

Giftedness in Practice

Strengthening Personal Leadership
in Gifted Adults

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Introduction

I discovered my giftedness in 2004, at the age of 33. My discovery led to an intensive personal process of integrating this newfound knowledge into my self-image. This process also inspired me to want to help other gifted people. After completing the postgraduate program “Coaching for Professionals,” I started my coaching practice for gifted adults in 2007.

At first, I spent one day a week coaching alongside my regular job. After a few years, I decided to cut down my hours with my employer to spend two days a week working in my practice. I have been fully self-employed since 2016.

Besides coaching gifted people, I conduct research and give lectures and training courses. I have brought together my experience in this book. I feel the need to share my experience in counseling with others. I turned 50 this year and have entered a new phase in my life. Although I never want to stop learning and feel comfortable in the role of an eager student, I also experience a certain maturity in my profession. Training and supervising other professionals have become an increasingly important part of my work.

Therefore, my book is not aimed directly at gifted adults themselves, although they will surely benefit from reading it. This book is intended specifically for those who provide guidance to gifted people or encounter them in their practice or the workplace.

Because gifted people are a minority in the population, they are considered ‘atypical.’ Many gifted people feel somewhat disconnected from the people around them. Overcoming this requires an effort on the part of gifted people themselves as well as those around them. During my coaching, we explore both. So this book is also aimed at the people around gifted people.

Not all my statements in this book are supported by scientific research. A lot is also based on my experiences in practice and observations and the patterns I see in them. That is why I would like to stress that my client group is specific: it concerns gifted people who go to a coach to start working on specific questions.

The structure of this book reflects the coaching process that I go through with clients. Taking a bird's-eye view of this process, the main steps involved are recognizing, normalizing, processing, growing, using, and maintaining. The people in the client's environment also play a role. Not every step in the process is relevant to every client, and the order is not set in stone. Each client receives an individualized approach. The client investigates, learns, specifies, processes, renews, integrates, and utilizes.

Some clients stop or start halfway through. They all have different needs, which they explain to me so that I can coach them accordingly.

With this book, I hope to offer insights that will help people recognize and deal with their giftedness or that of a friend, partner, or colleague. In particular, I hope that my own experiences will be helpful to other professionals who occasionally or frequently offer guidance to gifted adults.

Rianne van de Ven, October 2021

Preface to the English translation

After publishing this book in Dutch in 2021, it is now available in English; this requires some context about giftedness in The Netherlands for the international reader.

Before 2000, no educational programs were available for gifted children in The Netherlands. Even today, no certainty exists that gifted children will be identified as such at an early age or provided with the specialized educational support they require. However, there is a growing interest in gifted children in the Netherlands, and because of this new attention, many adults are beginning to recognize their own giftedness.

The gifted adults in my practice have a strong developmental potential that often has not been identified in their childhood. When they discover their giftedness late(r) in life, they often require help adjusting and integrating this in their self-image.

Even in countries where gifted education programs have existed for a long time, not every gifted child is identified. Consequently, in these countries, my experience in working with adult giftedness identification can also be of great use to professionals who guide, coach, counsel, or treat gifted adults.

Rianne van de Ven, May 2022

Reader's guide

The stories I use during coaching sessions in my practice form the foundation of this book. This does not mean that every chapter or every section applies to every gifted individual. Each client follows their specific path within the coaching process. For this book, I put all the relevant aspects of the coaching process in a logical order.

Chapter 1 is about how I see giftedness. My clients are people who already know or strongly suspect that they are gifted but have not known this for long, with all of the consequences this entails. What does giftedness look like for them? What do you do as a mental health professional if you think one of your clients may be gifted? What does giftedness look like for these clients? Do they still have doubts? How do CoreTalents work? I close this chapter with the Delphi Model of Giftedness, with which I enjoy working.

In Chapter 2, I provide general and in-depth information about giftedness. What issues do gifted people encounter? How do they differ from non-gifted people? How does giftedness explain a person's behavior, and how does the outside world react to this? How do gifted people create? What about gender identity?

Chapter 3 deals with how my clients process their recently discovered giftedness. Of course, this is different for each client because it depends on how their development up to that point has affected their lives.

Chapter 4 describes how clients learn to deal with their giftedness and its implications. They develop a new self-image.

Learning new skills is of great importance to better cope with the less positive aspects of giftedness. What are executive functions? Why are these skills often less developed in gifted people? In this chapter, I also discuss how gifted people can improve their communication skills. In addition, I address effective influencing and self-care skills.

Chapter 5 is about using one's potential. In this phase of the process, the client and I look at their passions, of which gifted people often have more than one. How can you convert your passions into a job? What does the job application process look like? I also deal with the process of finding meaning, an important part of a gifted person's life.

In Chapter 6, I describe the role of the gifted person's environment and how it can support their process.

The final chapter discusses the conclusion of the coaching process. The client and I look at whether and how they can continue without my help. What do they need? What tools can they use or are good to work with? At the end of this chapter, I write about going "beyond the label," meaning that discovering their giftedness initially plays a major role in a client's life. There is often a great sense of relief, and this new insight has to be discovered and experienced. During this often-temporary period, the client is preoccupied with the theme of 'giftedness.' To me, "beyond the label" means that someone has integrated their giftedness into their self-image and views it as one among many aspects of their identity.



Recognizing

1.1. About giftedness

The concept of ‘giftedness’ is still in its infancy. There are many definitions of giftedness, but none are universally accepted. Most definitions and models come from the world of education and are based on studies of children. While attention to giftedness in education is important, there is more to giftedness than that. Someone doesn’t stop being gifted when they finish school or turn 18. A gifted person remains gifted throughout their life, and giftedness affects more than just education. Giftedness also explains differences between people in the areas of physical and mental health and work.

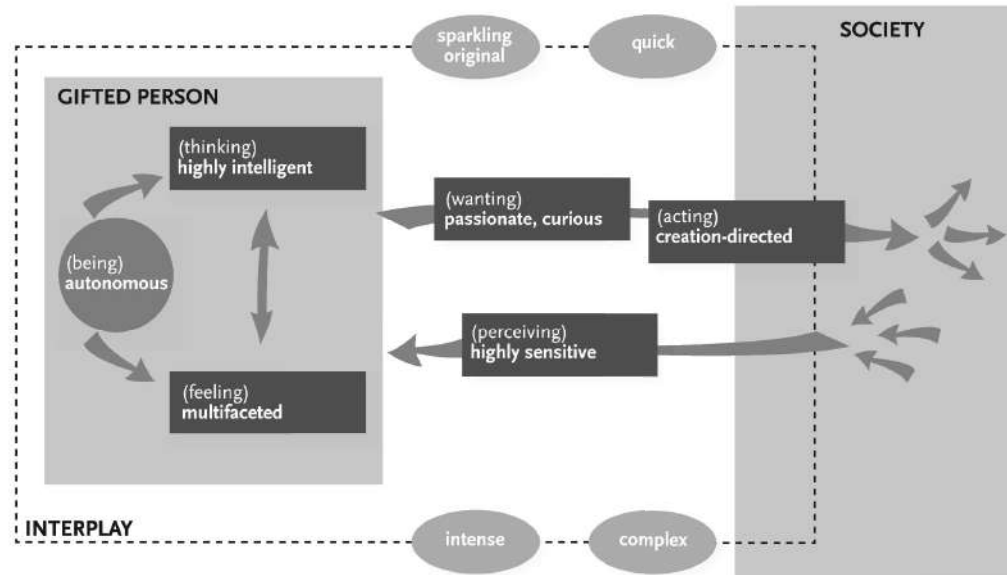
Attention to giftedness in adults is an even more recent development in scientific research. Therefore, research on this topic is still scarce. The Dutch Gifted Adults Foundation (*Instituut Hoogbegaafdheid Volwassenen*, IHBV) dedicates itself to this theme. The Netherlands leads the way in this respect internationally. Fortunately, the scope of giftedness is also expanding in other countries.

In the Netherlands, a clear outline has been formulated that appeals to me greatly. It reads:

“A gifted person is a quick and clever thinker, able to deal with complex matters. Autonomous, curious and passionate. A sensitive and emotionally rich individual, with great imagery, living intensely. He or she enjoys being creative.”¹

¹ Kooijman-van Thiel, 2008

The Delphi Model of Giftedness that accompanies this outline visualizes giftedness as follows:



From: M.B.G.M. Kooijman - van Thiel (ed.). *Highly Gifted. Obvious? On Identity and Image of Gifted Persons*. OYA Productions, 2008

According to the Delphi Model of Giftedness, the characteristics of giftedness are:

The inner world of the gifted individual:

Being	Thinking	Feeling
Autonomous	Highly intelligent	Multifaceted
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes their own judgments • Makes their own decisions • Sticks with their decisions until something better comes along 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly analytical by nature • Matrix thinking: multiple simultaneous tracks, levels, and moments • Metacognition: thinking about the matrix itself • Pattern recognition • Easily alternating between divergent and convergent thinking • Strong associative power • Good working memory and long-term memory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many simultaneous emotions • Sometimes so many emotions that they need to withdraw • Strongly interlaced • Nuanced and colorful

The gifted individual in relation to society:

Wanting	Acting	Perceiving
Passionate and curious	Creation-directed	Highly sensitive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wanting a lot • Preferably right away • Always looking for something new • Inquisitive, wanting to discover • Clinging on • Persistent • Gets into a flow easily 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Always busy making something and enjoying doing so: a model, process, theory, plan, technique, method, analysis, overview, invention, improvement, game, idea, product, puzzle, painting, or piece of music • Worlds of thought, structures, stories, images 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are indications of a gradually different neurological system: more, thinner, and faster nerves, more sensitive sensory neurons, more and faster synapses, a brain active in more places at the same time. • Everything arrives at once, fully nuanced, with great precision, and with its full weight

Intense, complex, quick, and creative are the characteristic features of the interaction between a gifted person and their environment. I also refer to these as the dimensions of which a gifted person must be extra aware because these are the areas in which they can become disconnected from their environment.

1.2. How I see giftedness

I often say: “Line up three hundred gifted people, and you’ll have three hundred different individuals. What binds them together is best described in the Delphi Model.”

I see giftedness as a combination of different elements. It is not just about high intelligence but about the overall picture. Their high intelligence enables quick and complex thinking but also intense feeling. Gifted people understand many nuances that escape those who are not gifted. Gifted people grasp situations more quickly and seek to understand them. Gifted people are creative, often have several passions, and therefore do not fit into the ready-made categories that people define for each other. Because of these differences, gifted people are at risk of feeling disconnected from their environment.

Who are my clients?

Giftedness is receiving more attention now than ever before. Most research has focused on giftedness among children, and multiple books have been written about it. Some schools also have programs that cater to the needs of these children. There is no doubt that progress is being made. More and more adults were identified as being gifted as children. However, most of my clients did not find out they were gifted until they were adults and did not have access to any special programs at school. When people find out that they are gifted later in life, this usually means they are experiencing specific problems or issues. People don’t go looking for answers when life is going smoothly. Therefore, the insights into giftedness, which my clients gain while coached by me, often lead to a grieving process. Many clients experience a strong sense of loss for things they never had. How different could their lives have been? Some go through this process alone, while others seek help.

Clients who turn to me for coaching have varying views of their own intelligence and intelligence in general. There are those who:

- think that being gifted is a requirement for my coaching. They then mean an IQ score that qualifies for Mensa membership (a

score in the 98th or 99th percentile; for most tests, this is a score of 130 or higher). They take an IQ test before coming to me;

- have not yet taken a test and ask me if that is a problem;
- identify with the characteristics of giftedness but do not have a corresponding IQ score;
- see an intelligence test as part of the process. For them, I include an IQ test supervised by a licensed psychologist.

As a coach, my focus is on gifted people. My clients often ask me if I think they are gifted. I do not give definitive answers on this, although I see it in their behavior, such as their speed of understanding, their high level of abstraction, and their humor. Recognition based on these characteristics often brings great relief. Suddenly giftedness seems to explain everything, and some clients attribute everything to it. Everything revolves around giftedness, even their personality. That's fine at first. It's a mechanism that helps them move forward, but being gifted is only part of their identity. Because this part of their identity has long been overlooked, devoting lots of attention to it can have a healing effect. In my coaching, I use this temporary extra emphasis on the theme of 'giftedness' to help my clients improve their self-knowledge. This focus often fades into the background as the coaching process progresses. A personality is more than just intelligence.

To further clarify giftedness, I often use opposites and extremes and black and white thinking in my practice. Of course, the reality is much more nuanced, but the extreme dichotomy clarifies things immediately. Examples are gifted and not gifted, fixed and growth mindset, and top-down and bottom-up thinking.

My clients are highly diverse. They vary in gender, age, background, nationality, social position, and more. They are referred to me by the Dutch Unemployment Agency (UWV) as part of their reintegration program, private individuals, self-employed individuals, or offered a coaching program by their employer. They only have one thing in common: they display characteristics of giftedness.

The coaching needs of my clients

My clients' coaching needs are also very diverse. The following coaching goals are common:

- investigating whether the client is gifted
- increasing their self-knowledge
- learning to make the most of their potential
- reducing problems associated with fear of failure, fixed mindset, and procrastination
- improving competencies, such as communication skills or executive functions
- better self-care, especially for highly sensitive clients
- reintegration into work after illness, often after burnout or boreout
- career coaching, outplacement
- finding meaning

1.3. Gifted but unaware

Gifted people who do not know that they are gifted, who are unaware of their giftedness, often seek support from a mental health professional because they experience issues like fear of failure, procrastination, or avoidance. But following a diagnosis, therapy usually does not solve the problem because nothing is done about the underlying cause: the mismatch with their environment due to being gifted.

Everything falls into place when a client realizes they are gifted and understands what this means. The knowledge and implications of being gifted make them stronger and more self-aware. Understanding how their brain works, how they differ from non-gifted people, and what they can do about this gives them tools for action. It gives them space so that the initial symptoms decrease or even disappear altogether.

Some gifted people do not experience any difficulties related to their giftedness and have never wondered whether they are gifted. This group is also unaware. These people are often very successful and do