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Take charge of your thinking process

1. Recognise that much of your thinking is automatic and unconscious – it has to be that way! But, this means that you run the risk of failing to notice the more subtle changes in your environment that require a change in your patterns.

2. Deliberately set aside some time to consciously review your assumptions and behaviours in different contexts. What you're wanting to do is to intentionally check whether the patterns you have stored and are unconsciously running are still valid – or the most up to date for the best outcomes.

For example, 'replay' the exchange between you and your client. What were the assumptions you made in order to act the way you did? Has anything changed over time that should cause you to moderate your behaviour?

3. Carefully scrutinise key elements of your expertise. Is it possible that some of what you believe to be true has changed? Are there other perspectives that might help you modify and strengthen the patterns associated with your expert knowledge?

4. Be curious about other fields and then see how insights and thinking from those fields might apply to your own areas of interest. Push yourself to make 'unexpected connections'.

ARE YOUR MENTAL PATTERNS YOUR MASTER OR YOUR SERVANT?

Unexpected connections

What do DNA, SMS messaging and Viagra have in common? Avid readers and would-be authors of crime fiction might immediately connect them to an enthralling murder mystery. Less well known is the fact that we use or better understand each as a result of unexpected connections.

James Watson and Francis Crick discovered the double-helix, twisted-ladder structure of DNA in 1953. Their findings revolutionised biological science. Yet, astonishingly, the pair actually conducted no DNA experiments of their own. Instead, they fervently studied existing and emerging research in a range of related fields including genetics, biochemistry, chemistry, physical chemistry and X-ray crystallography. They also benefited from working in complementary, rather than identical, scientific fields. Crick studied physics and X-ray crystallography. Watson's focus was viral and bacterial genetics.

Until the discovery of their double-helix model, the pair had spent 18 months relentlessly pursuing a 3D model of DNA. This included several failed models, among them a triple-stranded version. Essentially Crick and Watson were pooling all known and emerging research from a range of fields and making connections between the bits of knowledge to try and explain the structure of DNA.

New connections

The final breakthrough came from Watson applying insights from a visiting physical chemist who was sharing his office. Jerry Donohue pointed out to Watson that most textbook configurations of two vital molecules were in fact wrong. Watson set about building a cardboard model of the molecules in their 'correct' configuration. A flash of inspiration occurred while shifting the cardboard models around on his desk. He literally saw new, vital connections between molecules that had never before been imagined. The double-helix model followed quickly after that and the 'secret of life' was revealed in their one page article in an academic journal, initially going quite unnoticed.

Looking differently at existing evidence was the key to the DNA breakthrough. And new ways of seeing things were responsible for SMS and Viagra also. SMS messaging originated from the beeper or pager. Before mobile phones, they allowed people on the move to wirelessly receive a signal to call a number (beep). Fancier devices could receive a short telephone number. Soon after, it was discovered that upside down, some of the numbers looked like letters. Upside down, 07734 becomes "HELLO". 87 becomes "L8", an abbreviation for "late". Barely 30 years on, text messaging is the most widely used mobile data service globally.

Viagra was initially tested as a treatment for hypertension, angina and other heart conditions. As it turns out, it didn't suit that purpose very well. But, it had at least one unexpected side-effect on male test subjects. Despite failing as a drug to treat heart conditions, the unexpected connection to male reproductive health has resulted in a multi-billion dollar business.

Patterns and decision making

Why might it useful to point out these successful outcomes of unexpected connections? In a nutshell, because all information your brain processes is filtered using patterns you've stored. Because you've accumulated so many during your life, your brain prioritises them using emotional tags. Highly emotional events get highest priority and are most readily and vividly recalled. Think near-miss in the car. Or perhaps the time you burned your finger badly. Also, positive emotions you experienced, such as moments in a special relationship.

Of course, patterns become reinforced and refined through repeated practise and deeper experience. The value of being an expert is to pick out signals and patterns, perhaps among the noise, that lesser trained individuals might miss. But expertise can be a double-edged sword. Filters can become so rigid that you might reject information that is important to the context. This is especially so if the context is changing. Quite often contextual changes occur incrementally and therefore go by unnoticed.

Noticing and acting on changes in context

Businesses and individuals face unprecedented rates of change these days. Business cycles, for example, are shorter than ever before. Innovation is an essential response for business survival, let alone prosperity. Thankfully you have at your disposal an abundance of knowledge, an enormous store like never before. Also there are many powerful new tools for processing and making sense of vast amounts of data and information that is now to hand.

However, just as important as having all of this information on call are your own personal filters which determine which information you attend to and which you ignore. Missing or misinterpreting key data can cost you dearly. Critically, you need to realise that much of your decision making is unconscious.

Be more 'mindful' of your patterns

Mental patterns that you hold and use have a profound impact on every aspect of your life. A lot of the time they run on autopilot. Sure, this reduces your cognitive load. But, it may also be significantly impairing your capacity to notice important contextual changes and make valuable, unexpected connections. This deserves your conscious attention.