

Researchers and Founders

I spent many years working with founders and now I work with researchers.

Although there are always individual exceptions, on average it's surprising to me how different the best people in these groups are (including in some qualities that I had assumed were present in great people everywhere, like very high levels of self-belief).

So I've been thinking about the ways they're the same, because maybe there is something to learn about qualities of really effective people in general.

The best people in both groups spend a lot of time reflecting on some version of the Hamming question—"what are the most important problems in your field, and why aren't you working on them?" In general, no one reflects on this question enough, but the best people do it the most, and have the best 'problem taste', which is some combination of learning to think independently, reason about the future, and identify attack vectors. (This from John Schulman is worth reading: <http://joschu.net/blog/opinionated-guide-ml-research.html>).

They have a laser focus on the next step in front of them combined with long-term vision. Most people only have one or the other.

They are extremely persistent and willing to work hard. As far as I can tell, there is no high-probability way to be very successful without this, and you should be suspicious of people who tell you otherwise unless you'd be happy having their career (and be especially suspicious if they worked hard themselves).

They have a bias towards action and trying things, and they're clear-eyed

and honest about what is working and what isn't (importantly, this goes both ways—I'm amazed by how many people will see something working and then not pursue it).

They are creative idea-generators—a lot of the ideas may be terrible, but there is never a shortage.

They really value autonomy and have a hard time with rules that they don't think make sense. They are definitely not lemmings.

Their motivations are often more complex than they seem—specifically, they are frequently very driven by genuine curiosity.