. This way of operating is usually not considered good behavior, nor would it ever be suggested as the right path to success. Yet Bill is a multibillionaire; by our society’s measuring system, he’s one of the most successful men in the United States. Following society’s direction was clearly not the right path for Bill, and it’s often not the right path for anyone who creates success that is aligned with who they really are. But what was more apparent to me in listening to him was that he’s also successful in other ways most of us crave. He’s continually challenged by his work, so much so that he would do it for free. He also seems to be intrinsically motivated by the impact he is creating. Solving some of the world’s most notable

problems, such as eradicating polio worldwide, creating a way to cut carbon emissions by 50 percent, and providing clean water for those who don’t have it, are clearly linked to a rewarding feeling that he’s helping people who can’t help themselves. There is no doubt in my mind that Bill is fully operating in his Zone of Genius every day.

What I observed in the documentary was that Bill wasn’t motivated by money or power; he was just doing the kind of thinking and problem solving that he wants to do every day while having an impact that is meaningful to him. This is what creates real success. You have to wake up wanting to do the work that you do because it’s fun, exciting, and rewarding, not because of the accolades, pay, or power.

It took me thirty-five years before I learned what it was like to have work that I loved in the same way I see in Bill. In fact, I don’t just love my job; my work is an extension of who I am, and it pushes me to be who I want to be. It is my constant source of energy. When

I was experiencing overwhelming sickness during my first trimester of pregnancy, my work gave me strength to carry on. I don't daydream about what I could be doing with my career or life because I'm already doing it. I never thought it would be possible to feel this way about my job, but I do.

While what I just described may sound idyllic, it did not come easily. Creating a job I'm intellectually challenged by and emotionally attached to required a lot of work. I've always been ambitious, but I had no clue what I wanted to do with my life after college. Throughout my childhood, I was taught that the path to success was paved with good grades, college, and a job—any well-paying job. My parents rarely talked about prioritizing happiness or job satisfaction. What really mattered was *financial security*.

Even though I knew the rules I was supposed to follow, my path was a bit different. I spent two years after college exploring: I waited tables, moved to Holland to be an au pair, then came back home and

started a master's degree in nutrition before deciding it wasn't a good fit after all. I hopped into other roles, eventually landing in the wine industry as an executive assistant to the CEO. The work wasn't very exciting or challenging, but I thought it was a stepping-stone to something that was: wine sales. However, the company downsized and decided to eliminate my job. Fortunately, a friend who was working for Capital One told me they were hiring and expanding rapidly. I took a chance and applied.

I was hired as a marketing manager. They offered me a salary I previously couldn't even have imagined, exponentially higher than anything I had earned before. I remember jumping up and down, screaming with joy and feeling like my life had just started. Capital One's philosophy was that you could learn on the job, which was great because I'd never done marketing before. Once I got there, I ramped up my efforts to succeed at the job, and I learned as I went. Eventually, I applied to join the marketing and analysis group, which at Capital



Introduction

One was the *crème de la crème*. I decided I needed to be in this top-notch department because it would look good on my *résumé*. It would also make me feel important and smart—something I yearned to feel.

I was hired into the department and moved to Washington, DC. Within three weeks of my arrival, the management team decided to dissolve my group. But this was in the heyday of Capital One, so the restructuring was actually an amazing opportunity. If anything, it was a huge door opener, because my manager asked me, “What do you want to do next?”

I had the travel bug, so I answered, “What are we doing internationally? How can I get on an international team?” There was one small group in South Africa that was hiring, and two weeks later, I got on a plane. I lived in South Africa for two years. The group was highly entrepreneurial in the sense that we were building a business from scratch. Every day, I was tackling the jobs of twenty-five people back in the United States. It was a huge confidence builder for me, because I was

thriving, I was excited, and I was adding value. On top of that, I met a guy, fell in love, and got married. He was also working for Capital One and living in South Africa for a short stint.

From there, we were both sent to Spain, London, and finally Washington, DC, and that's where the Capital One party ended. Once we were back in the United States, I felt more like I was working for a large organization, which was completely different from the international start-ups. It didn't take long in my new role to realize I wasn't having fun anymore. I was uninspired by the tasks and projects I was managing. I didn't see how what I did made any real difference or impact on the business. I had a job that was largely operational, not strategic, and I lost all energy and enthusiasm for going to work. I was bored and uninspired, and even more upsetting, I didn't see a role that I wanted to move into. My husband felt similarly, and we decided to move on. We packed our bags and moved to New York.

Within a month, I ended up at Google in a sales job, and I was ecstatic—at first. In 2005, Google was the company to work for, and it immediately gave me bragging rights. Yet to my dismay, the moment I got there, I knew it was a terrible fit. I lacked autonomy—I had to respond immediately to clients' needs, which seemed never-ending, and I had little control over my day-to-day work.

For the first time in my life, I experienced something that I had only heard about from others: I dreaded going to work. It was a hard time for me—I hated my job, and my marriage was beginning to crumble.

Rather than look for another job, I decided to stick it out and stay in my role for a year, knowing that I could then switch departments. After the first year, I applied to another position that seemed like a better fit, and for the first ten months, it was. I also got divorced and was doing the work to move on with my life. I was excited about work again, but my happiness was short-lived. My department went through a reorganization,

and my job changed, putting me back in a role that wasn't right for me.

Even though I knew I was in the wrong job, I was addicted to the benefits: free food, free drinks, free snacks, and five-dollar massages (I think I got one every other day). My manager started talking to me about my "inability to succeed" in my role. I knew this job was not something I was good at, but I just couldn't stomach the idea of failure. I was put on a performance plan, which was crushing. I started thinking, *I'm thirty-three. What is the work that I'm really meant to do? Why haven't I figured this out yet?*

One day at the Google office, I went to hear best-selling author Srikumar Rao speak. He asked the crowd, "Can you imagine waking up every morning and getting on your hands and knees and being so grateful for the job and life that you have that you're almost in tears of joy every morning?" I wanted that feeling, and I knew I didn't have it, even though to the outside world, it looked like everything in my life was going fine.

But it wasn't. I questioned everything. *What am I best at? What am I meant to do? How can I create the kind of career and success I dream about?* I read every book I could find on careers and success and struggled to find concrete answers. I started an exhaustive job search, found a job quickly at a start-up, and quit Google. The start-up didn't last. I was there for nine months, but within a month, I knew that I was in another job that wasn't a great fit. I felt frustrated and as though I would never be able to find work that was right for me. I questioned my future, my value, and myself. Then, I got laid off. I will never forget that day—I was escorted out of the Frank Gehry building on the west side of Manhattan, and in that moment, I decided that if my dream job doesn't exist, I was going to create it from scratch.

Miraculously, I got a call from Srikumar Rao, whom I had seen speak several times since his talk at Google. I had approached him after one of those talks and said that I was interested in working for him. Now he was calling to take me up on that offer, and I was ecstatic!



In my role as his head of sales and operations, I helped him grow his business of helping people get happy. Throughout my time working with him, I watched and learned. He taught me the valuable lesson that **happiness is not just something bestowed upon lucky people**. Instead, happiness comes with daily practice; it is a habit you can cultivate. When I realized that my happiness was up to me, I worked every day on owning my power and my confidence, and soon after,

happiness began to come. Developing this habit of creating my own happiness was an essential building block in creating the work that I do now.

After working with Srikumar Rao as well as Esther Perel, another bestselling author in the personal growth field, I was ready for a complete pivot. I realized that working with them wasn't really my calling. I knew I wanted to work with entrepreneurs but on my own terms. I found that the part of my business I enjoyed most was brand building. I realized that to build a successful brand, you have to know who you are. And when I dug deeper, I realized it wasn't the actual branding that excited me; it was discovering who my clients were and how they could use this information to enhance their overall careers, not just grow their small businesses. Once I realized it was careers that I wanted to focus on, I pivoted again. I went back to my corporate roots and targeted leaders in the corporate world.

My business grew through lots of trial and error, and along the way I realized that the moments when

I enjoyed my work the most, when I was in the zone, occurred when I was asking people questions and seeing patterns in their responses that turned into insights and ultimately actionable steps they could use to create positive change. **This was the work and the thinking that really lit me up.** Whenever I did it, I completely lost track of time and felt as though I was on fire. Over time, I found I could easily create more of these moments each day where I could use my unique way of problem solving. The more I practiced it, the stronger it became and the more excited I felt about my work.

Today, I consider myself to be a successful performance strategist. I have become an expert in helping people understand the specific behaviors and habits required to perform at a very high level in their chosen careers. I've synthesized all the latest research and distilled the groundbreaking thinking from across industries into a process that allows people to incorporate these lessons into their lives. By using these tools, my clients learn that the key to achieving their best life and

a job they love is to really understand who they are and what they are best at, and then to take this knowledge and implement it in their work every day. By doing so, *anyone* can take more ownership of their career.

Is Happiness at Work Even Possible?

You may have experienced all the things I've gone through in my working life. You may feel unsatisfied with your job. You may feel unfulfilled. You may be trying to be someone you're not. My goal is to help you glean a better understanding of who you really are so that you can use your most powerful asset at work: you.

I promise that you don't need to think like Albert Einstein to find and develop your genius. Genius is in each and every one of us. All you have to do is identify it within yourself and learn how to best apply it to your work every day. I hope the information in this book will help you gain clarity about who you are and where you're going so you can proactively create the career of your dreams.



PART 1

Challenge



chapter → 1

Why Is It So Hard to Be Yourself at Work?

You are born being exactly who you are. Spend time with a toddler and you will see that while they have little awareness of what others think, they are purely authentic. This starts to curb once kids get messages about what is right, what is expected, what is good, and what is bad. As those messages are shared, an internal shift starts to happen, and it can often be a first shift away from the authentic self they were born to be. This shift can continue and usually does in dramatic ways, so that by the time you are a young adult, you can be completely detached from who you are.

There is also no formal education provided on being yourself or fully embodying your true potential. I hope this changes by the time my three-year-old daughter is in high school. Learning how to filter outside messages that can steer you in directions that are in opposition to yourself, discard them, or process them from a place of confidence is a skill that is badly needed for leading happy and authentic lives. It's also essential for making your life a process of becoming who you are. If we could learn how to be who we are before we become adults rather than much later, navigating life and career decisions would not be the struggle that they often are.

Not Succeeding Is Often a Job-Fit Problem

What's more, many people hold fast to antiquated ideas about work in general. *If you can't stay focused at work, it's because there's something wrong with you. If you find a particular task difficult, it's because you're*

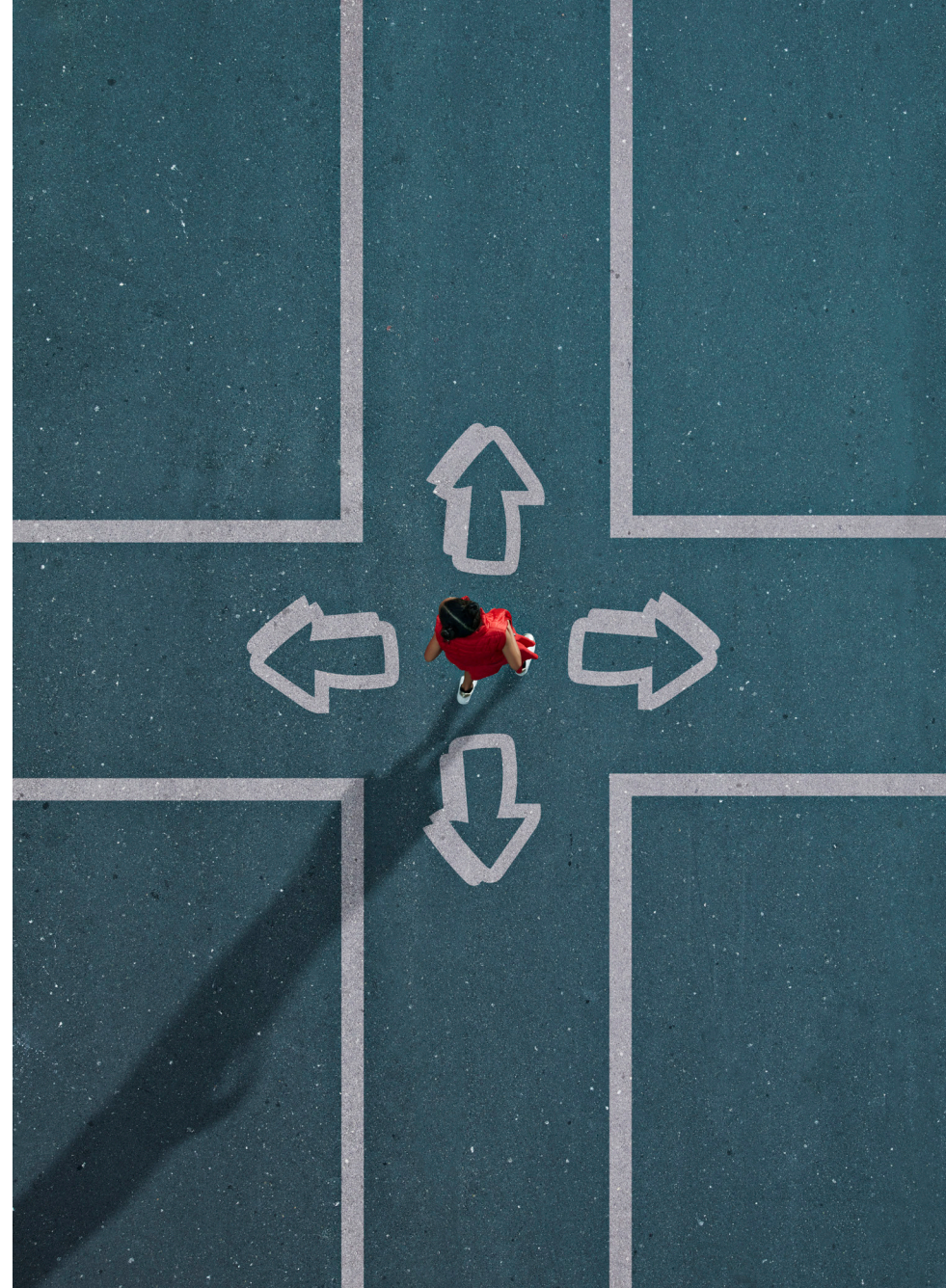
incompetent or lazy. Some people become so demoralized that they give up on a company or industry long before they have had a chance to diagnose the real problem, and they will likely find themselves back in the same situation in a few years. Others start working long hours to overcompensate for what they perceive to be a lack of skill or competence. This can create even more anxiety about job performance.

This book is meant to help you get more connected to yourself and figure out your Zone of Genius. By identifying your Zone of Genius and adjusting your work so that it revolves around your genius and purpose, you avoid the feelings of confusion and anxiety about work that many people can't escape. Instead of feeling like a victim of circumstance, you will be able to navigate work challenges and career transitions with ease. You will also be able to more easily diagnose job-fit problems or see when being who you are is not possible. You will see that scenario as a problem to solve, not a sign that you're not valuable and you need to be

someone or something you're not to succeed. Getting to know yourself and your Zone of Genius is a journey and a critical stepping-stone to success, a stepping-stone that is often never used.

Society Steers You in the Wrong Direction

The other problem with being yourself is that society conspires to keep you from yourself. This sounds strange, but when you take the messages we all get from others and compare them to the science of performance, it's very clear that society is wrong all the time. You are also hard-wired from birth to believe what your parents think is right. Unfortunately, most parents aren't career experts and are thinking more about themselves and what they want for their kids rather than what is actually right for them. It takes a new paradigm of parenting to raise a child to truly be themselves (which I'm currently practicing), and that new paradigm requires more effort than most are



willing to exert. Here are some messages from society that probably sound familiar:

- ▶ Going to college is imperative for a successful career.
- ▶ IQ is connected to success.
- ▶ How you do in school is a sign of your future potential.
- ▶ Failures are a sign you are a failure.
- ▶ Benefits and job security are more important than loving the work.
- ▶ How something looks is more important than how it makes you feel.
- ▶ Company brand recognition is more important than your happiness.
- ▶ If you make a lot of money, you will be successful and happy.
- ▶ When you're more successful than others, you are more valuable.

- ▶ Follow the advice of other successful people. If it worked for them, it should work for you.
- ▶ Don't quit until you have another job lined up.

You may not think you're operating from these rules, but when you think through all the decisions you've made in your career, you will be surprised at how much these rules show up. Part of being who you are is ignoring these rules. We accept these messages as truth because our brains are wired to conform to the thinking of the crowd. Psychologist Solomon Asch conducted an experiment in the 1950s that crystallized his research on groupthink. His experiments featured groups of people making basic decisions about whether a set of lines matched in size. He planted actors in the room to purposely give false answers and found that when the majority of people gave a particular answer (even if it was false), the unaware person went along with the group. This connection to conformity and avoidance of conflict is so deeply entrenched

in the brain that we react to disagreements in a similar manner to punishment. This is one powerful reason why it is so difficult to go against the groupthink of what work is supposed to look and feel like and stay steadfast in your belief that it should be fun and right for you. It's much easier to follow the lead of those around you, conform, and follow society's rules that often keep you in a job that isn't the right fit but may look like it is to others. This is also why outside-the-box thinking is a rebellious act of stepping out of your comfort zone and why creating a new kind of work, where you are who you are and love what you do, requires being a maverick.

This book is meant to introduce you to a new rule book: you. Who you are should become the new voice of reason, because when you're clear about who you are, decisions come more easily. You don't have to lean on society's erroneous rules.

Using Your Genius Makes Hard Work Energizing

The right kind of work challenges should be hard, but in a good way. These challenges occur when you are thinking, processing, and problem solving a specific task. You know that you're capable of coming up with the right answers; you just haven't figured out all the pieces yet. There's a positive energy about this challenge: you're looking forward to solving the problem and getting the right outcome. What feels exciting and energizing to you is that tension between knowing what you can do and wondering how exactly you will do it.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the pioneering psychologist and author of the groundbreaking book *Flow*, has his own definition for this kind of challenge: "The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile." In other words, you are most engaged when you are doing



Why Is It So Hard to Be Yourself at Work?

work that pushes you beyond your comfort zone yet isn't so stressful that it inhibits enjoyment.

Csikszentmihalyi uses this definition to describe *flow*: when you're in flow, you're so immersed in what you're doing that you lose track of time. You feel confident, and the work is invigorating. In fact, Csikszentmihalyi's research found that people are happiest when they're working, as long as the work is something they enjoy and is sufficiently challenging.

Csikszentmihalyi defines challenging work, or flow, as meeting three criteria:

- 1 **The work must contain a goal that you can measure yourself against.** For me, this refers to the ability to see progression and a specific outcome.
- 2 **You need to have feedback on that goal.** You should seek out valid confirmation that your goal has been achieved.

3 You must have a good balance between the perceived challenges of the task and your own perceived skills. This is what I call the sweet spot of challenge.

When I first read Csikszentmihalyi's definition of flow, what stood out for me was that most people are meeting the first two criteria: they are setting goals and getting feedback on their ability to achieve that goal. But most people don't know how to create the third part of the equation. Without an understanding of yourself (which most people sadly don't have), it's almost impossible to know how to create flow.

What Kind of Success Is Right for You?

Here is one question to think about, and the answer isn't one that can be tracked or quantified. This is the kind of question that might reveal your hidden biases, hopes, and fears about work. So much of knowing yourself better involves letting go of what

others have told you about achievement and success and learning to trust that your version of success doesn't have to be the same as that of society, your colleagues, or your family.

What is your definition of success?

When I ask myself this question, success is spending the majority of my time on work or tasks that are fulfilling, leveraging my Zone of Genius, maximizing my potential, and helping other people in a meaningful way while achieving the freedom, lifestyle, and experiences I desire.

The Next Step

Now, let's get started identifying your genius. It's time to start asking the right questions and figuring out how you like to work.

My Support Circle

To James, my partner, and my daughter, Zoe. You two are the lights of my life and continue to inspire me with everything you both do.

Special thanks again to Jenny Blake, Cybele Loening, and Teri Geotz. Your support and availability for ideas and feedback for this book were essential!

Mom and Dad, thank you always for giving me life and so much more, but most importantly for my ambition, my discipline, and my high bar for excellence. This second book wouldn't be here today without those essential qualities I learned from you both.

To my niece and nephews, Ella, Beck, and Connor, you are the future generation of our family, and your enthusiasm for life inspires me. I can see your Zones of Genius emerging and the tremendous value that you have to offer the world. I can't wait to witness your greatness in whatever form it takes.



Photo by Alyssa Peek

LAURA GARNETT is a performance strategist, TEDx speaker, mother, and author of *The Genius Habit*. She works with hundreds of CEOs and executives to identify their Zone of Genius™ and leverage it in their day-to-day work. She has brought

her expertise to more than forty companies, including OpenTable, Google, LinkedIn, and Geometry Global. Prior to launching her company, Garnett Consulting,

she honed her marketing, branding, and career-refining skills at Capital One, American Express, IAC, and Google.

Note from the Author

At the time that we were putting the finishing touches on this book, the COVID-19 pandemic hit. During such a crisis there is a lot of uncertainty about how our lives, the economy, and the world will shift as a result. One thing, however, remains constant, and that is who you are and the value you offer to the world. My hope has always been that everyone can find their Zone of Genius and own it. As a result of this crisis and its economic consequences, it's not just my hope, it's actually essential that you know and own your value. I wish you the best as you make the most of these uncertain times

Stay Connected

Sign up for my free biweekly *The Zone* newsletter at lauragarnett.com, where I offer free advice, access to

my recently published articles on *Forbes* and *Business Insider*, and more. I also share my own personal journey as it's happening as well as discuss new evolutions of my work and focus.

You can also follow me on Instagram @lauragarnett1 for inspiring quotes and ongoing performance building suggestions.

Go Deeper

Work directly with me: My genius is at its best when working with individuals one-on-one or with executive teams. I have a variety of individual and team packages. Visit lauragarnett.com/services to review how I can help you or your executive team take your work and team performance to new heights.

Purchase *The Genius Habit* Book Club (lauragarnett.com/bookclub): Want to take the lead and help your work team learn your Zones of Genius and take your performance to the next level? Check out the book club, where you will find videos, agendas, and

guidelines on how to run an effective book club experience with *The Genius Habit*.

Work with me privately or with a Zone of Genius coach: I have sought out and trained some of the best coaches I can find on the Genius Habit approach. If you are interested in learning more, please go to lauragarnett.com/services.

Have me be a select executive coach for your organization: I thrive when working with companies that are committed to their people and are supportive of them maximizing their potential. Visit lauragarnett.com/contact to reach out. It would be great to explore the opportunity to work with your leaders.

Speaking and workshops: I would love to come speak to your company or at your event. *The Genius Habit* talk or workshop is ideal for team off-site training, annual sales meetings, or any event that is focused on success or work performance. Please go to lauragarnett.com/speaking for more information.



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Being satisfied at work doesn't have to be a fantasy. You can stop living for the weekend by reorienting your job mindset. To unlock your potential, Laura Garnett reveals that an empowering career is about embracing your unique strengths in a way that no one else can. Once you discover your genius, you can start seeing your job as part of the career of your dreams.

Throughout her own career as a performance strategist, Garnett has developed a system for finding and honing your Zone of Genius—that sweet spot where you're challenged, fulfilled, and happily engaged in the work you're doing, no matter what that work is. Garnett will challenge you to live authentically and rethink your definition of success. Find your Zone of Genius and never dread going to work again!



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