

## **Four Questions: An Approach to Ignite Your Natural Genius**

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I found these four questions to be extremely important in working with CEOs and senior executives in assisting them and their organizations identify their unique DNA. (While the term “DNA” could refer to both personal DNA or organizational DNA, for this article, I will focus just on personal DNA. How we use this approach to understand and map organizational DNA will be subject of another article. By tapping into our DNA, we can find ways distinguish ourselves, unleash our authentic leadership, evoke passion, harvest our creativity (potentially resulting in new intellectual property, innovative products and services) and build a brand. In this short article I pose four questions, propose an integrated framework and offer some suggestions on how to inquire into these questions to tap into personal DNA and ignite natural genius. Ones natural genius is the source of ones unique competencies and capacities that makes one effective, creative and energetic. The four questions one could ask oneself are:

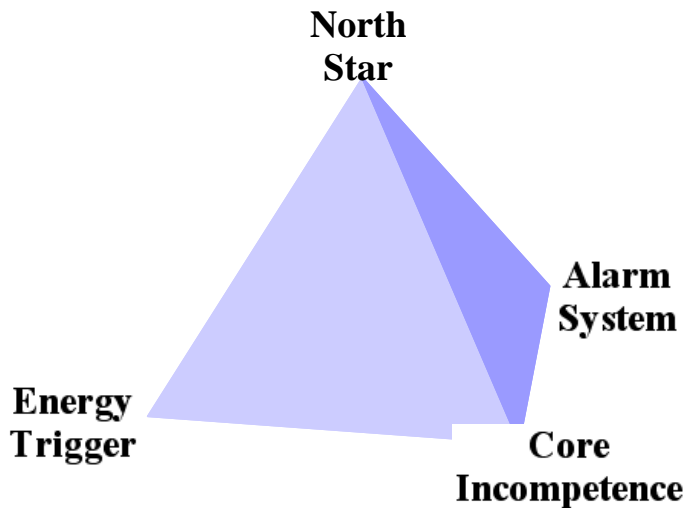
- What is my **North Star** (highest aspiration) that ignites both my natural genius and that of my organization (family, company, community or educational institution)?
- What is my **Core Incompetence**? Where is my foot nailed to the floor?
- What triggers my energy when I feel sapped? What excites, rejuvenates and regenerate energy for me? In other words, what is my key **Energy Trigger**?
- What kinds of activities, mindsets, and processes drain my energy? What kind of **Alarm System** do I have to set so that I can be effective, successful and joyful?

*North Star, Core Incompetence, Energy Trigger, and Alarm System* are cornerstones of our personal DNA.

### **What is Personal DNA?**

At SelfCorp, we believe that it is possible to create conscious DNA maps that represent an individual’s (or organization’s) unique personalities (or cultures). Although the words “personal DNA” “organizational DNA” and “cultural DNA” are metaphoric with respect to the actual meaning of a genetic code, they still have the potential to affect the generative capabilities that activate hidden codes in our biological DNA. It is known that we have many more codes that lay inactive in our genetic code (often called “junk DNA”), and certain emotions and actions can trigger those codes, allowing us to tap into a latent, previously unknown inner genius. We have worked with executives and companies such as Cisco, Mastek, Ford, Boeing to create individualized, three-dimensional maps (pyramids or tetrahedrons are other words we use for these maps) that are about 8 inches in size and constructed from plastic and cardboard. We call them *DNA maps or pyramids* and they have been very useful in helping executives determine their unique strengths and identify the next significant steps for themselves and their organizations. These DNA maps can help shape the future when used as tools in visualizing the future and clarifying purpose. Because they are based on our unique strengths and weaknesses and help us become aware of our latent capacities and competencies, we call this process “igniting natural genius.” An archetypal personal DNA map is shown below. We identify four cornerstones of personal DNA, just like base pairs of genetic DNA.

## Four Essential Questions



*What is my **North Star** (highest aspiration) that ignites my natural genius and that of my organization (family, company, community or educational institution)?*

### North Star

Many people work on or think about finding their purpose in life. We call the highest personal aspiration as North Star because it represents something above that beckons and helps us to orient ourselves. Some of us maybe clear about our North Star, while others try to find it by rejecting everything that is not their purpose. Just

like the real North Star is not visible to the naked eye during the day, when we have other strong influences that are dominating us, we cannot see our own unique purpose. We have to work at it and also find ways to filter out external influences to be able to identify our North Star. When we do identify our North Star and use it to guide our future, we can truly go far beyond our wildest expectations of ourselves. Considering that we spend much time in fear or survival mode, our future usually is predicated based on our past fears and unconscious limitations. Being aware of our North Star allows us to break through those limitations and participate in co-creating a future based on our genius.

The conventional goal-setting process starts from the present and extends into the future. We sometimes extrapolate what we want now into the future, wishing for a better or faster version of what we currently have. It is shaped by our past experiences and fears and, many times, and it is about hope. No wonder that such a goal-setting process is experienced as depressing by many people, because it reminds us that whatever we have now is not good enough and many of us do not feel inspired to keep our resolutions and work towards those goals. We fall back into old patterns because our goals are generally not challenging (we want to succeed so we create goals that are small and do not require much risk), inspiring (we do it because that is what we are supposed to do not because we are passionate or turned on) or directional (it is escaping the past rather than creating a future that led us to engage in goal setting process).

I found asking the following questions while clarifying my North Star to be helpful:

- Does my North Star inspire me (especially when I am down)?
- Does my North Star challenge me (when I feel smug)?
- Does my North Star give me direction (when I am lost)?

When we identify our unique North Star, it can be used to find our true direction. These three qualifications for North Star are adopted from conversations with Prof. Vijay Govindarajan around the theme of Strategic Intent (private conversation, 1998). Even though strategic intent framework was evolved first by Prahalad and Hamel in the organizational context, I find it to be applicable and meaningful to individuals when we use it with qualifications Govindarajan has evolved.

*What is my **Core Incompetence**? Where is my foot nailed to the floor?*

### **Core Incompetence**

Theoretically, North Star alone is sufficient to move forward with velocity towards living our larger purpose. But there are times when we have the nagging feeling that, despite having identified a motivating purpose, we are not progressing quickly towards it. To resolve this, it must be understood that each of us have ingrained behaviors that hold us back. CK Prahalad and Gary Hamel introduced the notion of the “core competence” of an organization in a Harvard Business Review article (and expanded in their book *Competing for the Future*) in addition to the concept of strategic intent in the context of organizations. Upon reflection over time, I found that it is important to pay attention to *core incompetence* to understand why a person (it could be an organization also) is stuck. Core incompetence (CI) is unique to each of us and prevents us from moving towards our purpose. It seems to have its roots in our past successes and behaviors that lead to automated patterns because we are comfortable with certain well-tested and successful formulae. When the core incompetence takes over, our capacity to think and act rationally is seriously impaired and we act on autopilot. Instead of being aware of the current context and engaging in fresh thinking, we react from past memories and dysfunctional patterns and hope for success because we developed that pattern based on past successes. In other words, our debilitating weaknesses come from unconscious application of our strengths inappropriately and out of context. For example, Japanese companies are known for their continuous improvement practices and process orientation. But when a Japanese entrepreneurial startup tries to apply same process orientation, it finds itself stifling innovation.

I know a brilliant executive who was instrumental in making a company very successful. His vision was appreciated and he was acknowledged as a brilliant thinker. He went on to build several enterprises since then but has been unsuccessful. He continued to do what he had previously done before to build the first company but has never been able to replicate the success. His vision was still clear but the context had changed, the market had changed but he had not. His core incompetence in this context is his vision – which normally is his strength.

Take the case of Howard Dean, the presidential democratic candidate in 2004 US elections. As he forged ahead of his rivals, his temperament was revealed and it was the front page story on Nov. 12, 2003 issue of USA Today written by Jill Lawrence. Some people admired his candor and others called it a ‘short fuse.’ According to Fred Greenstein, an authority on presidential leadership at Princeton University, “Character, whether you mean it as moral fiber or psychological soundness, is really the bottom line in an office in which the incumbent is never more than a couple of dozen feet away from the nuclear button. You want to be very comfortable with the personal wiring of your chief executive.” as quoted in USA Today. Dean says, according to the article, he “handled life-and-death decisions for 14 years as a doctor” and “I don’t think the American people want somebody who is never

forceful in their views.” According to him, his temperament is “really not a serious issue.” Until the Iowa caucus, Dean appeared to be unstoppable. When he came in third in Iowa, it was because they believed that he was not going to win against Bush. Dean is now more humble though we will have to see whether he tinkers with his persona.

I have come across many different executives in my practice who are very passionate yet don't know when to tone down their intensity and passion which often scares others in the company. So, they rarely receive appropriate information or bad news in time to make a right decision. Volatile tempers, excessive distractibility, chronic tardiness – all have roots in CI though on the bright side they are responsible for our intensity, brilliance and efficiency. It is just that we have over used our strength and it is now a liability that we are not aware of or don't want to acknowledge.

How can we discover our CI? By looking at areas where we get repeatedly stuck and where we think we already know the answer and are sure that we are right. We have to pay special attention to behaviors and attitudes other people complain about and things we usually justify or hide from others.

CI arises out of lack of contextual awareness. When we don't pay attention to my CI, slowly but steadily CI sabotages us. It deludes us into believing that we are on right track except that we may arrive at a wrong station. Once we identify our CI, we need to find a coach we are comfortable with to help us gain deeper awareness and pay constant attention. Then we have to work towards finding our North Star (that inspires, gives direction and challenges us). Faced with a challenge to reach our higher purpose, we usually find it easier to work with our core incompetence. When I coach executives, I pay special attention to CI because it is a serious growth-limiting factor. Once we are aware of our CI, we can partner with peers who have more awareness in the area of our incompetence and ask them point it out to us until we become very aware of it and we are self-correcting.

CI is like a hook: it's an unconscious, addictive pattern. Once we are conscious of it and also found a North Star that truly inspires and challenges us, our CI will begin to lose its grip on us. *It is important to remember that CI emerges based on our past successes and is like our winning formula.* That is what is so tricky about a CI. It behaves as though it is our friend but prevents our growth.

In my experience, I found that North Star and Core Incompetence are like opposite sides of the same coin. One is related to aspiration and the other to the desperation. Both can have significant influence on our mindset and behavior but when we have both working for us, we become unstoppable.

While North Star and Core Incompetence help us connect with our past and potential future, we still need tools that support us on our journey towards North Star and away from our CI. We need tools to manage our energy in the moment so that we stay engaged with the journey. For example, let's say we are in a motor boat tied to a dock in San Francisco. We want to reach Seattle and that is our North Star. Our energy management system is the gas pedal and the break pedal as they provide movement towards our goal. The rope that ties our boat to the dock is CI. Till we untie the boat from the dock, moving forward is difficult even though the coast is clear and our vision is perfect. Once the boat is freed and moving in the direction of Seattle, it is important to manage the journey with the gas

pedal and brake. In the following paragraphs, we will understand more about our “gas pedals” and “brakes” that help and hinder our journey towards North Star.

*What triggers my energy when I feel sapped? What excites, rejuvenates and regenerate energy in my organization? In other words, what is my key **Energy Trigger**?*

### **Energy Trigger**

Why am I full of energy one day and completely down the next? Do I really know what activities excite me, rejuvenate me, and energize me when I engage in them? Every one of us has a reliable and repeatable source of energy that we tap into through our energy trigger. Some of us know exactly what it is and others don't. One has to reflect on ones favorite activities to identify ones energy trigger. Is it being in nature? Is it music? Is it reading? Tennis? Good conversation? Good food?

Many of us are unaware as to what triggers our energy. If we are unaware of our energy trigger, we are dependent on weather, food, and unexpected surprises to cheer us up and energize us. It is like trusting the wind to take us to Seattle instead of purposeful navigation with motor powering our journey in the example above. As we become more aware and participate more in activities energize us, we begin to see an increase in our energy on a daily basis. By identifying activities or practices that reliably rejuvenate us, we reduce chances of burnout. Energy is more closely connected to our emotions and passion. Based on research work on emotional intelligence, it is found that *the emotional energy and passion are two factors that distinguish successful people.*

By the way, when I mention energy trigger, I really am looking for the triggering mechanism. For example, when my laptop battery is drained, I plug the ac adapter into a wall socket. Once I plug it in, the battery starts charging and continues to charge until it is full. My role is to plug it in. When we are truly connected to our energy source, our immunity goes up, time moves quickly, we get into a flow state and feel happy and relaxed. It has more to do with aligning our social persona with our authentic persona. In the spiritual literature, it is often said that we have an essential self or authentic self that acts and a critical or social self that criticizes. In his classic book Inner Game of Tennis, Tim Gallwey popularized the concepts of Self 1 and Self 2 – self 1 being the acting self and self 2 being the critical self. When our critical or judgmental self is aligned with our acting self, that alignment triggers our energy and passion. Operating more and more in alignment between our two selves is what makes us tap into our natural genius.

*What kinds of activities, mindsets, and processes drain my energy? What kind of Alarm System do I have to catch myself before I drain completely?*

### **Alarm System**

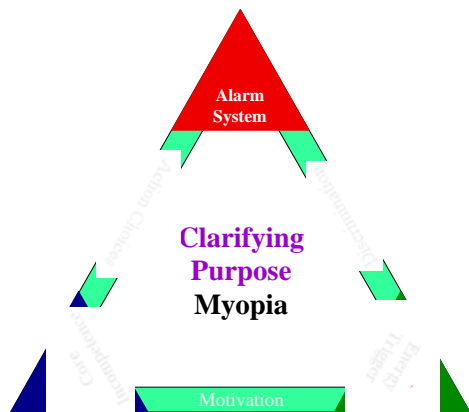
We all get exhausted the day and that is understandable. Weather, work, thinking, and stress – all of them can drain our energy. But sometimes, we lose our energy at a faster pace and if we don't catch ourselves, we might do such things as get upset with others, snap at people, become impatient with ourselves, and make poor decisions. These are preventable energy drains and we have to learn to identify signals from our body that let us know that we are getting

into a danger zone. How can we recognize when our energy is draining faster than usual? Paying attention to our breathing, and body sensations (such as sudden heat, cold, dryness of mouth and tension in our neck or shoulders) help us identify times when we are losing energy faster than usual. We could use body sensations and breath patterns as alarm signals and by paying attention, we might identify the source of our energy drain develop self-control, expand self-awareness and increase sensitivity to what is going on inside our body/mind and outside in our environment. People who pay regular attention to such alarm systems reported a shift in the quality of their communication and decision making, increased effectiveness in working with others, and an overall sense of accomplishment.

What is the logic behind our energy drain? When our social self is misaligned with our authentic self the energy drains faster than usual. The more mis-match there is between our two selves, the more the energy drain. By becoming aware of our body sensations and breath patterns, we shift attention away from our unconscious patterns and can consciously pay more attention to our aspirations (our North Star) and limitations (our Core Incompetence). Creating an alarm system is also critical for any meaningful change in behavior as it has more to do with the body and breath and less to do with our minds. That is why the more heady we are, the more attention we have to pay to our actions and behavior as opposed to our words and minds. Paying attention to our energy patterns, breath cycles, fears and trepidations allow us to be more effective in ‘walking our talk’.

### **Tying it all together**

By asking oneself the four essential questions, it is possible for identify the cornerstones of ones personal DNA. The four follow up steps I found useful are: 1. Developing a daily practice of being aware of what is going on around and inside myself. 2. Once I am aware, paying attention to what bubbled up in my awareness and staying in the moment



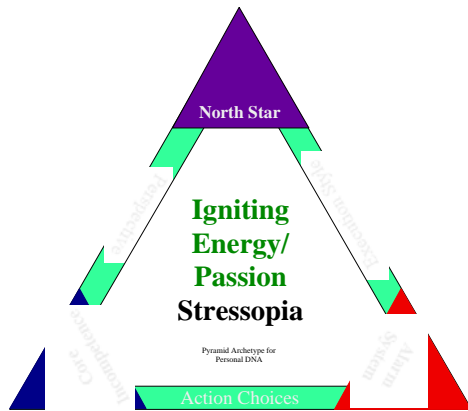
with no expectations or anxieties. 3. Once clarity and meaning emerges on what is next for me, taking that emergent action without attachment to a particular result. 4. Reflecting on both actions and outcomes without any blame or judgment. Each of these steps takes practice to get the most out of them and, with time, some noticed an internal shift.

Their presence, listening abilities, focus, performance, and results are some of the areas in which they saw a shift for the better.

*What happens if I don't pay attention to all the four cornerstones? What happens if I neglect one of them?*

When I ignore my North Star, larger purpose and higher aspiration lose their meaning to me. I focus just on immediate goals and short-term objectives and operate in the ‘myopia’ zone. Even though I have clarity about my energy drains, energy triggers and core incompetence in this scenario, without a clear North Star, my journey into the future depends on accidents and luck. When I do focus on my North Star, my purpose becomes clearer and I gain meaning, directionality and motivation.

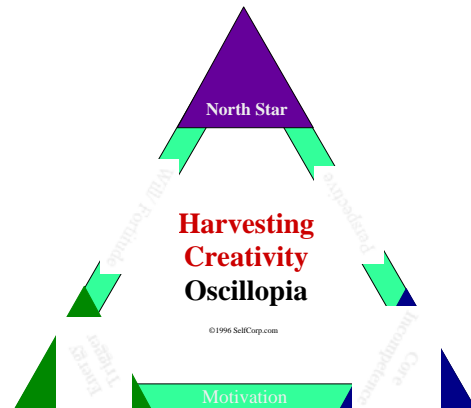
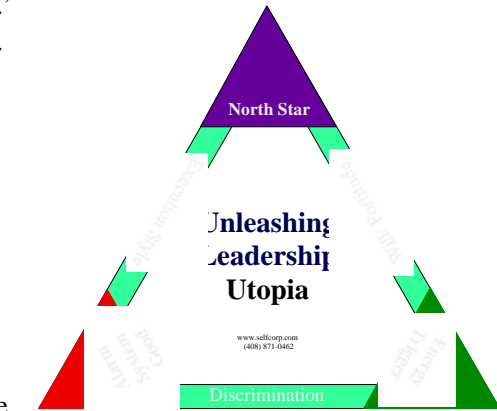
If I ignore my core incompetence, I start living in the land of ‘Utopia.’ Everybody, I would venture to say, likes to live in Utopia one time or another, but Utopia exists only in fantasy. Without awareness of my CI, I lose my ability to be authentic, aware and conscious of my leadership gifts. Unleashing authentic leadership is closely linked to knowing my core incompetence or my ‘winning formula.’



Ignoring my energy trigger leaves me in the zone I call “Stressopia.” I love to facilitate board meetings, off sites and workshops and after they finish, I am really drained of energy. If I don’t take care of myself by engaging in activities that replenish my lost energy, I fall sick or my productivity and creativity drop to low levels. By spending time by myself, meditating, taking long walks and sometimes playing tennis rejuvenates me and recharges me. Deep

reflection is my triggering mechanism that breaks me out of my stress and reconnects me to my passion and charges my batteries.

There were times when I felt great for no reason and at other times, I felt depressed and anxious. It was as if I had no control of my emotions and I could be feeling excited one moment and upset and angry the next. It took time for me to understand that when I don’t pay attention to my body signals and other alarms that go off in my mind, I enter this zone of emotional roller coaster. I call this zone “Oscillopia” and one reaches this zone when they don’t pay attention to their energy drains. When my energy drains rapidly, my creativity goes down and I feel like I am sailing on a ship without a navigational system. When I recognize that my energy is draining at a faster rate and identify alarm system to warn me, I begin to gain control over myself and learn to harvest my creativity.



The four triangles shown above represent four potential scenarios in our lives. We could operate in life in unconscious way and only hit upon Myopia, Utopia, Stressopia and Oscillopia and not know what to do about them and how to break out of that scenario. These four scenarios represent lack of awareness of the missing cornerstone in each scenario namely North Star, Core Incompetence, Energy Trigger and Alarm System respectively. When we begin to pay attention to the missing cornerstone, we could convert the exact same four scenarios to help us clarify our purpose, unleash our leadership, ignite our energy and passion; and harvest our creativity.

The four triangles representing four scenarios are related to our personal DNA. If we organize all the four cornerstones of your DNA to be equidistant from each other in three dimensional space, they form a tetrahedron

(one form of pyramid). We can visualize one scenario on each face and we end up with a 3-D metaphor of our personal DNA.

*What happens if we ignore two cornerstones and focus on only two cornerstones at a time?*

When we focus on only two cornerstones, we understand the reflexive relationship between them. In real life, every idea has a hidden side or tacit dimension to it. In other words, Good has reflexive or polar relationship with Bad and has reflexive relationship with low. When we choose to pay total attention to good, we tend to ignore the other pole. For example, when we pay total attention to North Star and ignore our CI, we end up being too visionary and not appreciate realism or pragmatism. In other words, we lose our perspective. When we learn to 'include and transcend' the polarity between North Star and CI and recognize that they are two ends of the same continuum, we gain new competence. In this specific case -- reflexive relationship -- it is 'perspective' that is gained.

Similarly, the other five reflexive relationships (four cornerstones have six unique relationships when taken two at a time) are: appropriate action, discernment, execution style (that evokes leadership in others), will/fortitude and motivation. When we pay attention to these relationships, we gain competency in each of these areas. Further discussion on this topic is beyond the scope of this small article.

Of course if we only focus on one cornerstone while ignoring the other three, we risk not make much progress in either our work or our life.

## **Summary**

Every one of us have unique DNA and most of us are not aware of our DNA. Clarifying our purpose, becoming clear about our core incompetence, learning to manage our energy, and creating an alarm system are the four cornerstones of our DNA. It is representation of our unique and natural genius and by igniting it, we can find ways distinguish ourselves, unleash our authentic leadership, evoke passion, harvest our creativity (potentially resulting in new intellectual property, innovative products and services) and build a brand. The key to ignite our natural genius is inquiry. Awareness, attention, action and reflection are processes that support the ignition process.

## **About the Author**

*Prasad Kaipa, Ph. D., CEO of SelfCorp, has advised senior executives from Ford, Boeing, Cisco, Disney, HP, British Aerospace, and Mastek in the areas of leadership development, strategic thinking, future directions, mindset change, and innovation. He coaches CEOs and entrepreneurs, and maps DNA of organizations. His book **Discontinuous Learning: Reflections on Aligning Self and Work** is due to be released in 2005 through Vinayaka Media. Prasad teaches through Saybrook Graduate School and directs the TiE Institute for Entrepreneurship. He sits on the board of six companies and organizations in the USA and India. He can be reached at (408) 871-0462 or at [pkaiipa@selfcorp.com](mailto:pkaiipa@selfcorp.com). Some articles written by Prasad can be found at [www.mithya.com](http://www.mithya.com) and [www.selfcorp.com](http://www.selfcorp.com).*