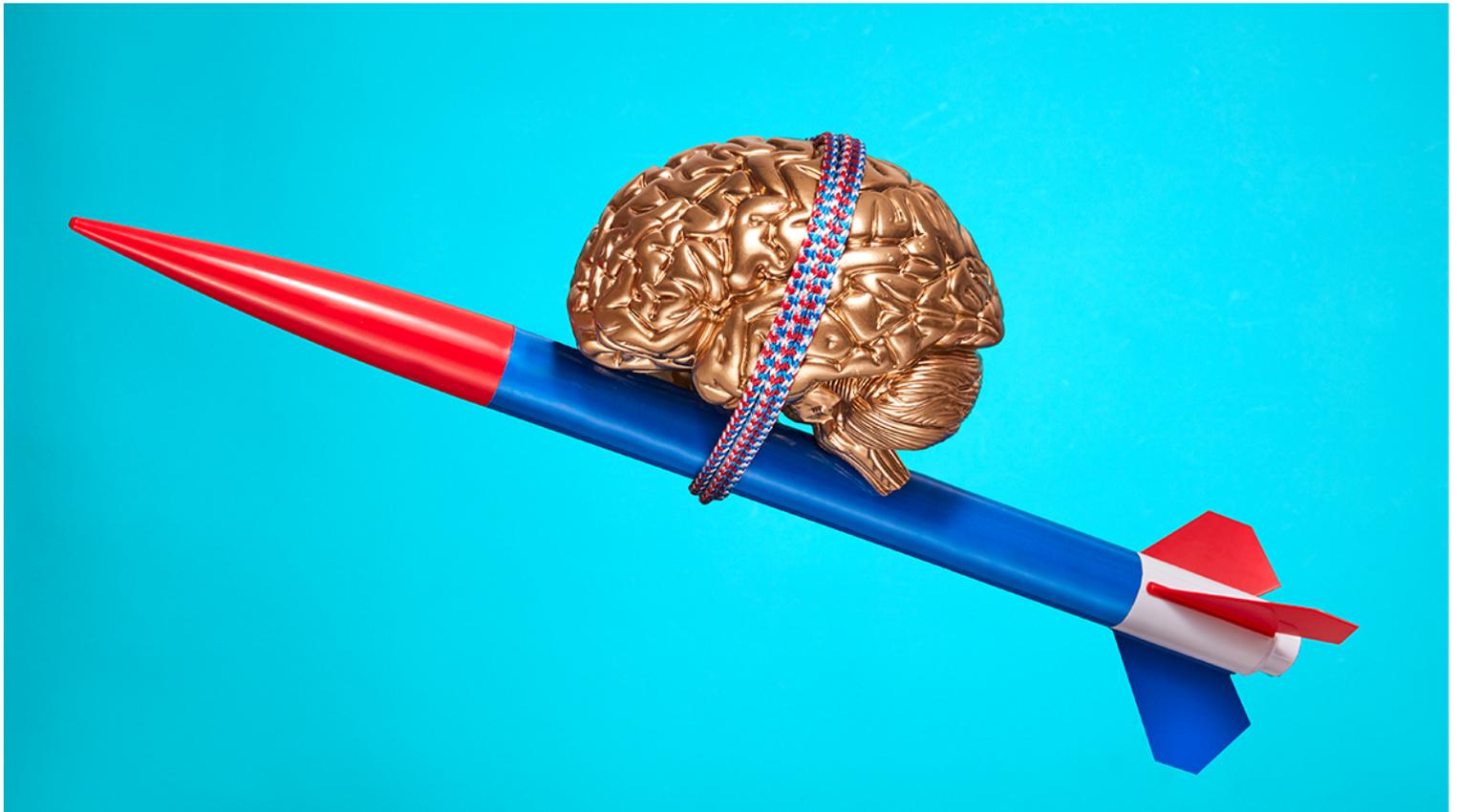


CREATIVITY

5 Ways Smart People Sabotage Their Success

by [Alice Boyes](#)

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Mark was always one of the smartest kids in his class. He's done well in his career, but when he checks Facebook, he sees people he outperformed at school who have now achieved more. Likewise, there are colleagues at his firm who have leapfrogged him. Sometimes he wonders, "What am I doing wrong?"

Sound familiar? You might relate to Mark yourself, or have an employee or loved one who struggles with similar feelings. Raw intelligence is undoubtedly a huge asset, but it isn't everything. And sometimes, when intellectually gifted people don't achieve as much as they'd like to, it's because they're subtly undermining themselves. If you're in this situation, the good news is that when you understand these foibles you can turn them around. Here are five I've seen smart people particularly struggle with:

1. Smart people sometimes devalue other skills, like relationship building, and over-concentrate on intellect. Very smart people sometimes see their success as inevitable because of their intellect, and don't see other skills as important. For example, an individual who finds workplace diplomacy difficult might write this off as an irritation rather than as a core skill required for their role. Similarly, they might see it as critical for a secretary to be personable, but not an executive. Therefore they don't invest time and effort in developing these skills.

These views don't come out of nowhere. Most people have a natural bias towards wanting to capitalize on their strengths and, conversely, would prefer to avoid thinking about areas in which they're not naturally as strong. Bright kids typically receive a lot of reinforcement throughout their early lives that their intelligence is valuable. They grow up being told they're smart, and during their schooling, experience that success comes more easily to them than to others. It's easy to understand why, as a result, they would continue to focus on their intellect as adults.

But in most workplaces, you need more than raw intelligence to get ahead. And only focusing on your greatest strength, rather than also addressing your weaknesses, tends to be self-sabotaging.

Solution: Use your strengths to overcome your weaknesses. If you're good at learning you can simply learn the skills that don't come as naturally to you. You don't need a personality makeover, you just need a game plan and a genuinely constructive attitude. For instance, identify three specific workplace diplomacy behaviors that would improve your success in that area.

2. Teamwork can be frustrating for very smart people. When someone grasps concepts quickly and has high standards for their own performance it can create difficulties when working with others who take longer to process information and pick up concepts. If a person felt held back at school by being in a class with less smart kids, this frustration with teamwork can develop early — you know what this feels like if you routinely did most of the work on group projects, or got scolded for daydreaming during a class that was moving too slowly for you. These feelings can get re-triggered throughout life. When people develop an emotional raw spot as a child, they often have outsized internal reactions when that raw spot is rubbed in their adult life.

Smart people also sometimes find it difficult to delegate because of a sense they can do a task better (regardless of whether this is actually true.) This is especially likely for those who have a perfectionist streak.

Solution: Be self-compassionate about your internal reactions and understand where they come from, but also learn to genuinely appreciate what diverse minds bring to a team.

3. Smart people often attach a lot of their self-esteem to being smart, which can decrease their resilience and lead to avoidance. If a lot of your self-esteem rests on your intelligence, it can be very difficult to be in situations that reveal chinks in your armor. That might be working with people who are even more skilled or intelligent, or receiving critical feedback, or taking a risk and failing. Any situation that triggers feeling not- smart is experienced as highly threatening. The smart person may even seek to avoid those situations, which ultimately holds the person back.

Solution: Take an objective view of the benefits of working with people who are, in some respects, smarter than you. If you're surrounding yourself with smart people, you're doing something right. Remember, iron sharpens iron. Develop relationships with people who you trust to give you helpful constructive feedback. The more you become accustomed to receiving critical feedback from people who believe in your overall talents and capacities, the easier it will become.

4. Smart people get bored easily. Being smart is not exactly the same as being curious, but if you have both these qualities you might find yourself becoming easily bored with executing the same behaviors over and over. Some types of success stem from creativity, but other types come from becoming an expert in a niche and performing a set of behaviors repeatedly. If you're smart, curious, and have a love of learning, you might find you quickly lose interest in anything once you've figured it out. The execution side of performance might bore you, and you'd rather constantly be learning new things. This can end up being less lucrative than finding a niche and repeating the same formula, but that might seem too boring or unchallenging to you.

Solution: Try taking a 30,000-foot view of when it's worth tolerating some boredom to collect easy wins when it comes to your overall success. Instead of attempting dramatic change, decide when tolerating short periods (a few minutes or hours) of boredom could have a very beneficial impact on your success. For instance, devoting 5 hours a week to an activity that's monotonous but lucrative. Additionally, make sure you have enough outlets for your love of learning across the various domains of your life, including your work, hobbies, physical fitness, understanding yourself etc.

5. Smart people sometimes see in-depth thinking and reflection as the solution to every problem. Bright people are accustomed to succeeding through their thinking skills, but can sometimes overlook when a different approach would be more beneficial. For example, the smart person might attack every situation by trying to think it to death (over-researching every decision and ruminating over every mistake) when other approaches would be more fruitful.

Solution: Notice when thinking becomes an unhealthy obsession. Consider when strategies other than thinking are more likely to result in success. Experiment with taking breaks to get unstuck, and allow yourself to learn by doing rather than through exhaustive advance research. Expand your range of skills for reaching insights so that you're not the person who sees every problem as a nail because their only tool is a hammer. Finally,

whenever you find yourself ruminating (doing negatively toned overthinking), disrupt it by doing a few minutes of an absorbing activity (such as a puzzle). This can be a surprisingly effective strategy for breaking out of negative thinking.

Which of these five patterns do you identify with the most? Try rank-ordering them. Are there colleagues or other people in your life who seem to fall into these traps? Try to let go of any sense of shame or judgment — it's not necessary or useful for overcoming these habits. For any of the tendencies you personally relate to, know that even longstanding and deeply psychological patterns can be turned around with the targeted, practical, problem-solving approach I've outlined here.

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