Don't Let Your Brain Boss You Around

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Most people carry their brain around in their head with little thought. Yet it is the organ we use the most in the workplace and in our lives. Do you know your brain processes around 11 million bits of information per second and has around 70,000 thoughts per day! Not surprisingly, the huge majority of this is non-conscious processing.

This non-conscious processing consists of all those 'short-cuts' or habits your brain has gathered throughout your lifetime to assist it to make make decisions and process complex data rapidly. But often, those short-cuts your brain decides to take are simply to save it energy and can easily contain mis-reading of critical information.

We know that people who understand how their brain functions, can take charge of their brain and outperform others who don't give it a second thought.

This book contains some very simple starters to help you to stay in control of your brain and to stop it bossing you around.
Idea #1: The brain can change

One of the revolutionary insights to come out of neuroscience research over the last decade is that of **neuroplasticity**.

Until recently, the brain was regarded as a physiologically static organ and that our brain structure was mostly immutable after the huge developments of early childhood. However, we now know that the brain has the ability to reorganise itself by forming new neural connections, and that this continues throughout our whole lifetime.

Not only does neuroplasticity allow the neurons in the brain to compensate for injury and disease, but it can adjust in response to new situations, different stimuli, and changes in the environment.

While this seems like a small discovery, it’s hugely powerful, because it means that we are not captive to either nature or nurture in the way we once thought we were. While both nature and nurture play important roles in shaping our brains and in forming our memories, behaviours, responses, and habits, they are not “destiny”. We have much more control than we used to believe. In effect, we can re-wire our brains.
Idea #2: Where your attention goes, energy flows

Simply being more aware of our responses and paying attention to the ways we want to alter them can give us the results we’re after. After all, where your attention goes, energy flows. And what flows through your attention sculpts your brain.

The term “attentional intelligence” was coined by Linda Ray in 2012, to describe the practice of using the power of attention to change the brain in subtle ways. Attentional intelligence is defined as:

“an intelligence that when highly developed allows you to effortlessly but ‘mindfully’ notice where your attention is at any moment and to intentionally choose where you want it to be.” (Linda Ray, 2012)

It's important to be curious about our attention if we intend to improve our “attentional intelligence”. The best news is it's not hard to do. What is hard, is to make it a habit.

Begin by intentionally noticing what is happening for you at the meta sensing level. Ask yourself what is happening in your body in the moment. Are you feeling calm or are you feeling a level or panic?
DO YOU NEED TO SHIFT YOUR THINKING?

Next, ask yourself where is your attention focused that might be making you feel this way. Is it focused on a thought or narrative that keeps replaying in your head like a broken record? Or is it exactly where it is of most benefit and where you want it to be?

The key is in noticing where your attention is focused and being more intentional in where you want it to be focused.

Finally, look at stepping out of your thinking in an impartial spectator way and notice what is in your narrative.

What are you thinking and do you need to shift your thinking to support you to focus your attention in a different direction?
Idea #3: It takes 23 minutes to regain focus

We live in a period of unprecedented complexity and distraction. It’s very easy to lose focus, to succumb to what I call “bright shiny object” syndrome. This is actually a normal response because we now know that the brain is designed to seek novelty and stimulation. It’s just that too much stimulation and novelty seeking can wreak havoc on focus and ruin productivity.

Every time you get distracted by an email or the ping of a text message, it can take up to 23 minutes to regain focus (particularly if you were on the verge of an insight or in a really heavy thinking task). Imagine what effect this has on productivity. Not only are we bombarded by these kinds of environmental interruptions, but our internal states also vie for our attention at any given moment.

Therefore, it’s important for each of us to be aware of our own attentional profile.

Are you easily distracted?
Do your moods take over?
Do you find yourself on automatic pilot?

Harvard professor Ellen J. Langer refers to this as “when the lights are on but no one is home”.

Developing attentional intelligence can help you tame distractions. The practice of noticing where your attention is and bringing it back to where you want it to be, will over time re-wire your brain.

You’ll be able to notice distractions for what they are – your brain looking for novelty and reward.
When you understand this it can assist you to resist the constant temptation of the smorgasbord of distractions vying for your attention. You’ll be better able to focus on the task at hand and at the end of the day you might have some left over energy to do some of the fun stuff.
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