

Bite-Sized Tips for a Good Day

Selected articles and essays by Caroline Webb

A How to Have a Good Day Publication

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CONTENTS

7 Science-Backed Skills That Will Make You Better at Your Job	4
How to Beat Procrastination	7
The Paradoxical Strategy That Can Make You Less Stressed and More Successful	11
How to Stay Positive with Negative People	14
Why Criticism Is So Tough To Swallow (And How to Make It Go Down Easier)	17
Reading This Will Make You Smarter (But Only if You Expect It to)	21
How Small Shifts in Leadership Can Transform Your Team Dynamic.....	23

7 Science-Backed Skills That Will Make You Better at Your Job

World Economic Forum, August 2016

Even in jobs we like, we all know that there can be moments of drama, stress and disappointment. On top of that, many of us face increasing uncertainty in our working environments, as waves of technological and political change break around us.

But there's some good news. Advances in behavioral science are showing us that we have more control over our day-to-day experience of working life than we might think. Here are some science-backed tactics to lift your spirits, sharpen your mind and put some energy back in the tank whenever you most need it.

Become intentional about your “filters”

Let's start with the most profound tip first. Your brain can only consciously process a portion of the information around you at any given time – so to lighten the load, your brain filters out a great deal without you even being aware of it. And there's a [pattern to what gets filtered in and out](#). You tend to notice things that resonate with whatever's already top of mind for you. So: walk into a meeting in a bad mood, and your brain will make sure you see and hear things that confirm that people are jerks. Meanwhile, you'll likely miss some of the more positive stuff entirely. It doesn't take much to reset your filters, though. Take 10 seconds before your next conversation to ask yourself what really matters most, and where you therefore want to focus your attention. Decide to look for signs that your colleagues are great – and oddly, you'll see more of them.

Be kind to others, be kind to yourself

When you're feeling worn down, it can seem counterintuitive to decide to give someone else a boost. Yet research is clear that being generous and kind to others instantly boosts our own feelings of well-being (as well as being rather nice for the other person, too). So if you're feeling drained, do something unexpectedly nice for someone else. It doesn't matter who, and it doesn't

have to be a lot. Give an unexpected compliment, or help someone who's struggling with a heavy bag. Then notice how good you feel about yourself and the world in general.

Adopt a learner's mindset

Your brain gets a kick from learning new things – and it turns out that the “new thing” doesn't have to be very exciting to [give your brain a feeling of reward](#). So, faced with a less-than-perfect situation, it's strangely helpful to decide to look for something interesting to take from it. For example, perhaps you're going to spend time today with a difficult client. Ask yourself: “What fascinating thing can I learn from this?” Maybe you'll try to figure out what's really going on with them, or decide to learn how to stay calm in the face of provocation. Get curious, and you'll enjoy the experience a lot more.

Stay cool through distancing

When we're feeling uncomfortably stressed, research has found that there's [less activity in our prefrontal cortex](#) – the part of our brain responsible for sophisticated reasoning. That's why we're more likely to say silly things under pressure. But studies have found that we can instantly reduce our stress levels in the heat of the moment by doing something called “distancing” – that is, [looking at the situation as if from a distance](#). For example, we can ask ourselves: “*When I look back on this in a year's time, what will I think?*” Or we can put ourselves in someone else's shoes: “*What would I advise a friend in my situation?*” By reducing the state of alert in our brains, distancing makes it easier to make smart choices (and wittier comments).

Manage uncertainty by amplifying the certainties

Negative experiences have been found to hit us harder when they're [coupled with uncertainty about what's going on](#). However, research has shown that a powerful antidote to unpleasant unpredictability is to refocus on the things that you do know and do control – however small they are. For example, perhaps 10% of the situation is murky, but you have a good handle on

90% of it. Perhaps you know *when* you'll find out what's going on. In the meantime, maybe there are some "no regrets" moves you can make. This technique has been found to help people even in dramatically uncertain circumstances – for example in combat or facing natural disasters – so it's a safe bet that it can help you navigate unexpected potholes in a work environment.

Remind yourself of the personal "why"

A sense of personal purpose – knowing why you're doing what you're doing – has been found to [boost people's emotional resilience](#). But sometimes we can get disconnected from the point of it all, especially if a piece of work has been created by someone else and then imposed on us. So take a look at that annoying task that's on your plate and ask yourself a few questions. "*What's ultimately possible as a result of me getting this done? And what's the bigger benefit of that? And why do I care about that, at least a little?*" Sometimes you have to push through some snark in your own head at first ("nothing is possible, this is pointless"), but a few moments of reflection can usually make even dull to-dos feel vaguely meaningful.

Work the peak-end effect

When we assess the quality of an experience, research has found that we [don't evaluate every single moment](#). We tend to use an average of the most intense moment – good or bad – and the end point. This peak-end effect means that it's oddly powerful to end each evening on a high, by quickly reviewing the good things that have happened during the day. However tiny the triumphs, this moment of reflection creates a permanent boost to the way we rate the day in our mind. And that's a pretty powerful trick. After all, our memories ultimately become the way we view our lives.

How to Beat Procrastination

Harvard Business Review, July 2016

Procrastination comes in many disguises. We might resolve to tackle a task, but find endless reasons to defer it. We might prioritize things we can readily tick off our to-do list—answering emails, say—while leaving the big, complex stuff untouched for another day. We can look and feel busy, while artfully avoiding the tasks that really matter. And when we look at those rolling, long-untouched items at the bottom of our to-do list, we can't help but feel a little disappointed in ourselves.

The problem is our brains are [programmed to procrastinate](#). In general, we all tend to struggle with tasks that promise *future* upside in return for efforts we take *now*. That's because [it's easier for our brains to process concrete rather than abstract things](#), and the immediate hassle is very tangible compared with those unknowable, uncertain future benefits. So the short-term effort easily dominates the long-term upside in our minds—an example of something that behavioral scientists call [present bias](#).

How can you become less myopic about your elusive tasks? It's all about rebalancing the cost-benefit analysis: make the benefits of action feel bigger, and the costs of action feel smaller. The reward for doing a pestering task needs to feel larger than the immediate pain of tackling it.

TO MAKE THE BENEFITS OF ACTION FEEL BIGGER AND MORE REAL

Visualize how great it will be to get it done

[Researchers have discovered](#) that people are more likely to save for their future retirement if they're shown digitally aged photographs of themselves. Why? Because it makes their future self feel more real—making the future benefits of saving also feel more weighty. When we apply a lo-fi version of this technique to any task we've been avoiding, by taking a moment to paint ourselves a vivid mental picture of the benefits of getting it done, it can sometimes be just enough to get us unstuck. So if there's a call you're avoiding or an email you're putting off, give your brain a helping hand by imagining the virtuous sense of satisfaction you'll

have once it's done—and perhaps also the look of relief on someone's face as they get from you what they needed.

Pre-commit, publicly

Telling people that we're going to get something done can powerfully amplify the appeal of actually taking action, because our brain's reward system is so highly responsive to our social standing. Research has found that it matters greatly to us whether we're respected by others—[even by strangers](#). Most of us don't want to look foolish or lazy to other people. So by daring to say “I'll send you the report by the end of the day” we add social benefits to following through on our promise—which can be just enough to nudge us to bite the bullet.

Confront the downside of inaction

[Research has found](#) that we're strangely averse to properly evaluating the status quo. While we might weigh the pros and cons of doing something new, we far less often consider the pros and cons of *not* doing that thing. Known as *omission bias*, this often leads us to ignore some obvious benefits of getting stuff done. Suppose you're repeatedly putting off the preparation you need to do for an upcoming meeting. You're tempted by more exciting tasks, so you tell yourself you can do it tomorrow (or the day after). But force yourself to think about the downside of putting it off, and you realize that tomorrow will be too late to get hold of the input you really need from colleagues. If you get moving *now*, you have half a chance of reaching them in time—so finally, your gears creak into action.

TO MAKE THE COSTS OF ACTION FEEL SMALLER

Identify the first step

Sometimes [we're just daunted by the task we're avoiding](#). We might have “learn French” on our to-do list, but who can slot that into the average afternoon? The trick here is to

break down big, amorphous tasks into baby steps that don't feel as effortful. Even better: identify the very *smallest* first step, something that's so easy that even your present-biased brain can see that the benefits outweigh the costs of effort. So instead of "learn French" you might decide to "email Nicole to ask advice on learning French." Achieve that small goal, and you'll feel more motivated to take the next small step than if you'd continued to beat yourself up about your lack of language skills.

Tie the first step to a treat

We can make the cost of effort feel even smaller if we link that small step to something we're actually looking forward to doing. In other words, tie the task that we're avoiding to something that we're *not* avoiding. For example, you might allow yourself to read lowbrow magazines or books when you're at the gym, because the guilty pleasure helps dilute your brain's perception of the short-term "cost" of exercising. Likewise, you might muster the self-discipline to complete a slippery task if you promise yourself you'll do it in a nice café with a favorite drink in hand.

Remove the hidden blockage

Sometimes we find ourselves returning to a task repeatedly, still unwilling to take the first step. We hear a little voice in our head saying, "Yeah, good idea, but...no." At this point, we need to ask that voice some questions, to figure out what's really making it unappealing to take action. This doesn't necessarily require psychotherapy. Patiently ask yourself a few "why" questions—"why does it feel tough to do this?" and "why's that?"—and the blockage can surface quite quickly. Often, the issue is that a perfectly noble competing commitment is undermining your motivation. For example, suppose you were finding it hard to stick to an early morning goal-setting routine. A few "whys" might highlight that the challenge stems from your equally strong desire to eat breakfast with your family. Once you've made that conflict more explicit, it's far more likely you'll find a way to overcome it—perhaps by setting your daily goals the night before, or on your commute into work.

So the next time you find yourself mystified by your inability to get important tasks done, be kind to yourself. Recognize that your brain needs help if it's going to be less short-sighted. Try taking at least one step to make the benefits of action loom larger, and one to make the costs of action feel smaller. Your languishing to-do list will thank you.

The Paradoxical Strategy That Can Make You Less Stressed and More Successful

Business Insider, March 2016

With limited hours in the day, we face an uneasy truth: Every time we say “yes” to a request, we’re effectively saying “no” to something else. So of course our time should be focused on the things that matter most. But a common obstacle to doing that is a desire to avoid awkward conversations.

As one busy CEO admitted to me, “I don’t like conflict or feeling like I’m letting people down. So I find it hard to say no.” If that sounds familiar, and you find it difficult to extricate yourself from low-priority commitments for fear of offending people, learning how to deliver what’s known as a “positive no” is like discovering a new superpower. It gives you the ability to make everyone feel better about the choices you’re making (including yourself).

To understand why it’s worth reinventing the way you say “no,” it first helps to know what happens to people’s brains when they’re facing something unpleasant. Each person’s brain is constantly on the lookout for potential nearby threats. If it spots a problem, the person’s brain works astonishingly fast to defend him or her by launching some kind of fight, flight, or freeze response. This is often a good thing — it’s what helps people jump out of the way of a speeding car, after all. But there are two issues with this inbuilt defensive reaction.

The first is that it can be triggered by minor personal affronts — a frown, a challenging comment — as well as by genuine physical threats. (In the workplace, a “fight, flight, or freeze” response might look like “snap, sulk, or silence,” but it’s the same basic defensive mechanism playing out.)

Second, while mounting this kind of defensive response, researchers have noticed that the brain reduces activity in the regions responsible for careful and sophisticated thinking. So it’s hard for anyone to be thoughtful, flexible or sensitive when they’re on the defensive. And that’s a challenge when you consider our usual way of declining requests. We start with “I’m really sorry, I’m not going to be able to come to the meeting/take on the project/paint the portrait you commissioned ...” It sounds polite.

But starting with the negative signal of “I’m sorry,” however well meant, puts the other person on high alert. His or her brain immediately goes into defensive mode: “You’re backing

out! This is a threat?” And in this mode, people don't have much capacity to be generous or sympathetic in understanding your priorities.

The “positive no” presents a helpful alternative. First articulated by William Ury, the co-founder of the Harvard Program on Negotiation, it lessens the sense of threat you're presenting to someone, by starting with something genuinely positive and engaging (rather than immediately negative and annoying). Like this:

Start with warmth

First, acknowledge and show appreciation for the person's request. (It's easy to forget to do this when we're focused on our own discomfort about disappointing someone.)

Your “yes”

Then, instead of starting with “I'm sorry...” begin by enthusiastically highlighting whatever your positive priority is right now, and why it's interesting, important, or meaningful to you. If possible, pick out a reason that will also resonate with the person you're talking to.

Your “no”

Explain that this means, with regret, that you can't do the thing they've asked you to do. This is where you say “sorry,” as profusely as you like.

End with warmth

Perhaps there's a suggestion or offer you can make without detracting from your real priorities, such as an introduction to other people who could help. At the very least, you can offer some warm wishes for success in their project.

Here's an example from a client of mine. Morgan had decided to reprioritize his time — as it happens, away from something he was doing for *me*. He was helping me lead a training course

for his younger colleagues, but he needed to cut out for a couple of hours. Once, he would have sent me an email like this:

“Caroline, I’m very sorry to say that I’m going to have to leave early on June 23. I’ve now got a personal commitment that I really can’t move, which means I’ll have to leave at 4:00pm and won’t be able to stay till the end of the day’s session at 6:00pm as we’d planned. I’ll be back for the dinner, but I appreciate that this isn’t ideal for you - my apologies.”

But because I’d taught him the “positive no” technique a couple of years earlier, this was the email I got from him:

“Caroline, I’m looking forward to the course on June 23 [warmth]. I’m writing because I’ve just been invited to join my son in a “fathers and sons” baseball game that evening. It’s a special game because it’s the last time the seniors will play before moving on to high school. Having only one son, and just before he becomes a teenager, I’m particularly keen to make this game [his ‘yes’]. However, it means leaving at about 4pm (and returning for dinner). I appreciate this isn’t ideal for you, and I’m very sorry [his ‘no’]. One suggestion I have is that I ask Simon to cover me. He’s a great supporter of what we’re doing with the course. I would be happy to discuss [warmth].”

The content of his positive no was essentially the same as a conventional no — a decision, an explanation, and an apology. And as soon as I started reading his message, I guessed something was afoot. But the tone of the two emails is quite different, isn’t it?

The first is a pure downer, while the second is ... strangely uplifting. My brain couldn’t help but be a little buoyed by Morgan’s upbeat comments about his son. And the truth is, I didn’t even realize what he’d done until I noticed feeling oddly serene about being left in the lurch. Like all good super-powers, the “positive no” works even when you’re in on the secret.

How to Stay Positive with Negative People

Quartz at Work, October 2017

If you're reading this, there's a good chance that you're interested in how to thrive at work—how to be your most productive, effective, energized self in all of your professional endeavors.

And yet, it's statistically likely that you're working with at least a few people who are pretty disaffected from day to day. Gallup's [State of the Global Workplace study](#) suggests that only 13% of employees worldwide feel actively engaged by their work. Most of the rest feel rather apathetic, but a significant number (24%) say they feel “actively disengaged” by their work. That may include your boss, by the way, since the numbers look just as bad for the category that Gallup calls “professional workers and managers/executives/officials.”

Given these grim numbers, it's perhaps no surprise that one of the comments I most often hear when speaking to audiences is: “All this advice on how to be at your best—I get it. But realistically, what can you do when you're surrounded by difficult people?” The glib answer, of course, is: “you should quit!” But most people can't simply walk out of their jobs, at least not immediately. Moreover, it's not easy to make thoughtful, balanced career decisions when you're feeling desperate. So while it's a good idea to work on an exit strategy if you're in a toxic place, it's also worth doing what you can to improve your daily experience right now—if nothing else, to help you think more clearly about your next move.

Decide what you want to learn from the situation

Human beings are wired to find it fundamentally satisfying and energizing to learn new things, even small things. [Researchers have found](#) that simply getting answers to questions is enough to activate the brain's reward system (something TV game show producers guessed a long time ago).

And the truth is that even in the worst of situations, there is something to learn. You might decide: “I'm going to learn how not to completely lose it when dealing with the office psychopath,” and experiment with different techniques for staying calm under pressure until you become a master at it. Working with obstructive colleagues? You could decide to bone up on a range of influencing techniques. It's a good way of making you feel that your time isn't

wasted. And if your goal becomes learning new things, even repeated failure becomes useful—because (paraphrasing Thomas Edison), you’ll simply be learning what doesn’t work. Just remember to take notes as you go along, to [cement your learning](#) and help you keep track of interesting stories you can tell in your next job interview.

You have more influence than you might imagine

Your behavior is surprisingly contagious. [Psychologists have found](#) that merely being near someone in a good mood can be enough to lift people’s motivation within five minutes, while being near someone grumpy can do the opposite. In fact, [research has shown](#) that just looking at photos of people smiling or grimacing is enough to provoke measurable feelings of happiness or sadness. The upshot: get annoyed with your situation at work, and it’s likely to leak into the behavior of those around you. Find something to feel good about, and there’s at least a chance they’ll mirror some of that back at you.

If it seems hard to imagine simply radiating joy at your colleagues, you could try the “random acts of kindness” strategy. For example, you could pay an unexpected compliment or pick up a drink for a colleague. Apart from anything else, evidence suggests that this will give you a weirdly reliable personal boost. Martin Seligman, the University of Pennsylvania professor who founded the field of positive psychology, is on record as saying that “doing a kindness produces the single most reliable momentary increase in well-being of any exercise we have tested.”

Recent research suggests that this kind of altruism really does spread. [In a study conducted at Coca-Cola](#), employees who had benefited from some kind of unexpectedly nice behavior were then three times more likely to do something nice for someone else. So you might not be able to create your dream workplace with a few warm gestures, but evidence suggests you’re going to make some kind of dent in the despair.

Get curious. They're probably not evil

Did you know that only 1% of the population [is thought to be](#) psychopathic? That number might still seem uncomfortably high to you, but it does mean that your annoying co-worker is probably not a psychopath.

The issue is that everyone's brain is constantly scanning for potential threats to defend them against. If it finds one, it launches a “freeze, fight, or flight” response, which in the workplace might show up as clueless, aggressive, or avoidant comments. A “threat” doesn't have to be big, either. It can be any tiny thing that challenges a person's sense of self-worth or social standing, like a task that makes them feel out of their depth or being left out of a conversation. And when someone's brain goes on the defensive, [neuroscientists have shown](#) that there's less activity in their prefrontal cortex, the brain region responsible for careful thought and self-control. In other words, even decent people become dumber and less lovely when they feel mildly threatened.

So most bad behavior in the workplace is the result of someone's brain being on the defensive, not because its owner is actually evil. I've found that simply knowing this can be helpful. And there's a lot to be gained by getting curious about what might have pushed their buttons. What's the human fear that's been triggered here? Are they concerned about not looking competent or not being in control? Are they worried about not being relevant or respected?

You don't have to become their psychotherapist. But it's oddly powerful to make factual observations, without interpretation or generalization, and invite them to talk (“I noticed you frowned when I mentioned X. Can I ask what's on your mind?”) The simple fact of paying attention can be enough to reduce their defensiveness—after all, you're boosting their sense of self-worth by showing interest—and you might just manage to uncover some humanity.

Failing that, of course, you can simply invent a silly story to explain their behavior. Perhaps the thought that, say, their cat vomits on them every morning, and that's what's making them cranky, will put a smile on your face. And given the existence of emotional contagion, you never know – they might just smile back.

Why Criticism Is So Tough To Swallow (And How to Make It Go Down Easier)

Fast Company, April 2016

A few years ago, I was working hard on a scrappy document that would eventually blossom into my first-ever book. It was still very early in the project, and I was hungry for guidance. So I was delighted that a colleague, who I'll call Matt, had agreed to review my efforts and offer some constructive feedback. When he did, it went something like this:

Matt: "You're doing great! Here's what I think you should change..."

[followed by a thoughtful explanation of six suggestions for improvement]

Other than that, it's great!"

Me: "Um, okay, thanks."

Matt was diligently following advice he'd once been given about the right way to give feedback. In his mind, he was making a tasty "praise sandwich"—saying one positive thing on either side of his criticism in order to make his comments feel less demotivating. He was trying to be considerate, yet I'd walked away feeling strangely discouraged. It was the opposite of what he'd intended. That was hardly surprising, though, given a few things we know about the way our brains work.

What your brain does when you're criticized

Praise is a social reward that's very appealing. But on balance, we are more sensitive to threats than to rewards.

At any given time, brains are subconsciously scanning the world around us for dangers to defend against—ready to launch a fight, flight, or freeze response that will protect us from predators or poisons. But the brain doesn't just guard us against physical threats. [Research has found](#) that it also goes on the defensive in response to things that threaten to undermine our social standing and safety, including interactions that make us feel even mildly rejected or incompetent. Since [even being glanced at askance by a stranger](#) can be enough to trigger our

defenses, you can bet that receiving critical feedback is pretty likely to spark a fight, flight, or freeze response.

That matters because when our brains are in defensive mode, studies have shown that there's [reduced activity in the brain's prefrontal cortex](#). That's where our most sophisticated mental machinery generally lives: the neural systems responsible for self-control, reasoning, and forethought.

So it's no wonder we don't always respond graciously to feedback; it's quite likely that our most thoughtful, attentive, flexible selves are somewhat offline. In fact, it's possible that we're not even properly listening. By the time Matt got to the third of his six suggestions, I was daydreaming about giving up the whole idea of writing a book (and considering what would happen if I perhaps punched him, gently).

And as for Matt's praise? Surely his warm words should have offset the sense of threat in my mind, right? Not exactly. It's true that our brains constantly seek out rewards as well as threats. That's why we're drawn toward things that make us feel good—and praise is a social reward that's very appealing. But on balance, we are [more sensitive to threats than to rewards](#). From an evolutionary standpoint, it's more important to be able to bolt from a burning house than to charge toward a cozy fireside sofa.

What's more, it's easier for our brains to process and remember specifics than to handle conceptual ideas. [Research has found](#) that we remember concrete words like “chair” better than abstract words like “comfort.” As a result, if we hear a generic positive statement (“It's great! You're great!”) followed by a list of specific things we should change, our brains will quickly discount that quick splash of praise and focus entirely on the negatives.

That's what made it so hard for me to digest Matt's praise sandwich. He meant well, but he might just as well have said, “Hey, here's a bunch of things you need to do better,” since that's pretty much all I heard.

The better way to give feedback

Thankfully, this understanding of the brain reveals a little routine that we can all use to ensure that helpful feedback lands as it's intended. It goes like this:

1. Tell the other person: “What I like about this is...” Give meaningful, specific examples of what you like, and explain why you like them. Aim for as many concrete positive points as you can. Don’t rush.
2. Then say: “What would make me like it even more is...”

The goal in the first of these two steps is to be at least as tangible and forthcoming in your praise as you are in your criticism—not just saying “it’s great,” but *what specifically* is “great” about it. (Matt might’ve said, “I really liked the way you pulled in survey data to support your argument, for example in the section on page two. It tells a great story and sticks in the reader’s mind.”) These sorts of details matter; they make it far more likely that the person properly absorbs the fact that you value aspects of whatever they’ve said or done.

Then, when you introduce your suggestion for improvement with the phrase, “What would make me like it even more,” you’re framing your comment as an idea that—if explored—could take the other person from good to great, rather than something they were really dumb not to have done. You’re still making the point you need to make, but it feels much less threatening to your listener’s competence and self-respect than the usual, “How about doing this differently?”

Taken together, these two sentences can greatly improve your chances of keeping the other person’s brain out of defensive mode as you give them feedback, making it far more likely that you’ll have a productive and good-natured conversation. This way, they can actually process your feedback intelligently and decide whether to act on it.

For what it’s worth, this “What I like...” feedback model can help you as the feedback-giver, too, because being forced to find something you like—however hard it is to uncover it—often reveals something useful that you might’ve missed had you led with your criticisms.

Finally, if you’re the one habitually receiving feedback rather than giving it, you can do what I eventually did with Matt, which is to simply ask him to give me brain-friendly feedback. I didn’t have to use any jargon, either. “First of all, can you tell me exactly what you liked and why?” I said. “It’s important for me to learn from that. I want to know what I should keep doing,

or do more of. Then you can tell me what would make you like it even more!” The result? A fine, fistfight-free working relationship—and a finished book to boot.

Reading This Will Make You Smarter (But Only if You Expect It to)

Wired, April 2016

A host of provocative studies have suggested that we can be [primed](#) to behave a certain way when exposed to relevant cues. For example: [researchers](#) found that while people were wearing a lab coat - a type of clothing often associated with smart scientists - they scored better on analytical tests. Another team found that after being asked to hold a warm drink, people apparently viewed others more warmly. After seeing a picture of a library, people spoke more softly. When typically French music was played in a supermarket (Édith Piaf accompanied by an accordion, perhaps), shoppers bought more French wine. And so on.

The results of these experiments are interesting to contemplate. And they would seem to lay out a checklist for how you should make the most of each day: put on a lab coat and dunk inspirational objects in your piping-hot cup of coffee. Sadly, it's not that easy. Researchers are wildly divided on how these results are obtained - in particular, whether the influence is conscious or unconscious, whether it's strong enough to really change someone's behavior, and whether it can be reliably replicated. In fact, priming is one of the areas where the “replication crisis” in psychological research has been particularly fierce.

That doesn't mean the effects are fake, though. When psychologist [Daniel Kahneman](#) raised the replication issue in priming research in 2012, he called himself a “general believer”. After all, there's little argument about the associative nature of the brain's connections, meaning that being reminded of one thing can lead us to think, feel or do something else that we associate with the original prompt. We get a glimpse of these stored associations when we're daydreaming and notice that our thoughts have leapt from topic to topic as one idea leads to another, or when we smile as we hear a song that reminds us of good times.

The challenge arises when we believe it's possible to prime someone else to behave a certain way by merely exposing them to a particular cue. After all, everyone has different associations in their brains. So music that lifts my mood might make you wince. A warm drink is less likely to make people behave warmly in a sweltering climate. Perhaps your favorite raucous hangout is called The Library Bar. And in the study mentioned above, when people

were told that the white coat belonged to a painter rather than a scientist, their test scores fell. Context matters.

But we can be smarter about knowing what associations we personally have with our most productive or upbeat states of mind - and we can be more deliberate about surrounding ourselves with triggers that might nudge us back towards those states of mind. Maybe there's a window seat where you once did great work - so, sure, why not seek out that seat the next time you want to be on your game? It's not going to guarantee brilliance, but at the margin it might just help. Perhaps clearing your desk really does help to clear your head. And your “lucky underpants”? Well, as long as they remind your brain of a time when you got lucky, maybe they will make you more confident in your next interview.

How Small Shifts in Leadership Can Transform Your Team Dynamic

McKinsey Quarterly, February 2016

Once upon a time, saying “the soft stuff is the hard stuff” was a snappy challenge to business convention. Now, it’s a cliché. Everyone knows that it’s not easy to suddenly make your colleagues more creative, adaptable, or collaborative, however well-intentioned you may be.

But thanks to research on human behavior, we know what it takes for the average person’s brain to perform at its best, cognitively and emotionally—even under the pressures of the modern workplace. These new insights suggest that simple tweaks in leaders’ communication and behavior can potentially create a much more productive atmosphere for any team. In this article, I’ll describe three leaders who knew enough of this science to spark positive behavioral shifts in their organizations.

The two-system brain

Antony heads a successful technology consultancy that has grown rapidly since it was founded in 2011. Before starting the firm, he worked for a big agency with a toxic culture. “There was a sort of ‘cultural presenteeism’—you needed to look like you were always working.” At his new company, he wanted to forge a very different culture that would enable people to be both innovative and focused, collaborative and emotionally balanced. He and his two cofounders did all the usual things—hired carefully, developed an inspiring vision for the company, and designed an inviting workspace.

But Antony knew enough of the research on optimal brain function to see that more tangible measures were needed. In particular, he raised the issue of information overload and multitasking and how their team could avoid it. Antony knew that the brain’s activity is split across two complementary systems—one deliberate and controlled, the other automatic and instinctive. The *deliberate system* is responsible for sophisticated, conscious functions such as reasoning, self-control, and forward thinking. It can only do one thing at a time and tires remarkably quickly. The brain’s *automatic system* lightens this load by automating most of what we do from day to day, but as the brain’s deliberate system becomes more exhausted, the automatic system increasingly takes the reins, leaving us prone to make misleading generalizations and kneejerk responses.

That's why multitasking is such a problem. We think we can parallel process, but each tiny switch from one conscious task to another—from email to reading to speaking on a conference call, for example—wastes a little of the deliberate system's time and mental energy. And those switches cost us dearly. Research shows that people are less creative, more stressed, and make two to four times as many mistakes when they deal with interruptions and distractions.

Another way that the deliberate system's limitations play out in the workplace is that decision-making quality drops the longer people go without a break. Classic cognitive biases like groupthink and confirmation bias take firmer hold, and we're more prone to sloppy thinking in general. In one study, where hospital leaders were trying to encourage the use of hand sanitizer, they found that compliance rates fell when people worked long hours without a break.

But here's the silver lining: if leaders can encourage people to go offline when doing their most important work, as well as taking more frequent breaks, they'll see an uptick in productivity, innovation, and morale.

As Antony thought about how to do this, he knew that a common hurdle to taking breaks and avoiding multitasking was that people often feel they need to show their responsiveness to senior colleagues by being constantly available, whether on email, instant messaging, or in person. So he knew that his own behavior would be central to shifting norms in his organization. He decided to place a timer on his desk to signal that he was taking 25 or 45 minutes to go offline—something that also helped him focus his brain on the task at hand—and wore enormous noise-canceling headphones to amplify the message. And then, between deep working sessions, he would “bugger off for a walk,” as he puts it. The role modeling worked, he says. “It's become a collective thing in the office now. And everyone's decided that breaks are a legitimate use of time because we get so much more done afterward.”

Antony and his cofounders also created a “Monday meeting” for all of the staff to discuss how they were working together as a company. After some time, it surfaced that pressures were mounting, threatening to derail their commitment to focusing and recharging. “It was an emerging cultural behavior, and we wanted it to stop. So we set some rules, like ‘we encourage each other to have lunch’ and ‘we schedule breaks between meetings.’” Most important, he felt, was that “we as leaders had to take responsibility for our behavior and give out the right signals, use the right language, celebrate the right behaviors in others. So we cheered people for leaving the office to go for

a run. Later, we adopted the phrase ‘leaving by example,’ encouraging people to use it instead of a mumbled, guilty excuse for taking a break.”

In the Monday meeting, the leaders took one further step to reduce cognitive overload, by asking everyone to name their two priorities for the week. Antony says “the ‘two priorities’ rule encourages people to be realistic and focused in their work. Sometimes you really have to force yourself to decide what really matters this week. But it always pays off.” They also use the meeting as an opportunity to highlight opportunities to redistribute work. “When it looks like someone has too much on, people are encouraged to offload rather than suffer in silence.” The result: great creativity and camaraderie, without a foosball table in sight.

The discover-defend axis

Ros is one of the most senior leaders in the UK’s state-run healthcare system. She oversees the complex web of relationships between the system’s many payers and providers and ensures that the interactions between the two help rather than hinder improvements in patient care. Budgets are tight and the outcomes of her team’s work are often subject to scrutiny by politicians and the media. So Ros has to help her colleagues stay energized and on their game as they pursue their noble goals, even when the going gets tough. Resilience is key.

The problem is, our brain is constantly looking for threats to fend off or rewards worth pursuing. When we’re more focused on threats than rewards, we’re in *defensive mode*. Our brain diverts some of its scarce mental energy into launching a ‘fight’, ‘flight,’ or ‘freeze’ response, and as those instinctive responses unfold—looking more like ‘snap, sulk, or skulk’ in the workplace—brain scans show less activity in the parts of the brain known as the prefrontal cortex. To put it another way: some of our more emotionally sophisticated neural machinery has gone offline.

This matters, because it takes surprisingly little to put someone’s brain into defensive mode—anything threatening a person’s self-worth, even the smallest social slight. This can create vicious circles in the workplace when, for example, people feel daunted from the start, triggering an instinctive defensive reaction that makes it harder for them to solve the problem at hand.

But then there’s *discovery mode*, where people’s brains are focused on the potential rewards in a situation—for instance, a feeling of belonging or social recognition, or the thrill of learning new things. If leaders can foster a rewarding environment even amid the most difficult situations, it’s

likely that they can dampen that primal feeling of being under threat just enough to nudge people out of defensive mode and back into top form.

Ros has put this insight at the heart of her leadership style. First, she creates a positive frame for difficult tasks or discussions. “We’ve got a huge project where 95 percent of it is going fine, but three things aren’t going so well,” she says. “We’re getting a lot of questions about those three things, and I can see my team tensing up whenever we talk about them. So now I always begin our meetings by talking about what we’ve done well. And you can see how it calms everyone down and helps people think more clearly.” She’s keen to emphasize that “it’s not about trying to spin or gloss over the problems. But beginning with what’s working well puts everyone in a more open frame of mind, meaning we can look at what’s not working without people getting defensive.”

By focusing on something positive before getting into the tough stuff, leaders can help people stay in high-performance discovery mode. It doesn’t take much. Research found that when volunteers were given a puzzle where they had to navigate a little mouse out of a maze, all it took to lift their performance by 50 percent was seeing a picture of some cheese next to the exit instead of a menacing owl. In a meeting, the metaphorical “cheese” can even be as simple as discussing the ideal outcome everyone’s shooting for, before talking about the steps to get there.

Ros also reinforces her team’s feelings of autonomy and competence—two things that feel highly rewarding for the average brain. Usually, when a colleague has an issue, leaders help by offering advice or direction. But that can backfire, because a well-intentioned “have you tried this/that...” can be subconsciously interpreted as a judgment, as in: “why haven’t you tried this/that?” And this mild cognitive threat can be enough to constrain the deliberate system and make people less creative in their own thinking. The alternative: create space for people to do their own best quality thinking. Ros uses the “extreme listening” technique. She asks someone what they want to think through, and lets them talk without interrupting or making suggestions. Sounds simple, but Ros says it’s rare enough to feel a little strange initially.

She describes the first time she used it with her deputy, Alex. “He had an issue he wanted to talk about” and “I actually explicitly told him the ‘rule’ I was following. I nodded, encouraged him, and asked ‘what else?’, when he flagged. Within five minutes, he’d literally solved the whole thing himself. We both laughed so hard. It absolutely worked.” Alex went on to use the technique with his colleagues, too, and now it’s a team habit. Ros is clear on the lesson for leaders: helping colleagues

feel capable of handling matters on their own “is one of the greatest gifts you can give someone,” providing a great boost to their resilience and confidence.

The social self

Charles heads the marketing function of a major retail chain. He’s overseeing a lot of change in the way his team works, as they take advantage of new technology. “Marketing is evolving fast,” he says. “Traditional marketing requires creativity.” He adds, “Modern marketing still requires that, but we now get to benefit from new analytical tools that allow us to track return on investment of our marketing campaigns. And that data crunching requires quite a different type of skillset—much more quantitative.” That means he’s had to hire new types of people in the marketing department, alongside existing staff.

It sounds like nothing but upside for the marketing team. As Charles says, “it’s fantastic to be able to combine the best of both skillsets.” So what’s the challenge? “Whenever you have a very new group of people joining an existing team, you’ve got to pay real attention to motivation,” Charles warns. The reason for this lies deep in our highly social brains. Of all threats, social slights are especially high on the list of things against which our brains seek to defend us. This social sensitivity probably helped keep us safe when tribal belonging determined whether we’d survive the dangers of the prehistoric savannah—but in the workplace, it means leaders have to meet three main types of deep social needs if they want their colleagues to thrive:

- *Inclusion*: “Do I belong?” In Charles’s case, existing staff may be worried that they’re going to be excluded from the exciting new work. The newbies, meanwhile, will be wondering whether they truly fit in.
- *Respect*: “Do people recognize the value I bring?” Everyone on the team wants to feel that their efforts are useful and appreciated.
- *Fairness*: “Am I being treated just like everyone else—or do I at least understand the reason that things are the way they are?”

If the answer to any of those questions is “no,” people’s brains can quickly go into defensive mode—which, as we learned earlier, is a sure recipe for dysfunctional behavior. Indeed, Charles said “people were clearly feeling anxious and nervous. As a result, they started complaining about things they’ve never complained about before—making snide comments or questioning things that they saw as scope creep or turf invasion. People here are generally polite and friendly, and passionate about their work. So they weren’t hostile. Just unsettled.”

To boost feelings of inclusion, Charles deliberately created opportunities for both groups of staff to get to know each other and later collaborate in cross-functional teams to work on new product innovation. In addition to emphasizing these shared wins from teamwork, Charles also takes the time to make everyone feel respected for their individual contribution. “You have to make sure to give people ‘spotlight moments.’ I look for opportunities to get them in front of the management team. I hate it when someone works on a presentation and then their boss delivers it. If people have done the work, they present it.”

Finally, he’s transparent about the rationale behind his decisions. As he explains, “it’s a great investment in minimizing suspicion and defensiveness later on.” In doing so, he personally takes time to balance his time between the creatives and the technical folks, and if someone’s giving up some responsibilities to one of the new hires, he says, “I make sure to explain why that’s happening and emphasize the opportunities they will have to do new stuff in other areas—often areas that they’re better at and enjoy more.”

As a result, Charles says, “both sides are learning and growing by being exposed to each other.” It’s not something he sees as a one-off effort, either. “The company never stops changing. The people who are currently ‘new’ will become the ‘old guard’ and then there will be a new generation of skills needed.” After all, he says, “this sort of attention to the social dimension is important in any industry where systemic change is happening.”

The evidence is pretty clear. Colleagues will behave more like their best selves, more of the time, if leaders take a few modest steps to foster an environment where people’s brains aren’t overloaded—more focused on rewards than threats—and have their fundamental social needs met. With a little behavioral science in their toolkit, leaders can build a more productive team—and a happier one at that.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caroline Webb is a management consultant and executive coach who has spent nearly twenty years at McKinsey and at her own firms, Sevenshift and How to Have a Good Day, showing clients how to use behavioral science to boost their professional effectiveness. An Oxford- and Cambridge- trained economist, Webb and her work have been featured in the *Financial Times*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *The Economist*, *Forbes*, *The Harvard Business Review*, and on the BBC, to name a few. She divides her time between New York and London.