

# Your Brain Wiring

Is it an asset or liability?



by Jonathan Picoult

**T**HE HUMAN MIND IS REMARKABLE, able to simultaneously receive and interpret volumes of data. Reading and understanding this simple sentence requires brainpower beyond that available with even the most advanced supercomputers.

Equally impressive is the brain's ability to ignore information—to avoid being overwhelmed by data, just as your PC slows to a crawl when running many programs. By “filtering” the data it receives, our mind focuses on information that matters, not on background noise.

Imagine what it would be like reading this article if you were distracted by every peripheral sound, every flicker in room lighting, every shifting shadow. Fortunately, your mind filters out extraneous inputs so you can focus.

While cognitive filtering is essential to normal functioning, it can be detrimental for leaders. Normally innocuous filters can suppress information that is needed for good decision making. Filters can become *biases*, tainting the mindset of even the most thoughtful leaders.

This happens when people have a strong attachment to a particular belief and wish to validate their perspective. They tend to focus on evidence that confirms their convictions. It's comparable to the perils of groupthink—yet can be unleashed by a single person in a position of authority.

It can seep into many judgments—assessing the appeal of a target market, projecting the success of a new product, viewing a new strategy as a cure-all, or evaluating the performance of staff. But leaders can guard against these biases by keeping a few tips in mind:

**1. Poke holes in your ideas.** When making judgments, seek confirming and disconfirming evidence. Your original hunch might be right, but don't leap there before challenging assumptions.

**2. Assign someone else to poke holes in your ideas.** With strong opinions on a topic, it can be tough to play your own devil's advocate. Others may be reluctant to question your perspective. To defuse such situations, explicitly designate someone to act as “chief contrarian” during important discussions. This ensures one person is consistently (and constructively) challenging the consensus.

**3. Recognize and commend healthy debate.** The best way to complement your own cognitive checks and balances is to make sure your team is comfortable raising concerns and objections. Go out of your way to recognize the value of vigorous debate whenever it happens.

**4. Keep an open mind when evaluating performance.** Rooting out biases in performance appraisals is tough, as these assessments can't be widely debated and vetted. So be open to the possibility of historically average contributors taking their performance to a higher level—or perennially strong performers experiencing a sustained downturn in their results.

As you formulate judgments, your thoughts are being influenced by cognitive filters out to support your still-crystallizing conclusions. Controlling these

filters requires striking a balance in how you collect, assimilate, and interpret information. Just as you wouldn't want to operate with filters left unchecked, you also can't obsess over neutralizing them, as that could be paralyzing.

The key is to actively engage in thought and organizational practice which compensates for the filters and biases that could otherwise undermine your judgment. That doesn't mean gut instinct, intuition, and leaps of faith become a thing of the past. However, if done properly, it does mean you can avoid a common decision-making pitfall that—for better and for worse—is wired into our brains. **PE**

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**ACTION:** Avoid decision-making pitfalls.

MENTAL • IDEAS

## Smell of an Idea

Great ideas are attractive.



by Edward de Bono

**A**T AN EARLY STAGE in the decision-making process, creative people can detect the *smell* of a new idea. This motivates them to pursue and develop that idea.

An idea which does not seem very interesting to anyone else can have this special *smell* for a creative person. This seems to be a sort of instinct in the way it operates. It is not, however, an instinct but a judgment built up from a lot of experience.

At the start of an idea, difference is a point of interest. Something which is different, or even the opposite, of the normal will always be interesting. Whether that interest develops into something practical is another matter.

**The purpose of any new idea is to show value and benefits.** Any idea which at an early stage suggests large benefits is always worth hearing and pursuing. The benefits must, however, be made very clear.

An idea that has no obvious benefits is not a creative idea. It is not much use delivering an idea and hoping that there may be benefits somewhere.

An idea which immediately seems practical is always attractive. We can see how the idea can easily be put into practice. Practicality covers many aspects. The idea must be practical and

feasible from a mechanical and scientific point of view. The idea must be practical from an “acceptance” point of view; the people who are going to be required to implement the idea must accept the idea.

**A simple idea is always attractive.** The idea may be simple to introduce. The idea may be simple to operate. The idea may replace existing complexity with simplicity. The “smell” of simplicity is always enticing.

There may be good ideas which will only work in very special circumstances. There may be good ideas which will only work for a certain class of people, for example people with little money but big ambitions.

**Not every idea has to be universal.** There may be niche ideas which serve that particular niche very well. Such ideas may be worth implementing. In terms of the “smell of an idea”, however, niche ideas are not very attractive. If the niche

is spelled out very clearly, then the idea can be seen to be valuable. It should not, however, be left to the listener to work out the niche where the idea does have value.

**Robust ideas are attractive**—ideas that will work even when not fully implemented. This means that the ideas will work even outside the best circumstances.

Creative ideas and lateral thinking help to improve your performance. **PE**

*Edward de Bono is the founding father of lateral thinking and is a leading authority on creative thinking as a skill. www.thinkingmanagers.com.*

**ACTION:** Detect and develop your best ideas.

