

Time to Think

By focusing as much time on exercising and building our cognitive strength as we do our physical strength we can start to better manage our emotions as well as our thinking resources to improve performance and maintain wellbeing.

By Deborah Hulme, Minerva Engagement

Thanks to neuroscience we can examine how we think in much more detail. This new knowledge is challenging some of our long-held beliefs and providing valuable insights into the origins of our own behaviour and that of those around us.

“We perform up to 98% of our actions on automatic pilot. We are not thinking. Thinking is hard work and if we can avoid doing it, we will.”

How much time do we spend thinking about thinking – how we think, what we think, when we think. For me, it was not a lot really. I think about lots of things, certainly, but I never used to focus that much on the nature of my thinking.

If I wanted to change something I focused on my behaviour and worked with that. I worked to break old habits in order to create new ways of being. It is kind of what we all do right? And it was not wrong – it is what we do based on what we know at the time.

But things have shifted. We now understand much more about what goes on between our ears. It is exciting and it is powerful. They say it takes 10 years for new insights and learnings in the science community to reach us in business or in life generally. This is too long, particularly at the pace of change we now live with. If we can understand what goes on when we think, if we can bring a language and a physicality to it, we can make a huge step change in what we do and how we do it. Not just within ourselves but within our organisations and our private lives.

When we focus on behaviour we are rather like the Doctor who focuses on the symptom rather than the cause. We now have a much better understanding of not only the cause of what we do but the process by which it works. We can bring it to life through language and demonstrate it through visual representation. We can show how thinking drives our emotions, which create our habits, impacting our behaviour and our performance. As we bring thinking into focus we can understand how it works and what it does.

We now know that it is almost impossible to get rid of a habit. It is always there. What we can do though is create new habits by redirecting our thinking (attention) and

practice, until the new habits eventually become stronger than the old. We know that it is virtually impossible to advise anyone. Each brain perceives in a totally different way to the next. What is good for you won't be the same for me, even if it is the same information. To change we must make the connections and create the insights for ourselves. This throws up a whole new set of skills we must develop if we are to be effective within a changing environment. How do we help each other think better?



Time dedicated to thinking is time well spent

We also know that between 95% and 98% of what we do each day we do on automatic pilot. We are not thinking. Thinking is hard work and if we can avoid doing it, we will. To think we must use energy and it tires us. In these knowledge-working days where many of us are paid to think, it is helpful to learn how to look after our precious limited thinking resources. Sleep, nutrition and exercise are all important as is our ability to manage stress, build our resilience and regulate our emotions more effectively.

What we are starting to see, with mindfulness for example gaining traction within an organisational setting, is a sharper recognition that perhaps we should be spending as much time focused on exercising and building our cognitive strength as we do our physical strength. In doing so, we can start to build a greater understanding of behaviours and the making and breaking of habits. We can also learn how to better manage our emotions as well as our limited thinking resources to improve performance and maintain wellbeing.

It soon becomes clear that time dedicated to thinking is time well spent.