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Train Your Brain to Fight Old Thinking

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By Merrick Rosenberg

Our brains are creatures of habit. They're programmed to seek out consistent patterns, leading us to make decisions similar to those made previously. In fact, most of our decisions aren't decisions at all, but rather instinctive reactions to external stimuli.

So what does all this have to do with training? When participants sit in a classroom to learn new skills, the brain is active and engaged. The brain is excited to learn new things. Yet, there's a strong and competing part of the brain that seeks to maintain its existing wiring. Can you hear the two competing voices? "This behavior will help me achieve better results. I need to change the way I've been acting. Change the way I've been acting? I reached this level in my career because of these behaviors. If I change something now, it can damage my effectiveness."

If individuals are going to change behaviors, they need to change their instinctive responses to the situations in which those behaviors are exhibited. This means that within one to two seconds, the individual must consciously make the decision to exhibit new behaviors. Once an old behavior becomes active and online, information starts flowing through long-established hardwiring. This makes it difficult to exhibit new behaviors, even if the individual truly believes these new behaviors will yield better results.

The Trigger Response in Action

Let's consider an example. Since childhood, Maria has had what she likes to call, "A low tolerance for indecisiveness." She can assess a situation very quickly and prides herself on her ability to make effective decisions with very little data. She has no patience for people who, in her opinion, "need too much time and information before they can act."

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Recently, in the presence of a senior manager, Maria lost her cool and berated one of her team members for not being able to make a quick decision. Citing Maria's lack of adherence to the corporation's culture of respect, the senior manager strongly suggested that Maria attend a training program to work on her

communication skills.

Maria attended the session and learned all about the importance of paying attention to words, tone, and body language. She learned the skills needed

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to be a better listener and even learned a thing or two about conflict management. Armed with this new knowledge, Maria was determined to be a better, more respectful communicator.

So did it work? Was this training program a turning point in Maria's career that allowed her to achieve greater levels of success?

The sad answer was no.

The problem was that Maria learned the skills, but she did not change her trigger response. In other words, in the first two seconds, Maria's instinctive programming regarding impatience came online. And once this happened, her new skills could not be applied.

For Maria to change her reactions, she needed to change her state of mind for just a few seconds. We've all heard the following advice regarding dealing with conflict. "Take a deep breath before responding." Or, "Count to five before you say anything." This is truly brain-friendly advice.

Once old behaviors are activated and come online, it's very difficult to take them offline and change our behavioral patterns. And while we cannot necessarily control the initial thought that arises, such as, "This person is indecisive," we can control what we do with that thought.

In Maria's case, she was feeding and enhancing the thought. Within three seconds, her emotions were so activated, that any new behaviors learned in training were simply distant concepts that did not reflect the real world at that moment.

Fortunately, just as it is possible to strengthen a muscle by subjecting it to stress, and then recovering, it is also possible to strategically build the muscle of self-control. And it is this ability to restrain our old patterns and consciously direct new behaviors, which allows us to apply the skills learned in a training program. For Maria, exercising patience past normal limits will strengthen her ability to be patient in the future.

Emotionally Intelligent Training

At the heart of learning self-control is emotional intelligence (EQ). Daniel Goleman, the father of emotional intelligence, explained that EQ includes the following competencies:

Self-awareness: Capacity for understanding one's emotions, strengths, and weaknesses.

Self-management: Capacity for effectively managing one's intentions and regulating behavior.

Social awareness: Capacity for understanding what others are saying and feeling and why they feel and act as they do.

Relationship management: Capacity for acting in such a way that one is able to get desired results from others and reach personal goals.

Note that the second competency, self-management, is based on emotional control and self-regulation. This ability is the key to controlling our instinctive, old patterns of behavior, instead of new patterns learned in training programs or during coaching interactions.

Emotionally intelligent training teaches people to understand the initial thoughts that arise when individuals are about to exhibit specific behaviors. Participants who can identify negative thought patterns and learn how to replace those patterns with more productive thoughts are much more likely to change their trigger responses and apply new skills.

Our brains are creatures of habit. However, with practice, people can develop the ability to control habitual reactions to situations, and exhibit new and more productive behaviors that ultimately, yield better results.

Merrick Rosenberg, MBA, is the co-founder and Chief Learning Officer of Team Builders Plus, in Cherry Hill, N.J. In working with line staff to senior executives in worldwide organizations, in diverse industries and sizes, Merrick has served as a facilitator, performance coach and management consultant for more than 15 years.

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