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# Distinguishing True Potential

By Adrian W. Savage.

Too often we make realizing potential sound difficult and mysterious, as if only a few special people can succeed in doing it. This isn't true. We all have unused potential. We just aren't very good at recognizing it. We know what we have done—what's worked and what hasn't—but we're usually in the dark about all the other things we *could* do.

People often ask how they can discover their potential. It's a very good question. It's easy to be carried away by an alluring idea or someone else's advice or experience. Perhaps there's a test out there that could indicate my potential clearly and beyond a doubt? Unfortunately, there isn't. Potential is made of possibilities—things we could do, if we chose them, but which will remain forever not done if we don't. Since they don't exist until you try them, there's nothing to measure. The only verifiable way to check out your potential by measurement is to do something and see if it works.

Potential is realized through choices. We generally choose actions that feel comfortable and familiar. We won't find much unrealized potential that way. The only sure route to finding and realizing potential involves making choices that broaden or stretch us and so add to our understanding. Whenever we stay with our habits and comfort zones, we forego chances to develop and grow. The more we repeat the past, the *less* we learn.

That means we ought to be able to discover our potential without trying everything—just by looking at the options and possibilities that are different from our usual habits. So far so good. But there are thousands, perhaps millions of them. Which of these genuinely indicate unused potential and which are simply ideas that won't work for us, however hard we try? We're back to the impractical idea of trying everything, in the hope of sorting out our true potential from all the other "might have beens."

What if we could look at options and possibilities in our mind's eye and subject them to a set of 'tests' that would distinguish true potential from wishful thinking or stereotyped notions? Our experience suggests that this is both possible and practical. You may still need some help to see how to access this untapped potential, but you can at least sort out the nuggets of potential 'gold' from the dross of impractical and unsatisfying possibilities—whether you've dreamed them up yourself or they've been suggested to you by others.

## 1. Does it align with my core values?



True potential always aligns with the things that matter to you most. If it doesn't—if it's only something you *think* you ought to do or have been told would be 'good' for you—you'll never gain enough motivation to develop yourself to the stage

where you can bring that potential to full realization. Take the time to connect with your most fundamental values. Use them to point to options that are going to increase your motivation to succeed. Good advice is always useful, but if you're not sold on the idea at the deepest levels of your mind, you'll be more likely to give up when things don't work out immediately.

## 2. When I think about it, does it immediately feel exciting?



Potential is doing what comes most easily and naturally to us. I don't mean that no effort is involved. It can be tough to realize some piece of outstanding potential. But it won't *feel* like hard work—at least, not in the sense of needing stubborn determination to overcome a constant wish to give up. Many performers from musicians through dancers to sports stars have described a state known as 'flow', where effort is effortless and you know that nothing can go wrong. When you connect with your true potential, you should sense a little of that 'flow'. Trust your intuition. Go with ideas that stimulate and excite you and avoid anything that feels like hard work—even to think about.

## 3. Does it build on my natural strengths?

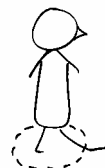
We all have some natural strengths and it's only sensible to make them the basis for the task of realizing potential. Weaknesses rarely form the basis for successful development. We may have to work to overcome them if they get in our way, but trying to develop from weakness is like trying to lay a road across a swamp. If you have the option, it's always better to choose firmer ground. The only exception to this 'rule' is where some strength has been ignored or set aside at someone else's bidding. From time to time we all suppress things that we might have found natural and easy, in the cause of fitting in with what we see as 'the right thing to do'.



Recognizing natural strengths isn't hard. They're all those things that you keep feeling drawn to, even if you've been led to believe they're useless, disruptive, pointless or worthless. Trust your intuition again. You're

being drawn to them because they're a part of who you are.

## 4. Will it stretch me beyond my comfort zone?



We've all got a comfort zone. Imagine a coral reef forming slowly around a tropical island. The coral polyps are small and soft—like our habits at the start—but they gradually solidify into this wall of rock, shutting off the open sea. Inside the reef, the water's calm and it's pretty safe. Outside the reef, there are big waves and sharks.

Over time, we develop a comfort zone inside our habits and automatic responses. Swimming there feels comfortable, safe and familiar. There aren't likely to be nasty surprises. Of course, compared to the ocean, the bay inside the reef is a very small space—just as our comfort zone is tiny compared to our potential. All the potential is *outside* the reef. That's where we have to go to find and develop it. There may be sharks and big waves, but there's also a whole world of possibility and adventure.

Anything within your comfort zone is competence, not potential. Realizing potential always means stretching yourself. If it isn't something that goes beyond your habits and will require you to step outside your comfort zone, it isn't potential.

## 5. Does it require learning of some kind?

If learning isn't involved, it isn't potential. Learning is an essential part of the process of realizing potential, so the absence of any need for learning is a giveaway that this—whatever it is—isn't part of your potential.



Why is this? *Accessing* potential always means stepping past our habits to explore something new. *Realizing* potential means learning from new experiences and adding what's useful to our repertoire.

## 6. Will it enhance my value, self-confidence and sense of joy in what I do?



In many ways, this is the most important question of them all. Our potential makes us *more* of just about everything: more valuable to ourselves and others; more confident in our ability; more courageous, more joyful and more successful. If something fails this test, the others scarcely matter. It won't be something that's part of your potential. Look at any small child at play. Children naturally realize their potential through playing and exploring. It's just what they do. They're not self-conscious about it and it's no effort. All young animals in species that have higher intelligence play. It's how they learn and develop their potential. Realizing potential is always joyful and exhilarating. If it's not fun, it's not potential.

We all have far more potential than we normally use. What matters is *access*. We must build access by stepping deliberately beyond our familiar habits of thinking and taking action. If we're willing to do this, we'll find quickly that we have much more potential than we ever dreamed. What's more, finding and using it will add greatly to our enjoyment of working life. Our potential is out there waiting. We only have to make a conscious choice to do what it takes to find and realize it.

## About the Author

Adrian W. Savage is an international authority on organizational development and potential. More than a decade ago Mr. Savage co-founded the forerunner of PNA, Inc. to help clarify the way people view employee and organization potential. Mr. Savage believes that employees can align themselves more successfully with their commitments and opportunities by exploring their unused talents and fundamental values.

PNA, Incorporated provides corporations with solutions for talent management, organizational development, succession planning and key staff retention. Using proprietary approaches that have been developed and proven over more than 15 years, the company helps national and international clients maximize individual, team and organizational strengths to achieve their business goals. For more information, visit [www.pnaincorporated.com](http://www.pnaincorporated.com).

## About Work In Progress Coaching

Founded by Camille Smith, Work In Progress Coaching specializes in increasing the performance and productivity of executives, managers and teams. Camille's approach enables people to achieve organizational goals while maximizing personal and corporate resources. "When people access their potential and produce results that they thought were impossible, two powerful things happen: the bottom line benefits *and* people's view of what they can accomplish together is expanded. This gives the individual and the organization more options for the future."

Camille is a certified NetTPS™ Solutions Provider. For more information, please call 831)685-1480 or visit [www.wipcoaching.com](http://www.wipcoaching.com).