

Day 1

Shared Instincts

No One Taught You to Breathe

There can be as much value in the blink of an eye as in months of rational analysis.

—Malcolm Gladwell

Today you'll tame:

- ◆ Your automatic response

The following is a completely true story that someone once told me about his worst presentation experience—*ever*. After working all morning—skipping breakfast and lunch—to fully prepare to give his first pitch to the senior leadership team, a new vice president of marketing triumphantly clicked onto his final PowerPoint slide. He dramatically pronounced the end of the presentation with the obligatory prompt: “Any questions?”

No response came, bolstering his confidence that he had given the audience every bit of information that they needed. He flipped the lights back on. The boardroom

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flooded with light. But to say that the reaction of the senior team was disappointing would have been an understatement.

Instead of the applause he had been counting on, all that could be heard was the embarrassingly loud snoring of the CEO—who was fast asleep at the head of the table.

Awkward—and true!

But not as awkward as what followed from the VP who had presented: His face turned bright red, just before he violently hurled his laser-pointer across the boardroom and stormed out, shouting obscenities.

Luckily, the CEO wasn't awake for any of that, either. I'll return to this story at the end of the chapter.

There are some things to which you react immediately, without thinking. You have a knee-jerk response—a reflex. Like when, on your first day back at work after vacation, you gag upon taking your first sip of coffee made with milk that has been in the staff-room fridge for over two weeks. It's an impulse to “throw-up” the unexpectedly sour-tasting—and, potentially threatening to your health—drink.

Then there are those things you feel deep-down, at a gut level, that have to be done, and done *now*. You are drawn to act—it's an instinct. Like when, after spitting out the bad coffee, you spray a whole can of Lysol into the fridge to kill all the microbial aliens you are sure must be living in it—never mind that the site-manager's birthday cake is sitting there, ready for a staff celebration. Your compulsion to “go to war” on the contents of the cooler just kicks in; you see red, grab your chemical weapon, and all *listeria* must die!

So, you've got reflexes and you've got instincts. These are the initial impulses that motivate us all to take action. But what's the difference between the two?

Well, for a start, one fact is the same about them: Nobody taught you to activate either. Both are genetically programmed.

Impulse Buying

Take, for example, your blink reflex. (This is not what happens when you pick up a Malcolm Gladwell book and buy it just because it's there.) Rather, it's the involuntary movement of the eyelids caused by stimulation of the cornea. If your blink reflex is working right, then some dust, a bright light, a loud noise, movement close to the eye, or a plain old poke to it should cause both your eyes to blink simultaneously.

The evolutionary purpose of this reflex is, of course, to protect your eyes. Just the sudden appearance of something in your vision is enough to cause the cranial nerve that emerges from your reptilian brain to react, as if you are definitely going to endure damage to your eyes.

In fact, we could speculate that *all* reflexes are designed to ensure your survival in some way.

You experience reflexes as a result of the most basic of neural processing. For example, the *withdrawal* reflex, which occurs when you pull back quickly from something dangerous—only takes a couple of individual synapses (connections between nerve cells). Let's say that you accidentally touch a hot object. The heat stimulates temperature receptors in the skin, and then a sensory impulse travels to the central nervous system, followed swiftly by motor impulses that flex your muscles and move your body away. This reaction is so impulsive that it doesn't even get to the reptilian brain, but happens in the spinal cord. Certain actions are so vital to our survival—such as

stopping ourselves from getting burned—that *no* part of the brain has a chance to think about anything. Your body just reacts—and fast.

Primary Schooling

Remember when you were born?

No, of course you don't. You weren't conscious of it. That's why, if everything was working out well for you, it was a reflex that took your first breath. It was not a conscious choice you made, or even something that your mother had to teach you, because that would have been too risky. If breathing needed to be taught, then your mother would have had, at the outside, a maximum of five minutes to teach you—which is, of course, impossible. So, instead, you inherited a reflex that's hardwired into your central nervous system to do the job of taking your first breath, and most others from that moment on.

Here's how it all works: Before you were born, your lungs were filled with amniotic fluid; and, if you were born by being squeezed through your mother's birth canal, the pressure on your chest forced that fluid out of your lungs. Once you emerged, that pressure was released from the chest, and the lungs expanded, taking in air.

Prior to birth, you got your oxygen through the blood delivered via your mother's umbilical cord. That cord continued to provide you with oxygen after you were born, until the placenta detached from the uterine wall. Once this happened (or the cord was cut), then the lack of oxygen and heightened carbon dioxide levels caused the arterial blood to become acidic. This was sensed by the vessels sending blood to your brain, your heart, and your lungs. They in turn sent a message to your reptilian brain, which sent a message to your diaphragm to contract, and so expand your lungs to breathe in. Thus, here you are today, reading this.

Well done, reflexes!

Thank goodness you did not have to think or learn how to carry out that complex procedure, because you would have killed yourself trying, for sure.

So how does this relate to the way your reflexes function in the workplace?

Say someone comes up behind you and touches your shoulder without announcing his presence. Most of us will respond by being startled. Or let's assume you prefer to keep the "notification" feature of your e-mail program turned on; and although you try and concentrate on the document you are writing, your attention keeps being diverted by the little "ping" that emanates from your computer speakers whenever a new e-mail arrives. You can no more ignore that alert than you can stop yourself from jumping when someone touches you unexpectedly from behind.

Suppressing Thoughts

The fact is, you cannot stop your reflexes. As long as your reptilian brain is fully functioning it will continue to stimulate you to breathe and to perform all of the other reflexes that it controls.

Under most conditions, your reptilian brain will always fight for breath on your behalf; cause you to blink when you get something in your eye; sneeze when you get something up your nose; or stretch your deep tendons so that you do not fall over when you walk.

It is extraordinary that the part of your brain that supports consciousness can be totally destroyed, and yet, as seen in some coma patients, its most primitive parts will still cause your eyes to scan the environment and lock onto and track any moving object. However, this eye movement, triggered by the reptilian brain, could no more be considered a sign

of consciousness than could a sunflower turning its “face” toward the sun.

That is the nature of reflexes; they are automatic, and initiated unconsciously. So what about instincts?

Ingrained Habits

The simplest example of an instinctive behavior is what is known as a *fixed action pattern*, a short sequence of actions that you perform each and every time in response to a very specific stimulus.

Your instincts set in motion more complex sets of behaviors than your reflexes do. But like your reflexes, you perform these behaviors without any prior experience. So, once again, instincts aren’t lessons that someone teaches you, that you learn over time. They are preprogrammed in the same way that newly hatched sea turtles are preprogrammed to automatically move from the beach, where they were laid as eggs, toward the ocean.

It is only because some instinctive behaviors depend on our getting older that they appear to be actions we’ve learned. For instance, we commonly refer to children as “learning to crawl.” In fact, it is that they have come to an age in which the built-in instinct to crawl kicks in.

A number of our most important instinctive behaviors embedded in our reptilian brains include fighting, fleeing, courting, and preparing to give birth. We’ll look at some of these later this week, especially the most “famous” instinct of all: fight or flight. But first we will look at how we think when we have an instinctive reaction. For that we turn to the topic of . . .

The Unconscious Process

Out of the continuous flow of sensory input to which your instinctive behaviors respond, the reptilian brain “forwards” or distinguishes what might be important for your Limbic

social brain and sometimes your intelligent critical thinking Neocortex and tells it, “Pay attention to THIS!”

Of course, a huge amount of processing is going on before it makes you aware of any of that. And you cannot tell anyone about that processing, because you are not aware of it yourself: it is preconscious thought. Nor can others tell you about their preconscious thoughts, either.

That is why, even when we become alert to something that has happened and to which we’ve reacted instinctively, we are often confused—what on earth is going on, and why the hell are we reacting to it this way?

In such circumstances, both we and those around us are often completely unconscious of, hence unable to explain, our impulsive reactions, and why we have behaved as we have. The brain’s electrical activity that precedes an action—called the *readiness potential*—occurs several hundred milliseconds before we are even able to start reporting the desire to act.

Out of Control

It is tough to control your reflexes. Give it a try, if you relish a challenge. Run a cold shower and walk straight into it without changing the way you are breathing, the speed at which your heart is beating, or the level of tension or relaxation within your muscles. Get the point? If you need further proof, then smack yourself hard across the face with this book (or e-reader). *Now* do you get the point?

Unlike reflexes, however, instincts can be culturally or consciously suppressed—to some degree. For instance, if you are driving your car and you suddenly see another vehicle careering toward you, you will find it nearly impossible to suppress your instinct to swerve and avoid a collision. Now take the same potential collision and move it to the world of the demolition derby race-track. The experienced demolition derby driver with a desire to win can overcome his instinct

to avoid an impact, and instead, ram the other vehicle head on. Yet even he will be unable to keep his eyes open for the fraction of a second of impact.

Is Work Torture?

The late English/American author and journalist Christopher Hitchens was, he said, always somewhat proud of his ability to keep his head and maintain presence of mind under trying circumstances.

When, however, for a *Vanity Fair* article, he agreed to experience the “enhanced interrogation” technique of waterboarding (now banned as torture), which simulates drowning and instantaneously causes the gag reflex and the fight for life, Hitchens lasted only a few seconds before succumbing to the extreme panic attack that waterboarding is designed to induce. It is said that subjects will confess to just about anything under such conditions, and even experience divine revelations jam-packed with “intelligence.”

The most simple of mechanisms can produce tremendous stress for us humans, as well as the life-threatening panic, unpredictable behavior, high anxiety, and altered states of consciousness.

None of us, not even the most highly trained to resist, are immune to our reflexes. That’s why we can expect displays of the most primitive kinds of behavior from ourselves and others when we perceive our work environment to be an overwhelmingly threatening one.

You can’t so easily control your reflexes; but you can control—to an extent—your primitive instincts. Take, for example, the murderous rage you instinctually feel toward an

employer who has recommended that the department you work for abandon the project your team has been working on for 12 months; and, furthermore, that your team be disbanded and its members relocated to other departments. Like most of us, you will stifle your initial impulse to leap at the boss and wring his neck with both hands. However, under extreme stress, and within a very hostile environment, the urge toward physical violence may be more difficult to subdue. While you don't (hopefully) kill your employer at this point, you might still have those thoughts, which may very well cause you to act in an abrupt, rude, and dismissive manner, or even seek later "payback" in some underhanded way.

Day One Action

Notice when you get an adrenaline rush at work—that unexpected queasiness in your stomach and muscle tension; your heart rate speeds up, your breathing becomes shallow and rapid, your face flushes, and you begin to sweat.

Unless you work on a roller coaster, shark-dive for a living, or are having a heart attack, these are quite probably symptoms of your fight-or-flight response—your body's instinctual reaction to danger—playing out. Your reptilian brain is preparing you to either run away from a threat it has perceived, or to fight it. So above and beyond some of the physical changes just mentioned, you may also feel anxious or somewhat aggressive, or both.

In what kind of work scenarios/situations does this reaction occur for you? Do you notice particular triggers for this reaction (in terms of both people and environments)?

Try to notice the same for others: What seems to trigger them into fight-or-flight mode, or to become anxious or aggressive?

You'll learn more about the full extent of your and others impulsive responses to all these situations later in the book.

Manage Primitive Impulses Today

Awake or Asleep

We humans are normally *diurnal* creatures, meaning that we are active in the daytime and sleep at night. As with most other diurnal animals, our wake and sleep patterns are controlled by the primitive brain. This is stimulated by the levels and quality of light around us, which act as the synchronizing clock for the human circadian rhythm, our instinctive pattern of getting up and going to bed.

During midday hours, sunlight has high intensity, a high color temperature, and a high content of blue light. Our primitive brain is programmed to keep us awake under these conditions. The sun's intensity, color temperature, and blue content dramatically decrease during evening hours—conditions under which our primitive brain is programmed to send us to sleep.

With that in mind, back to the opening story, about the new VP and his snoring CEO, like I had promised.

Should you, like the new VP, encounter problems keeping those around you awake and alert at work—especially when it's critical that they pay attention to you—think first about changing the light environment; specifically, make it altogether brighter, and install bluish-white lighting. (On the other hand, should you want them to fall sleep, then by all means, switch off all the lights and mumble through a deck of PowerPoint slides!)

Think, too, about managing the environment around people so that it best meets their basic biological needs, reflexes, rhythms, and comforts; consider such factors as food, light, heat, shelter, and safety. In doing so, you may find that their primitive and impulsive behaviors almost immediately become more manageable. Keep stress levels relatively low and glucose levels reasonably high (remember to eat) and you might even be able to nip in the bud the chain reaction of reflexes and instinctual behaviors, like those that escalated into an aggressive tantrum from the VP of Marketing.