



# Beware of the Benchmark

September 2026

Dear Friends,

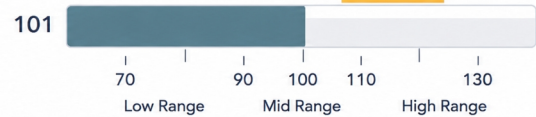
I recently undertook one of those self-ranking emotional intelligence questionnaires.

I won't name the exact one, but it produced some interesting results — and, more importantly, it reminded me how careful we need to be when looking at data.

The graphs showed a gold bar representing “top leaders”, one is displayed below.

## Optimism

Positive attitude and outlook on life



What would you assume that meant?

I initially assumed it represented something like an interquartile range — perhaps the scores of genuinely high-performing leaders compared with everyone else.

It didn't.

The questionnaire had surveyed just over 200 Americans in a range of positions, from middle management to CEO. “Top leaders” simply meant the people who had scored in the **top 50% of this particular self-ranking questionnaire**.

That is quite a different thing.

Perhaps this was deliberately presented this way to encourage people to aspire to take action to become “top leaders”. But it is a useful reminder that whenever we see a graph, we should ask:

**What exactly is being measured?**

And perhaps even more importantly:

**Who are we being compared with?**

Who is the benchmark?

The people completing this particular questionnaire were North American.

That matters because self-assessment isn't necessarily consistent between countries.

For example, a YouGov international survey found striking differences between countries in how people rated themselves. In the intelligence question, **47% of Americans described themselves as “very intelligent.”** [The study](#) is a useful reminder that self-assessment is influenced by culture.

This reminded me of something that happened when I was hiring skis. The lovely guy asked me what level of skier I am because, quite reasonably, he wanted to make sure I had the right equipment.

I said I was a beginner. He looked at me and said:

**“You're definitely not a beginner. I've been hiring you skis for years now Doc!”**

He then made an observation that stuck with me:

Apparently, all the Americans tell him they're advanced.

The moral is not that one nationality is better at skiing — or self-assessment — than another.

It's that **the answer depends on the benchmark.**

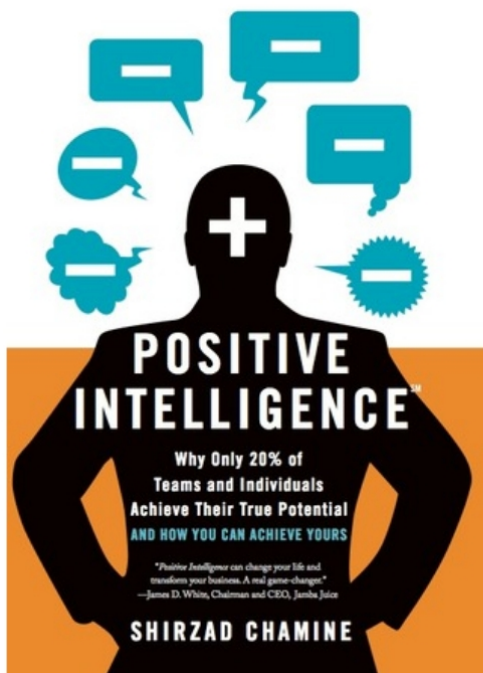
### **Visualise overcoming the obstacle.**

The questionnaire did give a bit of advice I really liked relating to visualisation (mentally, not data visualisation!). We often hear about athletes visualising success before they perform. Mentally rehearsing the [successful shot](#), movement or outcome which can improve performance.

There is a famous story about a prisoner of war in Vietnam who supposedly visualised playing golf every day while imprisoned, only to find that his golf had improved dramatically when he was released. It's a great story — probably apocryphal and there would obviously have been many other factors involved. But it does highlight the power of visualisation.

Well, you can use a similar technique at work if you're working towards a goal, don't just picture the end result. Picture yourself navigating the difficult bits along the way. Overcoming barriers and engaging in those awkward conversations successfully!

### **YouTube Video of the Month**



If you want to know more about Positive Intelligence on high-performing teams watch this video or if you would prefer to [read check this summary](#).

I will leave you with a note I have previously made that might resonate with you.

"in the moment of action, a high degree of optimism even what may seem excessive is essential for high performance."

Keep positive and have a great month,

Chris



Chris Weatherburn

Get the most out of your life!