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"G" is for guru

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Anyone can call anyone a guru. The six selected here are the real deal, the cream of the crop, our gurus of gurudom

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What makes a guru? Peter Drucker, the original management guru, said people called him that because they didn't know how to spell "charlatan." The British magazine *Management Today* noted that Tom Peters, Drucker's best known successor, is 50% genius and 50% bullshit artist, "but which bit is which?"

So, yes, there is an elusive quality to the guru business, and perhaps an illusive one too. Yet gurus seem to be something the contemporary world craves. How else to explain liner-notes gurus, snowmobile-clutch gurus and infant-potty-training gurus, all of which apparently exist.

At the same time, there is another class of guru, the five-star kind for whom there is no mistaking gurudom and guru-dumb. The business world loves them. These are the ones who combine intellectual heft with glowing charisma and a startling ability to communicate. Equally important, they cling to a central theme, a core of tenets and beliefs that's always apparent, even when they're spinning through more phases than Picasso.

Of course, it's not just who they are, it's what they do. Full-fledged gurudom has to be earned, and then maintained. One needs to write books, for example, preferably lots of them, and they really should sell. The website and blog must be as polished as the first paragraph in the first book after the blockbuster. Media appearances help make trends and influence people. And if well-paid speaking engagements don't follow, true gurudom has not been achieved.

A proper guru will have added at least one word or phrase to the lexicon, even while failing at several other attempts. Academic achievement isn't absolutely crucial, but academic recognition is. It takes a decade to earn a PhD, a month on the *New York Times* bestseller list to get an honorary one. Impressive clients are important in that they help pay the bills, but also because they help pad the client list. And whatever one thinks of think tanks, a guru without one needs to rethink the strategy.

Who are the top gurus in Canada when tested against these criteria? It's a short list no matter whom you follow. But we've narrowed our choices to these six: Karim Rashid, Richard Florida, Yvan Allaire, Ron Dembo, Naomi Klein, and Don Tapscott. Call them Canada's five-star gurus, whether they relish the distinction or not. In these pages you'll meet each one. But first, a few gross generalizations.

Some of our gurus want to change the world, others are content to tweak it, and still others exist to help someone else remake or refine it. Klein and Rashid are clearly in the first group. She wants a world that is more egalitarian, with less concern for fashion labels and more for throwing Karl Rove in jail. He wants it to be more colourful, soft-edged and beautiful - and with livelier background music, in keeping with his sideline as a club DJ. Allaire and Tapscott belong to the third group: Allaire is the classic wise man who straddles the worlds of business, governance and academia, offering insight to all who seek it; Tapscott's a serial conceptualizer in the corporate management tradition of Drucker, Peters and their bestselling ilk. Florida and Dembo lie somewhere in the middle with modes and motives that are not as easily defined. Dembo, a financial engineer by trade, has risen to prominence with a website that aims to save the planet by proving that unabashedly commercial enterprises - like his website - can help promote sustainability. Florida wants to help cities become more economically dynamic by attracting a larger share of creative types, but critics wonder whether (a) the theory is sound, and (b) his allegiance is to the cities, the creative types or Richard Florida Inc.

Yes, it's a tricky business, gurudom. To avoid being dismissed as dreamers, the most idealistic have to emphasize their practical side. The pragmatists, meanwhile, are especially careful to reach for big ideas - and to throw some of these around pro bono. All seem capable of both gobsmacking insights and self-serving banalities. The enduring question: Which bit is which?

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