
The Examined Life -- The Brian and Coaching -- Edition 24, May, 2007

A free, electronic newsletter brought to you by:

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The Brain, How We Change (or Don't), and Coaching

Do we grow into our brains or do our brains grow with us? Scientists are changing their minds. Past theories of neuroscience said that the adult brain had all the neurons it would ever have and that, for the most part, the existing connections of neurons could not be changed. In other words, old dogs could not learn new tricks. Current research says that the brain has the ability to change its structure and function in relation to experience. The brain can create new patterns, it's just difficult. The old dog can learn new tricks, but it has to have a really good reason.

Why is it hard to change?

According to Jeffry Schwartz, Research Psychiatrist at the UCLA School of Medicine and author of *The Mind and the Brain*, our working memory is the part of the brain used for learning new activities and it has limited resources. "...Any activity we do to the point of becoming a routine habit gets pushed to the automatic pilot part of the brain to free up cognitive resources... Forging new circuits is like cutting through dense new forest rather than following a well-worn trail. We have to go much slower, and put in a lot more effort and attention for every foot we travel... Trying to change a routine behavior sends out strong messages in our brain that something's not right..."

What will make us go through that effort? Choosing what to pay attention to, adopting a solution focus over a problem focus, building awareness of choice at the moment of decision, taking consistent action and noticing progress are all ways that help adults change.

How coaching can help

Coaching, which relies on open-ended questions and discussions, slows down the pace of life enough for the client to pay attention to important facets of their life and work, develop awareness, take time to reflect, create insights and support consistent, considered action. Coaches help their clients think and focus on solutions.

David Rock, author of *Quiet Leadership*, uses the ARIA model: Attention, Reflection, Insight, and Action, as a way to tie together the learning from a number of studies,

including one that used functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) technology to see what happens in the brain during a coaching session. Let's take a look at how ARIA works.

Awareness and Attention

"We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are." – Talmud

The first step in change is to become aware of the current situation or pattern. When change is especially difficult it is often because there is a conflict between your values or mental maps.

The coach helps by asking questions that explore your desired results, pointing out conflicting values, keeping your focus on the goal, reducing your frustration by acknowledging success however minor and reconnecting you with the desired results.

Focus your attention on the desired goal often- and long enough and you create new mental maps that build strength in the new habit.

Reflection

"Follow effective action with quiet reflection. From the quiet reflection will come even more effective action." – Peter Drucker

Reflection slows you down and connects you to your inner wisdom. You use many of your senses, not just linear thoughts, as you reflect on your current situation and the changes you want to make. To help you reflect, your coach will assign an Inquiry question, one that is meant to help you explore deeply between sessions.

Your coach also reflects, like a mirror, what she notices about you and what she hears you say – or not say. Your coach can point out negative self talk, limiting beliefs and self-doubt. She can help you to focus on your strengths and remind you of your successes.

Insight

"A moment's insight is sometimes worth a life's experience." – Oliver Wendell Holmes

Rock writes, "It is clear that at the moment of insight various neurotransmitters like adrenaline are released as well as possibly serotonin and dopamine." Coaching generates insights in several ways. First, you set aside time on a regular basis to think and talk about things that are important to you, thereby creating fertile ground for insights. Your coach helps you to dig deeper and explore by asking questions and encouraging you to look at things from different perspectives. Using metaphors, visualizations, guided imagery, role plays and other multi-sensory tools, she engages many parts of your brain, increasing the opportunities for insights. Insights lead to the desire for action.

Action

"Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Willing is not enough; we must do." – Johann von Goethe

The urge for action is very short lived. That's why many people find it so difficult to develop healthy habits. The coaching process maintains the focus and your coach reminds you of your insights and desire for action. Together you break the tasks into manageable chunks. It's amazing how much gets done in the day or two before the next coaching call. Your coach will point out progress, explore what gets in the way of your plans, and will help you to create structures that keep you engaged and in action.

Modern brain science will continue to develop and find practical ways to take advantage of the neuroplasticity, the ability to change and make new connections, of the brain. Mark Hallett at the National Institute of Health said, "We have learned that neuroplasticity is not only possible but that it is constantly in action. That is the way we adapt to changing conditions, the way we learn new facts, and the way we develop new skills... We must therefore understand neuroplasticity and learn how to control it."

"Behavior will lead to changes in brain circuitry, just as changes in brain circuitry will lead to behavior modifications." Alvaro Pascual-Leone & colleagues, Harvard

Personal Update

Our son Michael got married this month. Can you believe it? These are exciting times! I wish Michael and Amanda growth and learning and happy years together.

I'm thinking about how our roles change as our children grow. How can we continue to be present in their lives without being intrusive? Especially since what may seem routine to our children may feel like meddling to their partners. Do our responsibilities end when our children turn 18? 21? 30? When they choose their life partner or settle into their careers? These are questions I've wondered about myself and have helped some of my clients explore.

Our kids will face similar questions if they choose to raise children. And we've faced them before. We've been letting go and fostering independence all along the way – either by choice or necessity.

One suggestion is to have conversations about the subject. Ask your adult children what they want and need from you. Explain that it is a tricky thing, to have your role shift, and that it takes some figuring out. Let them know what you want from them.

To foster communication, listen more than you talk. Take your cues from them. Take time to consider what they've said before you react to it, especially if it is difficult to hear.

And consider this. You may be modeling the kind of conversation you want them to have with you when they wonder, in your later years, how much support, respect and direction you need from them.

I'm interested in your feedback. What has worked for you? What tips can you share? Send me an email at dexner@exnerassociates.com – if I get enough response I'll share the suggestions in a future article.

Coming Events

Free session by phone: Now What: 90 Days to a New Life Direction

Monday 6/11 4:00-5:00 pm AZ Time/PDT; 7:00-8:00 pm EDT

See what the Now What program can do for you -- either in individual or group coaching.

Now What coaching can help you get clear about what's next in your life, especially if you are:

- Re-entering the work world or seeking more satisfying work
- Considering your options after a major life transition
- Looking for fulfillment and meaning
- Wanting to discover what's next for you

The work between calls involves reading a chapter from the Now What book and completing exercises designed to uncover limiting beliefs, wisdom from your past and direction for your future. The individual coaching calls will help you to personalize the information and create your action plan.

Print and take the [Now What Quiz](#) to see which sections of this book/program can help you.

Ready to take a big step towards a more satisfying life and work?

For more information contact me via email: info@exnerassociates.com or phone: 602-298-1129

***The Pathfinder: How to Choose or Change Your Career for a Lifetime of Satisfaction and Success* Book Discussion**

Dates: Mondays 7/9, 7/16, 7/23 & 7/30

Time: 4-5 pm AZ Time/PDT, 7-8 pm EDT

Group Size: 8-10 people

Fee: \$75 (Book available from amazon.com for @\$10)

Back by popular demand, ***The Pathfinder***, by Nicholas Lore, has three sections:

- Living the Life You Love
- How to Get There from Here
- Designing your Future Career

In our introductory call we will discuss goals and some reading shortcuts and strategies. Then, we will read one section between each call. On the calls we will have a one-hour group discussion (via phone conference) about that section. Not only will this group get you reading, but you will also be encouraged to do as many of the exercises in the book as possible!

For more information contact me via email: info@exnerassociates.com or phone: 602-298-1129

Participants of previous Pathfinder groups said:

"I have been holding myself back from changing careers for many years and this book

has shown me that making commitments to myself - in all areas of my life - is critical to achieving my dream job." TD, Delaware

"This class helped to propel me forward into decision-making - not only for my life work, but many other aspects of my life." FC, New York

"The book Pathfinder by Nicholas Lore includes all the tools for discovering and creating a career you will love. The trick is putting in the time and effort necessary to take full advantage of them. The book discussion group led by Debra Exner provided me with a fun, highly motivating way to make sure I did just that. The regularly scheduled conference calls made the difference between just reading the book and really applying it in my life. If you are resigned about the difference that a book can actually make in your life, give this discussion group a try. It really works!" KD, Delaware

"This was an absolutely wonderful session! The book was fabulous! It was great to be able to discuss in a group and hear other perspectives. And Debbie was a wonderful facilitator - with a great ability to motivate, listen, and respect everyone!" KM, Maryland

"Thank you for your direction and encouragement. Pathfinders helped me confirm my thoughts about whom I wanted to work with and what I wanted to do." BB, Delaware

If you are ready to make changes in your business and personal life or know someone who is, I'm looking for you. I work primarily with people in with self-directed individuals who want to maximize their effectiveness and satisfaction at work while maintaining a healthy life/work balance and with people in a life transition that has them thinking about what's next (i.e., the kids have grown, they want to partially retire, etc).. Curious? Email me at DExner@ExnerAssociates.com or call 602-298-1129 to schedule a complimentary 45-minute coaching session.

If you are enjoying this newsletter, please forward it to your friends and colleagues! Or direct them to the subscription form and past issues at <http://exnerassociates.com/newsletter.htm>

Thanks,

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Time is the coin of your life. It is the only coin you have, and only you can determine how it will be spent. Be careful lest you let other people spend it for you.
-- Carl Sandburg (1878 - 1967)
