

HOW'S IT GOING EVERYONE ?

ALL UNDER CONTROL....

GREAT BOSS.

LIKE YOU ACTUALLY CARE.

I'M REALLY CONCERNED THIS ISN'T SAFE!

ALL GOOD...

I COULDN'T TELL YOU THE TRUTH IN A MILLION YEARS..

THAT HR FEEDBACK THAT PEOPLE ARE SCARED OF ME - TOTAL RUBBISH. LOOK HOW OPEN MY TEAM ARE WITH ME..

# CHAPTER ONE

## LIES

You aren't being honest with yourself —  
don't worry; it's entirely normal

### THE REALLY BIG IDEA

There is a quote I love to use from the Harvard economist J. K. Galbraith:

**Faced with the choice between changing one's mind  
and proving that there is no need to do so, almost  
everyone gets busy on the proof.**

This underpins a theme that recurs throughout this book. The theme is quite easy to explain, but in my personal and professional experience it's the hardest psychological concept to get your head round which in turn makes it hard to use in real life. Let's make it simple.



You are being lied to.

That's right. Even when amongst your carefully selected friends and when your clever mind is fully functioning and not tired/hungover/sleep deprived/stressed (delete as appropriate), someone is lying to you every day and you don't even notice.

There is a good reason that you don't notice. The person lying to you is the last person you would suspect. You've known them for ever. You'd trust them with your life.

The person lying to you is you.

Let's just pause there for a moment and allow that to sink in.

We love to think of ourselves as rational, clever, realistic and honest – and we are, for the most part – but the curiosity of the human brain means that we are also *not* rational, clever, realistic and honest.

I have tried not to use too many psychological or neurological terms in this book – mostly because they are hard to remember and aren't really the sort of phrases you want to drop into everyday conversations – but there is an exception to the rule and it's these two words: **Cognitive Dissonance**.

Let's break it down (one of my pet hates being when people use words and assume that they are in everyone's everyday vocabulary).



‘Cognitive’, or ‘cognition’, relates to your conscious intellect – the processes of thinking, remembering, understanding, imagining, reasoning or learning. If you have ever done a cognitive reasoning test to get a job, it would have been to assess how good your brain was at thinking things through. Simply put, cognitive means the process of thinking or understanding something.

‘Dissonance’ is when things don’t match. It’s often used in music to describe notes that clash discordantly. More generally it indicates a lack of harmony or agreement.

Putting the two things together – cognitive dissonance – describes a situation in which your brain is unhappy because it has received two conflicting pieces of information.

What happens next as your brain finds a way to regain harmony is fascinating. Faced with a second input that doesn’t match the first, your brain quickly and conveniently changes it slightly (or even greatly) to align it with what it already knows.

Your brain may even encourage you to disregard the new data by telling you it’s not important or not relevant, or that you don’t have time to think about it. The problem is that by doing these things to return to equilibrium, your brain also makes the ‘truth’ rather murky. We believe ourselves and the evidence of our own conclusions. So, when you tell yourself that something is not important, you genuinely believe it’s not important. When you tell yourself that you don’t have time to think about something, you can immediately list a whole raft of more important demands on your time.

Because we can't see, feel or touch our mental or cognitive processes, it can be hard to accept how they affect us.

To make sense of this, let's take an altogether more straightforward scenario that you could see, feel or touch. If you have ever heard a child practising piano or violin you will know how hard it is on the ears when dissonant notes are played at high volume. It's uncomfortable, annoying and exhausting to listen to. You would consider it very 'normal' to distract them with the promise of an ice-cream or any other inducement on hand to make them stop. No one would think you were behaving strangely. Indeed, few would bat an eyelid if you stopped them taking lessons altogether. What people *would* find strange is if you were to let the torture continue and encourage them to come closer and play louder. Imagine how stressful it would be to put up with such caterwauling for weeks on end until the noise started to resemble something tuneful – or your ears adapted to the new style of 'music'?

We can't hear our mental processes like we can an instrument, but a similar thing happens. When your brain believes something to be true and it receives a new piece of information that clashes with an existing belief, it doesn't like it at all. This 'dislike' is cognitive dissonance. Knowing what happens in your brain when it occurs might just change your life ...

Cognitive dissonance affects us constantly, at home and at work and from childhood upwards. Ever had a partner who everyone else could see was trouble but you thought was 'the one'? That probably didn't end well, did it?

One pretty reliable 'trick' that your brain plays on you which helps explain cognitive dissonance is called 'confirmation

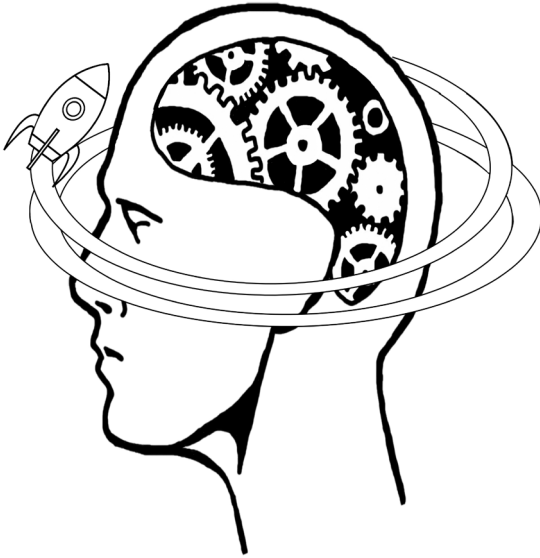


bias'. Your brain is wired to make you look for evidence for what you already believe to be true. When we have come to a conclusion about something or someone, our brain is continually on the lookout for more information that matches what it already thinks is right. We like to 'back-up' conclusions we have already reached.

This is related to something called the 'frequency illusion'. Have you ever bought a new car thinking it was quite an unusual make or colour and then seen hundreds of them on the road? Or you buy some cool new shoes and then everyone seems to have a similar pair? It stands to reason that there are not suddenly lots more of those particular cars or shoes in the world. The explanation is that, in order to stay sane, your brain must quickly disregard almost all of the millions of bits of information it receives every day. However, if you suddenly prompt it to think that hybrid vehicles or yellow Jimmy Choos are of interest then, guess what? Yes! There are plenty of both waiting to be noticed.

To illustrate the concept in the workplace, think about someone you consider to be a really good performer and someone else who you think is a bit flaky. You might be right. Your good performer may do only great things. Your poor performer may be a total waste of space. But be careful – your brain might also be lying to you. It might only be noticing the good things your 'good' performer does, and only noticing your flaky performer being late or on Twitter.

And when your eyes see your good performer being late – what does your brain do with the information that it gets from your eyes and needs to process? It will try the same



tricks as it would stop the unmusical child's racket, to distract you from the possibility of a problem as quickly as possible.

If you could hear your brain cogs whirring around, you would probably hear something like: 'Oooh bit of cognitive dissonance there – they are late and that doesn't fit with my existing beliefs that they are "good". I'm not keen on the evidence of them being late because it goes against what I already believe to be true ... I might have to change what I think about them. Quick! Let me find some evidence it doesn't matter ... I bet there's a good reason they were late today ... I'll worry about it next time ...'

And even when next time comes your brain will find another distraction: 'Oh, they are late again ... I wonder if



I should think about that ... I might do but actually I need to look at this super-important thing that has to be done right now ...'

We find it easy to discover evidence for what we already believe to be true. It is almost impossible for our brain to process evidence that something we believe to be true is

not actually true after all. The reason is a very good one: being wrong takes up a lot of energy. Our brain likes patterns and order and evidence we are 'right' because that doesn't expend much cognitive energy. Our brains are actually cognitive 'misers' – wired to avoid wasting energy. In lots of ways that is a good thing. Imagine how exhausting it would be to notice every car, shoe or event that contradicts something you consider to be important or unimportant? You'd be drained half an hour after you got out of bed.

The downside is that you can't trust your brain. In an effort to conserve energy it is misleading you constantly. And the process happens so quickly and feels so natural that unless we stop to reflect, we rarely think about our thinking.

This is where I hope this book will help. By accepting that what you think or believe right now, about yourself or the people around you, might not be 'true', and might actually be the result of your brain trying to conserve energy, you can start to notice things differently.

You can start to think about your thinking. You can begin to use your cognitive processes to understand where you





could improve your performance in areas you might not have noticed – even if you are already successful.

Or maybe you'll notice something that will help someone in your team to improve their performance – even if you had all but written them off.

So, perhaps our J. K. Galbraith quote is now easier to appreciate:

**Faced with the choice between changing one's mind  
and proving that there is no need to do so, almost  
everyone gets busy on the proof.**

I hope this founding chapter together with the rest of the book helps you to do something different. To become the exception to the rule and get less 'busy on the proof'. To divert that precious brain energy into seriously questioning whether there are some fantastic things that you could do with your brain to improve your performance and increase your happiness.

## GOT IT – NOW WHAT?

Here are some of the common cognitive 'biases' or brain tricks that our brains play on us all. I very much like to call them LIES. I find that the provocative language and shock value helps people to want to overcome them.

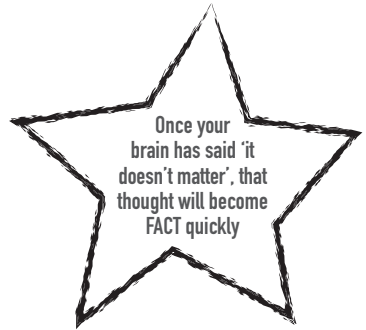
One of the best ways to make sure that these tricks/lies don't take hold is to have some quick ways to sense-check and deliberately challenge whether they are 'real' or a trick. If not,



then what you believe to be a TRUE FACT, might actually be an illusion that is holding you back from thinking about something with clarity.

If your brain does play one of these tricks on you, sooner is better than later in terms of recognising it. Once your brain has said 'it doesn't matter' or 'I don't have time to deal with this', that thought will become FACT quickly. You will then be able to find evidence that it is TRUE that you don't have time or it doesn't matter, making it difficult to argue yourself out of that position.

Get into the habit of spotting the lies as quickly as you can. Get other people to help you. Sharing the following examples of common (and very normal) lies or biases with them can help. Give them clear and explicit permission to let you know if they hear your brain playing tricks on you. Don't dismiss their feedback if they do dare to challenge you, though. They might not do it twice ... Here are some of your brain's favourite tricks ...



### **Brain trick 1: bandwagon effect**

This is where you tell yourself that *everyone* agrees or disagrees with something so it must be right. This can happen when you talk about someone – perhaps saying you think they are a star performer and whomever you are speaking to says, 'I think you are

right'. Or you complain that something your boss has done is unfair and they concur. It only takes one or two people to agree with you for your brain to embed as FACT that 'Joe is a star' or that 'The new policy is unfair and possibly illegal'.

The effect of cognitive dissonance means that once you are on that bandwagon it is really hard to get off it again. Your brain is much more likely to dismiss the times when Joe is in fact not a star at all, but actually is taking advantage. Or when someone tries to point out to you that the new policy might be unpopular but it's neither unjust nor unlawful.

Here are three quick counter-measures to try:

### **Jump off**

Deliberately jump off the bandwagon. Even just for thirty seconds of thinking time. When you find someone who agrees with you, think of a person you usually don't agree with. Ask them for a view. We do subconsciously tend to ask for opinions from people we like and who are likely to agree with us. Test out your FACT by asking someone from outside your usual circle – and really listen to what they tell you.

### **Pause and brainstorm the opposite**

Write down the situation as if the opposite were true. If your star performer Joe was actually just talking a good game, what would you be able to see if you looked for it hard enough? If the unjust new



policy was actually fair, what could it be trying to achieve? This can help your brain to notice alternative evidence. You might still want to dismiss it, but this is a little bit harder when you can see it in black and white.

### **Woah, Horsey!**

Practise being the person who puts the brake on. Asking questions like ‘How will we double check Joe isn’t a poor performer in disguise?’ or ‘Are we sure this policy is unfair?’ – One of my favourite questions in this space is ‘What would we say to play devil’s advocate?’ My experience is that, whilst you might get some disgruntled looks to start with, people do appreciate and admire the provocative thinking and the challenge.



### **Brain trick 2: post rationalisation**

We are scarily good at telling ourselves that, in retrospect, the decisions we took are reasonable and rational. Or even when decisions are proved wrong, they were ‘justified under the circumstances’ or we ‘had no choice’ but to make them.

Our brains are well equipped (some would argue deliberately designed) to protect us from the shame of being wrong. It is really difficult to say to yourself, ‘Do you know, in hindsight I could simply have done that better – no excuses.’ When we are given

feedback, we often find it difficult to absorb the most hurtful criticism – so we might concentrate on the parts we know are true and are less difficult to hear and just explain away the really hard bit by saying, ‘They don’t really know me all that well’ or ‘I couldn’t do what they suggested for a good reason that they don’t appreciate.’ We can spend hours finding justification for our actions, our thoughts and our words. Frankly, this is a waste of time and energy.

Here are some tactics to challenge post rationalisation:

### **Welcome challenge**

Let a trusted colleague or friend know that you want them to challenge you nicely when you seem to be justifying something that you did or said. Let them know that you would really welcome them saying something like, ‘Is there an element of you justifying that to yourself to make you feel better about it?’

Feedback can really help with this bias – but only if you listen and don’t shoot the messenger.

### **Make failure OK**

This is a really hard one, but practise telling yourself and others you trust that, whilst you know you made a mistake, it is OK because the most important thing is that you learnt X, Y or Z. It can pay to remember that we sometimes learn more from getting things wrong than we do from getting them right.



### Focus forward

Practise being the person that makes it OK for other people to experience the ‘shame’ of having made a poor decision. Help them refocus quickly on the future rather than rewrite the facts of the past. It can make it easier to forgive yourself if you practise on other people. Try questions such as, ‘If I told you it was perfectly OK to have got it wrong, but that it is not OK to berate yourself for it, what would you do now and next time?’



### Brain trick 3: in-group bias

This bias tricks us into believing that people who we know well and are in our team are generally better performers than people who are in another team. Listen out for it. I bet you hear within a day something like: ‘The new person isn’t quite as good as Bob,’ or ‘The people I’ve interviewed from Claire’s team don’t seem to be as ambitious/driven/skilled/well trained as my people.’ Or, to give you an out-of-work example, ‘He’s OK, but our new striker is never going to be as good as [insert name of much loved goal-scorer who has moved on].’ This bias is linked to our human need to belong to a tribe. Once you have found a tribe to belong to, you want to convince yourself you made the right choice – that your team is the best. Hence we look for evidence

that our people are best and – hey presto! – we can find that evidence, no problem. The upside is that the better you get to know ‘the other side’, the more likely you are to appreciate the positives in what they do. So there is a relatively easy fix. Expand your tribe and make the boundaries of any team more flexible. Welcome outsiders and encourage your team to do the same. Remember, unless you do this, they are probably underestimating your abilities too, so it’s definitely worth the effort!

So here are some ideas to help you do that:

### **Interview mindfully**

If you interview someone from a different team, simply reminding yourself that this bias exists before you start the interview can help. Write ‘In-group bias?’ on your notes. It should sharpen up your listening skills and your ability to judge whether their responses to your question are really ‘not as good as my team would give’.

### **Encourage curiosity**

When you hear someone in your team being critical of another team, ask them questions that challenge their potential bias and increase the chances of effective collaboration. If your team are having a moan about the service provided from another team, challenge their perceptions by saying something like,



‘Have you actually spoken to them or are you making that assumption based on their response to your email?’ or, ‘Go and try to get to know them a little better – it might help you to see where they are coming from and vice versa.’



#### **Brain trick 4: status-quo bias**

We love to think we embrace change and challenge. But actually, unless we instigate a change, our brain would prefer things to stay as they are. Remember the idea of your brain as a cognitive miser – it is designed to expend the minimum amount of energy necessary to get the job done. Because new things take up more energy to think about, your brain prefers the tried and tested ways of doing things. So if you find yourself coming up with a great idea but can't seem to find the impetus to get started, or tell yourself ‘I'll start tomorrow’ or ‘It's not broken, so why fix it?’ your brain could well be playing a trick on you. Something might not be broken, but it could work much better if you stopped listening to your own excuses.

Try these ideas to get your brain to be less miserly about new concepts:





### Just take 10

If you find yourself feeling less than enthusiastic about a new idea, promise yourself that you will try it for ten minutes straight away, before your brain gets a head of steam and convinces you not to bother. During that ten minutes, don't allow yourself to look for reasons that it won't work – stay positive that it could. At the end of the ten minutes do a quick brainstorm and write down three positive reasons for its implementation. Chances are that, having tried it for ten minutes, your brain has already invested some energy and won't want that to go to waste. Many of my clients have fed back that this 'ten minute' trick works really well. I use it when I am in a coaching session sometimes and I have seen it achieve great results for my clients. People generally have an hour or ninety minutes in their diary booked for our session. When I hear them making excuses about why something won't work, I ask them to take a break to try out the 'new thing' for ten minutes. They can't use the excuse 'I don't have time' because I have just provided it! I explain that this will enable us to explore together in the immediate aftermath of that ten-minute consideration whether they think at all differently about doing something different. In my experience, clients find they are much more positive by the end of just ten minutes.



### Quick brainstorm

If you find yourself or anyone else saying ‘It’s not broken ...’ when you are faced with a new idea for adapting or changing something that is not brilliant, take a moment to do a quick brainstorm. On paper works best. Write down all the potential opportunities that could arise from it being ‘great’ not just ‘OK’. As well as the obvious things, ask yourself ‘What is the very best thing that could happen?’ and ‘What left-field, entirely different things could this lead to if it worked like a charm?’ or ‘What would happen in my wildest dreams?’ Actively encourage your imagination to run riot for a minute or two. There is some evidence that this releases dopamine and serotonin – two hormones that can make you feel happier and more motivated. These natural chemicals can sometimes help get you started.

The most certain way to prevent your brain creating a fabulous opportunity from a new idea is to not give it a chance.



### Brain trick 5: self-serving bias

Human beings are really good at thinking that the skills and qualities that have helped us to be good parents or successful in our jobs will help other people too. Equally, whilst we might appreciate that people are different, we can easily convince ourselves that a

skill or quality that we *don't* have is actually not that important after all. It's easy to see why. If someone asks us how we achieved something, we tell them what we did or didn't do. It becomes natural therefore to equate that 'success' directly with those actions. We have 'evidence' that what we did or didn't do 'worked', and our brain wants to repeat that pattern. We miss that something else could have worked just as well.

I describe this science most often when I am asked to help a client to develop their leadership criteria, or their 'people' specifications for use in recruitment. The problem is that if you ask the people currently in the business to give you their 'people-spec', then as human beings they will advocate the inclusion of those qualities or skills that they believe have contributed to their own success. Equally, they will often argue that skills or qualities they don't possess are of less importance or relevance – and why wouldn't they, since they have very little personal 'evidence' that those 'other' things matter?

We can create evidence aplenty that there is a workaround for any deficiencies – because we have worked around them!

With that in mind, here are some things to think about:

### **Interview mindfully (again)**

We can tend to recruit in our own image. If you are interviewing someone, beware of this bias. You



might think that one candidate who gives you all the right answers is perfect for the job. However, the ‘right’ answer could simply be the one you would have given. Someone who gives you an entirely different answer from the one you were expecting (or even an answer that you think is ‘wrong’) might be a great candidate. Perhaps they have a different set of skills and strengths that would be equally or even more useful in your team or company? Do they have strengths and skills that complement your own rather than mirror them?

### **Work with ‘That won’t work’**

If you find yourself saying, ‘That won’t work,’ consider whether what you *actually* mean is, ‘I don’t have personal evidence that will work.’ We can sometimes be quick to dismiss an idea simply because our brain doesn’t want to expend the energy on thinking about something new. Remember, your brain is a miser.

### **Catch it and call it out**

Be wary of sentences that begin ‘You should try this – it works for me,’ or ‘Don’t bother – I tried it and it didn’t work.’ Whether this is something you hear yourself saying or something you are on the receiving end of, don’t be surprised if the well-intentioned advice isn’t acted upon. With just a little knowledge of self-serving bias, we can perhaps see that, whilst

offering advice based on what worked for you can be helpful, it can also easily fall on deaf ears. 'Don't try and operate that machine with wet hands' might be a life-saver. When it comes to a situation where there are infinite variables such as how to lead a team, the polar opposite of what you felt worked really well for you personally might play to the strengths of someone else. There's more about this bias in Chapter 6 when we talk about diversity and in Chapter 10 when we discuss coaching.



### **Brain trick 6: negativity bias**

I find this one particularly fascinating and I only learnt about it around five years ago. Basically, we are wired to think that people who are critical and negative have more gravitas, and even to assume they are smarter than someone who is enthusiastic and smiley. This can mean that we are likely to take feedback from Mr Grumpy to heart but will pay less attention to a positive comment from Little Miss Sunshine.

I wish I had known about it when I first used to go to executive meetings to present ideas. I noticed a pattern that I didn't understand at the time. I would find that members of a senior team would be quite positive or even enthusiastic in their support for an idea when I spoke to them privately – 'Sounds like a

great idea – let’s get you to the Exec to present it,’ or, ‘That sounds challenging, but I’m sure we could find a way.’ However, in the more formal meetings when they were joined by senior colleagues, those positive feelings seemed subdued or muted and were replaced by more reluctance than I was expecting from those previously enthusiastic people – and it seemed to be catching. Comments – by someone who had been enthusiastic about an idea one to one – like ‘I’m still not a hundred per cent convinced this can work’ took me by surprise. I also noticed that it influenced the room to ask for more information and a delay in introducing an idea. Clearly, a formal meeting will always be more structured and considered than an informal chat in someone’s office, but often the atmosphere seemed subtly more critical and negative.

With the benefit of knowing the brain tricks about bandwagons, the status quo and negativity, I now reflect that it is not at all surprising that any private enthusiasm or excitement for a new idea has a very hard time being displayed in a ‘serious’ environment. Given that we associate negativity and criticism with gravitas and intellect, it is no surprise that we subconsciously ‘upweight’ those qualities when we are in the boardroom. Imagine a scenario where one or two of the most senior people in the room are critical of an idea. Even if those two individuals are simply feeling a human bias towards the status

quo and the idea is a brilliant one, how difficult do you think our brains would find it to enthusiastically argue against their clever sounding caution if we were sat at a table in a less senior role? Our brains tell us we won't look clever, and that it is much safer to align ourselves with the status quo and the top gun in the room.

Knowing about negativity bias means that I don't respond to negativity in formal meetings in the way I once did. I used to take it quite personally – I can remember feeling quite 'betrayed' and being made angry and emotional by some of the responses of previously supportive colleagues – but being able to attribute it to negativity bias helps me to remain calm and respond in a more balanced way.

I have worked with some executives who are very gifted at getting their colleagues to be their more positive selves during a meeting. They are sensitive to an atmosphere of unhelpful negativity and caution and sometimes will be 'provocatively positive' or look to make decisions in less formal settings than a boardroom.

No one would suggest that it makes commercial or practical sense to run a business, a school, a hospital or even a family by enthusiastically implementing every idea that comes along without sitting down and thinking about its merits. However, it can be helpful to consciously remind ourselves that, when we are in a group where our



status matters and a new idea is introduced, our brains feel safer with what is familiar and will bias us towards the negative. Otherwise something left-field but brilliant could get sidelined because our very human brains come up with a million reasons not to do it.

Here are some thoughts to help your brain accept that it can be enthusiastic AND clever:

### **Influence-matrix activity**

As human beings we are generally motivated to seek approval and copy the behaviour of influential people and to distance ourselves from or disagree with those who have lower influence. It's called the 'influence matrix'. Try this experiment when you are next the most senior or most influential person in a meeting, see what happens when you are positive about an idea first and, conversely, what happens when you are immediately critical. Do both in the same meeting and observe the reactions around you carefully. Repeat over a series of meetings. Does negativity bias seem to affect some of your team more than others? You can easily overlook the fact that you are surrounded by 'yes' men and women. Noticing it could help you survive (ask Enron) and enhance your ability to make the most of the opportunities available to you.



### **Don't slow down**

Ask yourself which decisions are best made 'away from the table' and which need proper and formal consideration. In my experience, businesses can get tied up in negative bureaucracy and endless meeting cycles that slows things down unduly. Part of the reason could be due to the natural negativity trick that our brains play on us all.



### **Be positive on purpose**

Force yourself and other people around you to think of a positive or a potential solution to each negative they raise. When people say 'It simply won't work', try asking 'Let's challenge our thinking for a moment. If our business survival depended on making it work, what could we do?'

### **Exceptional executives**

If you are part of an executive committee or a senior formal meeting, my favourite short research paper to recommend is from the *Harvard Business Review* and is entitled 'What Makes Great Boards Great'. Jeffrey Sonnenfeld writes: 'What distinguishes exemplary boards is that they are robust, effective social systems with a virtuous circle of respect, trust and candour.' There is more on why trust AND challenge together are important in Chapter 9, for executives and indeed anyone else. For now, reading

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this short paper could help you to have candour, without undue negativity.



### **Brain trick 7: current-moment bias**

I bet your tricky brain has tried this one on you at least a half dozen times today already! Your brain regards ‘right now’ as very ‘precious’. Don’t forget, your brain is a miser. The miserly trick it plays here is to protect the ‘current moment’ – encouraging you only to do things right now that are easy, you have done before and like doing. Remember, this is not because the easy things are necessarily the best way to use your precious time (although your brain, in trying to conserve metabolic resources, might make you think they are). Your brain will come up with all sorts of sentences to make you feel it is perfectly rational that more difficult conversations, and other things that will take up a lot of cognitive ‘energy’ are not worth doing. Your brain will try all sorts – ever thought ... ‘I’ll do a better job on that in the morning, when I’m fresh,’ or, ‘I’ll focus on that next, when I’ve got more time,’ or, ‘That difficult conversation with Tom will be more productive if I have spoken to Joe first and reviewed his objectives properly.’

Be honest. How many of those things that you neatly convince yourself to do ‘tomorrow’ actually

happen the very next day? Or is it more likely that they then get placed on the list for the day after that? Or the day after that?

This is because, once 'tomorrow' or 'next week' becomes 'today' our current-moment bias kicks in again. If you are not careful, you end up with a to-do list as long as your arm and spend so long curating it and rewriting it that you actually reduce the amount of time available to get things done.



Here are some possible remedies:

### The 4 Ds

It's a fabulous return trick! Try it right now. Look at your to-do list or try it when a request comes into your inbox. Do one of the 4 Ds immediately – either:

- 1. DO** it now. Yep. Right Now. You will then have only thought about it once and read the email one time. This can save you hours. Otherwise you have to remember to remember it (or find and re-read the email), which takes up valuable thinking time you can invest elsewhere.
- 2. DIARISE** it. Don't put an action on a to-do list. Put an appointment in your diary to do it. This helps you to schedule time really well – you can plan your important thinking tasks for when you know you have time to do them, or for a time of day when

you have noticed those types of tasks take you less time to do. Diarising it means that you are also appreciating you can't do something else at the same time ... More of that in Chapter 7. (Spoiler: Multitasking is almost impossible unless the quality of what you are doing doesn't matter – then it's possible – but it actually doesn't save you very much time).

- 3. DELEGATE** it. Do it straight away. Give the task to someone whose strengths it plays to most closely and who will do it without you having to chase them. Be clear on what you want the person to do. Get into the habit of asking once and ensuring there are clear consequences when you have to ask twice. (By 'consequences', I don't mean being fired. An uncomfortable conversation using some of the 'Top Right Questions' in this book will mean you keep your people *and* get them to be more effective.)
  
- 4. DITCH** it. Yes you read that one right. Be realistic. If something is not important enough to you, and you will probably put it off until it is too late, then ditch it now, before you have invested any more energy on it. If you aren't going to remember to send back the feedback request and don't really have much to say then just delete or bin the request now. Even if you do send a quick note



of apology to explain why you won't be doing something, you will spend far less time on it than you will if you half-carry it around in your head or keep writing it down on a new to-do list when you know in your heart of hearts you aren't going to do it.

### **Just take 10 (again)**

Try a variation tip we've met before. When you find yourself saying 'I'll do that tomorrow/next week/when I'm ready', deliberately stop yourself putting it off and instead do it for just ten minutes. It can be so hard to resist postponing a difficult conversation or a boring job. But I promise you, I've tested this ricochet trick with hundreds of clients and friends over the years. More than 99 per cent report back that they are pleased they did it and it wasn't so bad after all once they picked the phone up or got started.



### **Brain trick 8: false-consensus bias**

You might have noticed this bias if you have had friends round to dinner recently and suddenly realised they don't share your views on something in the news and were really surprised. Apparently we are much more likely to think people will agree with us if we like them and can be surprised when they

disagree or say they won't back our idea. The converse is true. We are surprised when people we don't like or don't know well wholeheartedly agree and support us.

When we are making decisions and trying to win people over, if we are not careful we don't listen to the warning signs that someone we like is trying to break to us gently that they don't agree ... We can mistakenly take a 'Mmm – let me think about it' as a firm yes.

Combine this bias with the in-group bias we talked about above and your brain can think of some nifty excuses not to look outside your team for feedback 'because it won't help'. We might put off from asking for feedback from people we often cross swords with when actually they might fundamentally agree with us. Even if they have a couple of challenging observations, the bonus is that asking people you don't know well or have previously argued with about something is an opportunity to build the relationship too.

Here's some quick ways to test this out:

### **Go walkabout**

If you have an idea or need some feedback about something right now, walk away from your desk and go for a wander. Find someone you don't know very well or haven't always seen eye to eye with and



request a minute of their time to ask for their feedback. It could be the start of a beautifully productive friendship.



**Listen for what people don't say**

Be careful about assuming that you know what people think because you do or don't like them. It's natural, but dangerous. When you next get a less than extremely enthusiastic reply from someone you know and love,

make it safe for them to tell you what they really think. Questions that reassure them, such as 'I'm sensing you don't totally agree – that's OK – I'd love to know what you really think', can help them as well as you to navigate a potential area of disagreement.

# TOP RIGHT QUESTIONS

## For you

- What have I just told myself that might not actually be true?
- If I were to convince myself the opposite were true, what evidence would I look for?
- If I find some contradictory evidence, what will I need to do in order to pay attention to it?
- Who could challenge me to know this is true and not just my brain playing tricks on me?

## For others

- What emotion might your brain be trying to avoid?
- If you could think of failure as a bruise and not a tattoo what would you do?





## LEARN MORE AND SHARE

### Really great read

#### *A Mind of Its Own* by Cordelia Fine

Cordelia Fine is a psychologist with a degree from Oxford, Masters from Cambridge, PhD from UCL and is a professor at the University of Melbourne.

### Blogs

A one page blog on the dreaded 'to do' list and getting them done:

<https://changeyourmindfast.com/2015/03/26/just-one-thing/>

A quick Christmas blog on coping with multiple demands on your time, that resonates any time of the year:

<https://toprightthinking.com/2017/12/14/a-christmas-miracle/>

### Article

Jeffrey Sonnenfeld's *Harvard Business Review* article explains why great boards are as much about highly functioning social systems as bringing together experience:

<https://hbr.org/2002/09/what-makes-great-boards-great>

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## PARTING SHOT

It can be exhausting to start thinking about your thinking. It can also be disconcerting to have held a belief for twenty-five years and then to realise that what you have been telling yourself is crucial to your success might have been a lie that has held you back in some way. But the realisation that your brain is playing tricks on you can be revelatory. Some of the lighter-hearted ‘lies’ my brain told me over the past twenty years include ‘You’ll never be able to play an instrument – you can’t read music,’ and ‘I’d have loved to have learnt to surf when I was younger – it’s too late now.’ I turned forty thinking those ships had sailed.

Now I know about brain lies, I practise fun ways of proving I can get past them. As a result, I was in the North Sea last November on a surfboard to see off a particularly spectacular hangover. I play the guitar and sing along whenever I get the chance – I will leave you to imagine what my teenage children make of that ... But this gives me ‘evidence’ I can use as motivation to tackle the more pedestrian work-day lies too.

Who says you can’t teach an old dog new tricks? Not I. Not any more. The old dog just needs to disregard its brain when it spouts all sorts of lies about the new tricks being unnecessary new-fangled nonsense and therefore not worth the effort of learning.

Let’s tackle your ‘old dog’. On to Chapter 2.