



CUTTINGS

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WYSI-Not Always-WYG

A couple of thought provoking articles on how the brain helps us, but can also fool us: What You See Is-Not Always-What You Get.

The first article appeared in the New York Times in November to explain what happens under hypnosis – but has much wider application and implications for us. It explains a process of ‘concept formation’ or ‘neural networks’ through which we perceive the world. These allow us to make quick decisions and create meaning, but also mean that we often filter out data. In Learning Consortium we use ‘The Ladder of Inference’ process developed by Chris Argyris to help participants understand more about how their unspoken feelings create a frame of reference which affects the outcome of an interaction. The NYT article details some of the neurological underpinning of this process:

“In the processing of sensory data, information from the eyes, ears and body is carried to primary sensory regions in the brain. From there, it is carried to higher regions for interpretation.

So, for example, photons bouncing off a flower first reach the eye, where they are turned into a pattern that is sent to the primary visual cortex. There, the rough shape of the flower is recognised. That pattern is sent to a higher function, where colour is recognised, and then higher still, where the flower's identity is encoded along with other knowledge about the particular bloom.

Researchers call this direction of flow feed-forward. Raw data is moving from lower to higher brain functions to create a comprehensible, conscious impression. Bundles of nerve cells dedicated to each sense carry this sensory information.

The surprise is the amount of information traffic going the other way, from top to bottom, called feedback. *There are 10 times as many nerve fibres carrying information down as there are carrying it up.*

These feedback circuits mean that consciousness – what we see, hear, feel and believe – is based on “top down processing.” What you see depends on a framework built by experience that interprets the raw information – as a flower or a hammer or a face.

The top-down structure explains a lot. If the construction of reality has so much top-down processing, that would make sense of the powers of placebos (a sugar pill will make you feel better), nocebos (a witch doctor will make you ill), talk therapy and meditation. If the top is convinced, the bottom level of data will be overruled.” What you see is what you expect to get. Top-down processing explains why subjects susceptible to hypnosis can accept suggestions that overcome reality, but also has implications for all of us.

The hidden language of language

Reading the NYT article reminded me of a piece by Kaizen Training in their *FriendlyBrain* newsletter. They reported an intriguing experiment used by Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Blink*. People were given a series of words, and asked to make sentences out of them. An example might be, “shoes give replace the old” and you might make the sentence, “Replace the old shoes.”

Gladwell reflects that after that test you would walk out of the room and down the hall more slowly than you walked in. Why? Because the lists contained words like “old, worried, lonely, grey, and wrinkle.” The brain starts to think about the state of being old, and although you wouldn't notice it consciously, it would affect your behaviour.

You know before you know you know
The other effect that the Kaizen article highlighted was that brain is working ahead our consciousness.

Scientists at Iowa University did an experiment where subjects were asked to play a game where the turn of cards won them money. Red stacks of cards had high stakes – win a lot but lose a lot as well. Blue cards gave smaller but regular returns, better in the long run. Knowing nothing about this at the start

of the game, most players started to develop a hunch about what's going on after turning over about fifty cards. They don't know why they prefer the blue decks, but they're pretty sure that they're a better bet. After turning over about eighty cards, most have figured the game out, and can explain exactly why the red decks are a bad idea. Standard learning theory: We have some experiences. We think them through. We develop a theory, and then finally we put two and two together.

The Iowa scientists repeated the experiment with gamblers, and measured stress activity of the sweat glands in the palms of their hands (a classic lie-detector test). What they found was that the gamblers started generating stress responses to red decks by the tenth card, forty cards before they were able to say that they had a hunch about what was wrong with those two decks. They also started favouring the blue decks. In other words, the gamblers had figured the game out before they figured the game out: they began making adjustments long before they were consciously aware of what adjustments they were supposed to be making.

It seems our brain uses two very different strategies to make sense of the situation. The first is the conscious strategy. We think about what we've learned, and eventually come up with an answer. This strategy is logical and definitive. But it takes us eighty cards to get there. It's slow. It needs a lot of information. There's a second strategy. It operates a lot more quickly. It starts to kick in after ten cards. It has the drawback, however, that it operates—at least at first—entirely below the surface of consciousness. It's a system in which our brain reaches conclusions without immediately telling us that it's reaching conclusions, except by sending messages through weirdly indirect channels, like the sweat glands on the palms of our hands.

Food for thought... ©

This Is Your Brain Under Hypnosis, Sandra Blakeslee, New York Times 22.11.05 FriendlyBrain, Kaizen Training, August 05

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Snippets

A collection of thought provokers and quotations ...

- ✂ “The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths to it are not found but made, and the activity of making them changes both the maker and the destination.” *John Schaar*
- ✂ “Vision is the capacity to believe in what the heart sees, what others can't see. Vision is seeing positive possibilities where others see only negative probabilities.” *Carl A. Hammerschlag*
- ✂ “Vision is not enough, it must be combined with venture. It is not enough to stare up the steps, we must step up the stairs.” *Vaclav Havel*
- ✂ “A vision is not just a picture of what could be; it is an appeal to our better selves, a call to become something more.” *Rosabeth Moss Kanter*
- ✂ “Your vision will become clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside awakes.” *Carl Jung*
- ✂ “Praise, flattery, exaggerated manners and fine, high-sounding words were not part of Lakota politeness. Excessive manners were put down as insincere, and the constant talker was considered rude and thoughtless.
“Conversation was never begun at once, not in a hurried manner. No one was quick with a question, no matter how important, and no one was pressed for an answer. A pause giving time for thought was the truly courteous way of beginning and conducting a conversation.
“Silence was meaningful with the Lakota, and his granting a space of silence to the speech-maker and his own moment of silence before talking was done in the practice of true politeness and regard for the rule that, ‘thought comes before speech.’” *Chief Luther Standing Bear*
- ✂ “There are no such thing as bad soldiers, only bad leaders.” *General Omar Bradley*
- ✂ “Happiness is that state of consciousness which proceeds from the achievement of one's values.” *Ayn Rand*
- ✂ “He who asks questions, cannot avoid the answers” *African proverb*

The Seven Deadly Sins

Free Pint, the newsletter for library and information specialists, recently identified ‘seven deadly sins for library managers from an on-line survey – I think that they are also transferable to other management roles.

Micromanagement

This is employees' most common complaint. 25% of respondents used some variation of the word; others described bosses' micromanagement tendencies; many having trouble delegating.

Lack of communication

Managers usually fail to communicate because they assume people already know what they need to know, believe knowledge is power (so hoard as much as possible!), or want to avoid giving unpleasant news.

Fostering divisiveness

Differing treatment of groups of staff, showing favouritism, or playing departments against one another. Managers often do this unconsciously, but staff note any sign of unfair treatment.

Abusiveness

Insecure managers often overreact, others need to think about the impression they make and the way relationships change when moving into management. Some may find the most sarcastic manager amusing, but other might feel perpetually persecuted — differing communication styles!

Failure to listen

Managers are seen to be unwilling to listen to different options and opinions, or unwilling to be flexible. Some ask for input, then announce their pre-made decision!

Avoiding conflict

One of the worst things a manager can do is ignore problems and let them fester. Conflict avoidance ranges from failure to back up staff following policy, to ignoring personnel conflicts.

Taking credit for others' work

Managers may take credit unconsciously, and need to be careful to note ideas' origin. This goes back to avoiding micromanagement; managers who give people responsibility and the ability to run with projects instil a sense of ownership.

And the seven desirable strategies:

Encourage growth

Provide autonomy

Look out for staff

Respect everyone's contribution

Lead by example

Communicate and listen

Provide leadership and vision

Seven Deadly Sins (and Desirable Strategies) for Library Managers, Rachel Singer Gordon, www.FreePint.com

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