

Lazy Brains

By: Steve L. Robbins

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The sign on the treadmill read, “*For the consideration of our other guests, please do not use this equipment for more than 45 minutes.*” I chuckled aloud as I wondered if this sign was truly necessary. How many people could this apply to? Let me be clear the little notice taped onto the machine did not have a hyphen between the 4 and 5 as to read *four to five minutes*. No, it was asking the user to refrain from using the treadmill more than three quarters of an hour!

Okay, I admit it I am lazy. But I have a perfectly valid reason for my *slothfulness*—my brain makes me do it, or in this case not do it. Recent advances in neuroscience suggest that the piece of gray and white matter between my ears is rather lazy. It tries to do the least amount of work possible. Put more positively, my brain (like all brains) works on an efficiency principle. That is, the human brain operates in a manner as to expend as little energy as possible.



This all makes sense when viewed from an evolutionary perspective. The most efficient creatures survived! Efficiency is about energy conservation. The more energy you’ve saved up, the more energy you have on hand to deal with saber-toothed tigers and other aspects of your hostile surroundings. Inefficiency meant slow, and slow meant death in ancestral environments. We don’t live in the same types of danger-filled conditions that our predecessors faced, but our brain still operates as if it were in hostile environments. It still tries to conserve energy.

One of the ways it conserves precious energy is to make decisions quickly. Time is energy. And in order for it to make decisions quickly it relies on mathematical calculations based on probability. Our brains interpret data (i.e., make predictions) using categories derived from past experiences. As it takes in data from the external world it asks, “*How does this information best fit the categories I have?*” and then draws the most *probable* interpretation from existing mental models. In short, our interpretations and perceptions are constrained by our categories. Can you begin to see how this process, driven by the efficiency principle, works against inclusion (of people and ideas) if we have limited and/or negative categories about people and ideas that are “different.”

When we encounter something different, something new and novel, we force more neurons to go *online*, and that means more energy is required. From a cognitive science perspective, this is the very reason why we like to stay in our comfort zones. Relatively few neural networks have to go online when we are not confronted with new and novel data. Outside the comfy confines of the familiar we are forced to activate more, and different sets of neural networks. Thus, more energy is spent.

The efficiency principle also explains why we hang out with people who think and believe as we do. It would require too much energy to have to explain to “outsiders” why they are wrong. Why bother when we can just sur-

round ourselves with people who will tell us how right we are—who will affirm our current way of thinking and doing? Why expend more energy when the status quo is so comfortable, and energy efficient?

The answer is greater creativity and innovation (i.e., better problem solving ability). Research clearly supports the idea that many different perspectives are better than a homogenous set of perspectives when it comes to problem solving. If past experiences directly impact our ability to identify problems and solutions, it logically follows that the more (and different) sets of past experiences and knowledge one has on hand, the greater the likelihood the most optimal solution will be found. It should then come as no surprise to find that the best lifeline to use when you are a contestant on the show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* is to ask the audience. The “Ask the Audience” lifeline is far better than the “Expert” lifeline. Based on data from this popular television game show, the audience has been correct 91 percent of the time. The expert, though good, is correct only 65 percent of the time (to understand the mathematical rigor behind this read up on Bernoulli’s Law of Large numbers). The key is the diversity of experiences within the audience, and that each audience member’s answer was included in the final calculation without group pressure to conform.

So there you have it. The power of inclusion is found in its ability to facilitate problem solving (as long as you have a diversity of perspectives to work with). We often don’t leverage this power because our brains, in the quest to be as efficient as possible, would rather exclude ideas, people and things that are new, novel and strange. It is stuck in the status quo. True innovation does not occur within comfortable quarters. It requires the spark that comes from the intersection of many perspectives, the collision of different domains of knowledge and even the discomfort that arises from conflicting viewpoints.

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Picasso said, *“The first step of creativity begins with the act of destruction.”* Could it be that destroying that which is familiar (rewiring existing neural networks) by engaging the unfamiliar is required for novel thinking and creative problem solving? If so, then we must be willing to challenge ourselves to venture beyond our comfort zones and into the comfort zones of others who view the world differently than we do. This won’t be easy. Our brains will resist. It wants to conserve energy, and leaving our comfort zones requires spending energy. But it can be done, and it must be done if we truly want to unleash the power of inclusion and reap the rewards of diversity.

“No pain, no gain,” the saying goes. The next time I get on a treadmill I’m going to push myself beyond 45 minutes. It will be uncomfortable, but I know there is much to be gained from spending that extra energy to break old routines. See you at the gym! ☆