



HOW TO GET THE LEARNING TO STAY

By Michael Rosenberg and Gillian Williams McClean

It is a book, I admit, that is designed to help cure insomnia. Once you get through the small print and long-winded academic and scientific information, *The Mind and the Brain* by Dr. Jeffrey Schwartz has some pretty interesting and relevant information to learning and organizational development professionals. One of the main points of the book is that our brain forms neural pathways that create 'roads' that create our belief system. The only way to change somebody's thinking is to literally change his or her brain by creating a new neural pathway. You can tell that a new neural pathway has been created when you have an 'aha' moment. This is the basis of accelerated learning design and training in general – to allow people an opportunity to create an 'aha'.

Using the metaphor of road building, we have now created a new road but it doesn't replace the old one. It is simply a 'by-pass' road that changes the direction of our beliefs. Once the new road, however, is created, we then need to reinforce the road and start moving traffic in that direction. If we don't, then (like any unused road) the path will crumble and it will eventually return to its original condition.

How do we reinforce the road? As part of any learning strategy, you need to reinforce what is taught in the workplace. Here are a couple of quick hits that can help provide any training program with ways to help reinforce their key messages and help their participants apply what they have learned.

1. Reinforcement of Key Messages

There's one indisputable method to reinforce key messages, behaviours and practically anything that is "learnt". Examples are as close as your nearest toddler and thankfully a lot more predictable and reliable. Hold on to your hats...it's the tried and true mental and/or physical exercise of repetition. *Exactly how many times can a Barney DVD be played before its quality deteriorates rendering it obsolete? Is anyone else pining for the return of the VHS?*



In training programs we ask participants to adopt new patterns of thought and, most of the time, associated new actions or behaviours. The novelty of the new thought pattern generates the 'aha', but it is the act of repetition that sustains its momentum until "the new" becomes "the norm".

"Any thought that is passed on to the subconscious often enough and convincingly enough is finally accepted." Robert Collier



Travelling back to the road-building metaphor, repetition reinforces the by-pass road and gradually transforms it into the new highway. Renowned success trainer Napoleon Hill advised that new thoughts must be repeated twelve times per day to become new behaviours. Others recommend new actions be repeated for at least 21 days before they become habit or sustained transformational change. Yes, it sounds so simple but why is it that most people remain glued to their old ways of thinking and acting?

Repetition is an effective tool for key message reinforcement, but not necessarily in and of itself. It is most effective when it is applied within a transformational change strategy.

2. The Four Components of Change

When we learn something new, we can get frustrated because it seems so foreign and difficult. Our performance during this period actually decreases. What we require are tools and a personal transformation change strategy to keep us motivated to learn, to ingrain the learning and to apply it.

Transformational change is a sustained alteration of thoughts and actions from the inside out that produces lasting outcomes. It is most effective when undertaken as a four-part transformational change strategy. The four components are – **verbalization**, **visualization**, **strong conviction** and **action**. No, it's not new. In fact, this strategy dates back to some of the earliest philosophical, psychological and religious teachings, but is still touted today by leading experts.

So, how does it work?

For one, it works through verbalization and repetition. Verbal repetition of new information is a key element in the creation of new neural pathways.

We literally have to talk our brains into changing our behaviours!

There is tremendous power in the act of speaking. To hear oneself say the words and phrases that either directly reflect or indirectly represent the new learning is a powerful change tactic.

Words affect our thoughts, which in turn affect our beliefs and our behaviours.

Thoughts run through our minds all the time. By consciously verbalizing (speaking aloud) we interrupt and take control of our thoughts in a way that is supportive to the change we desire. When verbalizing we are teaching our subconscious self to affect our conscious self. It is the basis for the widespread use of affirmations and declarations by change gurus across the globe.

Early twentieth century writer and metaphysicist Florence Scovel Shinn stated, "*We cannot always control our thoughts, but we can control our words, and repetition impresses the subconscious, and we are then master of the situation.*" When you apply this concept to learning and to what we now know about the brain, it means that we can



use verbalization to take control of the neural pathway construction of the brain. For centuries many knew that this worked, but now through science we understand how it works. Verbalization with repetition is however only one step in making lasting change.

Visualization is another key step. Yes, people have different learning styles, but an individual also has different ways of capturing and retaining new information. Creating a mental picture of the new learning, in a context that is relevant to the learner, is an effective way to reinforce change. In fact, verbalization and visualization trigger and support one another. Together they help to keep the new neural pathway open.

Having a strong conviction, belief or faith in the change is another step. If the learner doesn't believe what he or she has learned or believe in his or her ability to change, it will be extremely difficult to adopt the new learning or behaviour. If you're in doubt, try saying and visualizing that two plus two equals three. There is a sub-component to the belief step and that is being motivated to change or acquire the new learning. Ideally, this motivation should be both external (the environment) and internal (the state of mind) to the learner.

Lastly, action is required for transformational change. It is important to put the new learning or changed behaviour into play, in order to solidify what has been verbalized, visualized and believed. The incorporation of activity rounds out the process.

What is curious from an effectiveness standpoint is that the action can be real or merely "perceived as real" to support the transformation. For example, when treating his patients with obsessive compulsive disorder, Dr. Schwartz has them "act" as though they have already changed; this is part of his revolutionary brain change formula. World renowned success trainer T. Harv Eker encourages exercises where participants "act" as though they have already acquired wealth as part of their training to become wealthy. Florence Scovel Shinn writes, "... *only active faith impresses the subconscious, and unless you impress the subconscious, there are no results.*" These are three experts, from three different disciplines, who advocate the need for action to fulfill the change process.

In our perpetually busy brains, we require a method of keeping new information top of mind and keeping the new by-pass road in view and in use. The order and impact attached to each of the four change components varies depending on the background of the expert you ask. However, in one order or the other, verbalization, visualization, strong conviction and action play essential roles in transformational change. Each affect the creation and maintenance of the new by-pass road to change until that by-pass road becomes the highway to the desired outcome. It's a four-part process to keeping the "aha" that learning and organizational professionals work so hard to create.

Michael Rosenberg is Principal of OYG Inc (flexiblethinker.com) specializing in Teambuilding, Coaching, Leadership Gillian Williams McClean) is Founder and President of Sayings of Success (SayingsofSuccess.com and SayingsofSuccess.ca) and a Communications Professional specializing in Transformational Change.