

## The power of your thoughts

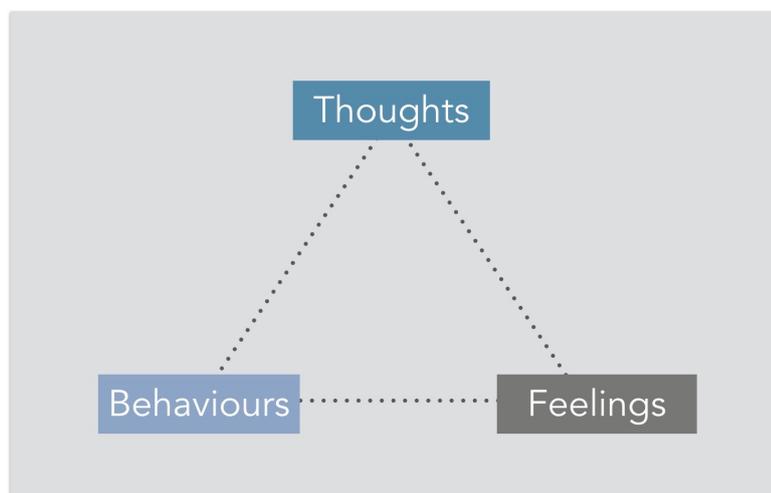
If our thoughts shape our behaviour ...  
what thoughts do you have about leadership and your  
own effectiveness?

There's an idea that stretches back to Greek philosophy which says that it's not 'the events' in life that make us feel one way or another but the *meaning* we give to those events. Modern day Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) uses this concept in a really practical, active way to encourage people to examine the meaning they give to situations in order to see if those cognitions (thoughts) are logical, helpful or effective.

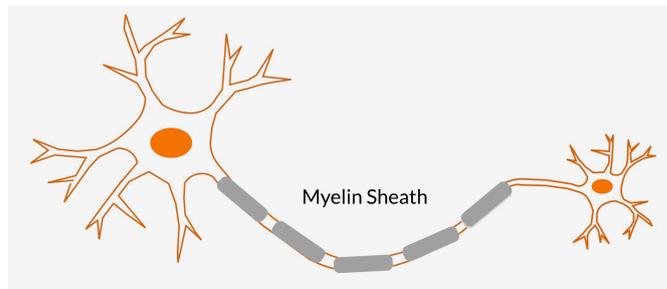
What can often happen is that certain thoughts and beliefs which may have made sense at one point in our careers become engrained - we've deployed the thought so many times that it is easily triggered in the brain regardless of whether it is still effective in a world that is rapidly moving on.

Let's look at a common example: our relationship with 'control'.

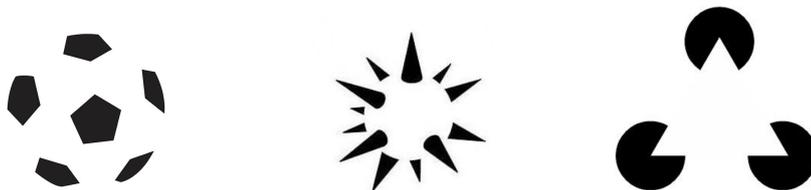
In many operational roles, people will have experienced strong rewards for deploying the "I need to be in control" thought. They were the ones who really knew what was going on, were slightly obsessive (passionate?) and achieved great results as a consequence. As a result of their beliefs about control, anything that was unclear would make them feel uncomfortable - and when we feel anxious we engage in behaviours that reduce that anxiety - in this case we take control. So for this person there is a clear link between the thought, the emotions and the behaviour when faced with that event (see diagram).



The human brain works, at a very generalised level, on the principle of maximising reward and minimising threat. So we can see that over time, the neural connections that reduced anxiety by taking control will have been strengthened. The process of strengthening is fascinating - myelin is a fatty substance produced in the brain - and it acts like an insulation tape so that when faced with similar events (stimulus) the brain has a semi automatic response that's good to go. These responses over time become our habits and shape our leadership style.



As much as we like to think we are creative beings, always responding appropriately to the facts in front of us - the brain simply does not work like that. The human brain is a very energy efficient system, it relies on preconceived ideas, it fills in the gaps. As the picture below shows, it does not notice everything but looks instead for evidence to support what it already 'knows' or expects. We have to respect the power of this system - we have to respect the habit.



At the same time, whilst these connections might be very well insulated and well established they are not, in fact, 'hard wired' - this is what people mean by neuroplasticity - the potential of the brain to make new connections continues throughout our life. So we need to take a balanced view - change is possible but it requires wilful, deliberate, mindful effort.

So what's wrong with being in control? Of course nothing intrinsically - the answer is always 'it depends'. Many leaders will recognise the transition in their careers when they take on more strategic, more ambiguous roles and this is where it can really help to be mindful of our leadership thoughts. Those that thrive typically recognise the need to adjust their cognitions - those that don't are quite often still deploying their habitual 'safety behaviours' to reduce their anxiety when they feel not in control. Staying late, getting involved in low level details, keeping hold of things are very common safety behaviours.

Let's look at another example - self belief.

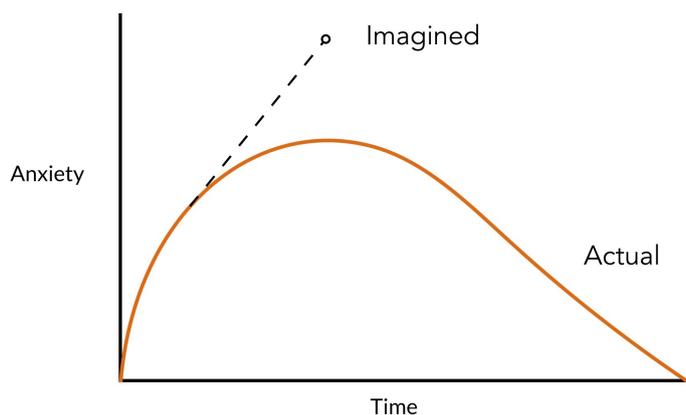
A CBT approach would encourage us to think scientifically about this. To become more mindful of the thoughts that we are deploying - and this may take some time to do because we may not be consciously aware of them. Another key step is to accept the logic that the thoughts in our heads might be powerful but they are *thoughts* not facts. That means, logically, that we can examine those thoughts and see if they are fit for purpose.

In the case of confidence and self-belief, what often happens is that the safety behaviours are about avoidance. In a meeting it feels initially safer to not make your point, to let others take the lead. When criticised, it feels more familiar to accept and believe the criticism than to challenge it. In the context of a cognitive behavioural approach, these safety behaviours make perfect sense - there's an internal consistency and logic to them. If I think other people deserved to get my job more than me or if I think that other people are more capable, educated, or more charismatic than me - then it makes logical sense that I behave the way I do. If I behaved differently it would be weird, uncomfortable and inconsistent - and people like to be consistent!

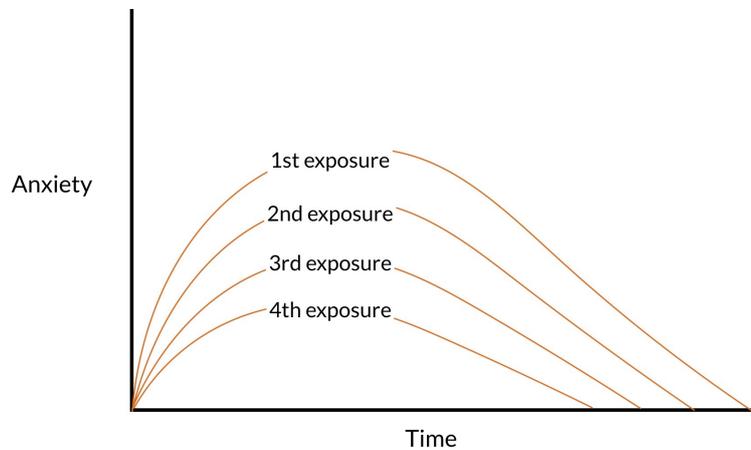
In a separate handout we'll look at the 5 Drivers in more detail. Drivers is the name given to a series of quite common automatic negative thoughts that lead us to behave ineffectively if we are not mindful of managing them. So if I think things have got to Be Perfect (for example) you can see how that will create strong emotions and ineffective 'safety behaviours' in many situations.

If you are interested in changing style or leadership behaviour then we need to get practical and active about it. We need to respect the power of the habit but recognise the possibility of change.

Behaving differently will create emotions and sensations. What many people don't realise is that there is a pattern to those sensations. So for example, the prospect of speaking up in a meeting, or of letting go of control would make the people in our examples so far feel anxious. Our bodies at this point are simply doing what the brain is telling them to do - fight, flight or freeze. As we experience the butterflies or dry throat we assume that the sensations will keep on getting stronger and stronger until something embarrassing or bad happens to us. It's at this point that we deploy a safety behaviour - run, keep quiet, stay late, take back control!



In fact what happens is that the emotion will reach a peak and then plateau and then start to subside. It's a natural physiological process that has a pattern and feels like its taking ages when in fact it's really not.



There is a phrase in CBT 'feel better, get worse - feel worse, get better' and it recognises that our short term 'safety behaviours' serve to maintain our habits and that change will make us feel uncomfortable. The discomfort is a good sign that you are doing something differently. Face Events And Recover (FEAR) is a neat summary that over time, the discomfort we feel by facing up and doing the things we don't find easy will start to ease.

### **Could this CBT idea work for teams as well as individuals?**

People often talk about habitual responses that their organisations have. I've heard people say that when faced with uncertainty their business habitually re-organises or buys in a consultancy to reengineer things. I've heard people say that when criticised, there is a default of passing the blame elsewhere or that when new ideas are suggested there is almost a default reaction of 'not invented here'.

So it must be possible that teams or departments develop habitual thoughts - and it makes you wonder what you collude with? Perhaps it might also make you appreciate the power you have as a leader to role model being the change you want to see. I apologise if that last sentence is a bit of a Ghandi 'rent a quote' - but I'm not always sure if people have a clear vision of what the *leadership* part of their role is.

As you move towards Tiered Meetings there is a great opportunity to try out some new thoughts, to practice doing some things differently. For some of you it will mean letting go and trusting others more. For some of your direct reports it will mean developing the confidence to speak up, to raise issues.

## Summary

- \* The way we behave is often driven by the emotions we have, which in turn are caused by the way that we think.
- \* Thoughts aren't facts.
- \* It is possible to practice thoughts.
- \* It is necessary to practice because the brain works automatically and will deploy habits unless you intervene.
- \* Feeling anxious about the process is a good sign that you are doing something different.
- \* It is important to learn to live with the anxiety and to notice its strength reducing over time.
- \* The brain works with specific stimulus-response connections - so it helps to be really clear about the contexts and triggers you need to be mindful of, as well as the new thoughts or behaviours you want to deploy.
- \* Set backs are a normal part of the learning process - the key is to recognise this and plan in advance so that you know what you'll do when you experience them. This isn't about setting yourself up to fail - its about reframing your attitude to learning and experimenting and being practical about it.
- \* Situational awareness is a concept that can help individuals or teams know when and where to deploy and practice new habits.
- \* Checklists can play a role in reinforcing new habits and practices.
- \* Mindfulness is a technique that calms the brain down in order that it notices more of what's in front of it. This can include your own thought patterns and habitual responses.

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