



Think and Thrive Part 4: Change Your Mind

by Sonia Herasymowych, PhD

“Now they must seek out the unknown. Leaders who have previously relied on a master plan must get used to the feeling well-expressed by the hero of the first *Indiana Jones* film. When asked what his plan was, his answer was simple. ‘I don’t know. I’m making it up as I go.’ Uncertainty is the new reality.”

— Randall P. White, Philip Hodgson, and Stuart Crainer, **The Future of Leadership** (1996)

“Now, why didn’t I think of that?” Chances are that this phrase comes to mind when you see a master or expert learner in action. Like *Indiana Jones* of movie fame, master learners have specific traits that are envied and admired. As individuals who manage change well, they seem to thrive in the most difficult and ambiguous of conditions. They share an uncanny ability to think on their feet, to make sound decisions, and to act boldly, despite any inherent dislike of any *snakes* they may encounter. They seem comfortable with ambiguity, delight in paradox, and are open to trying out new alternatives, changing

tactics often in very brisk order.

Although these characteristics seem remarkable to those who watch on the sidelines, research has shown that many of these traits can be acquired and learned. They are especially evident in entrepreneurs who strike out on their own. I am fortunate to see this on a regular basis, first-hand.

Since early this year, I have belonged to a unique group of 12 successful and outstanding female entrepreneurs. We originally met to participate in a research project on women entrepreneurs. This meeting was so successful and energizing that the group is now meeting regularly to discuss issues and to share ideas. At the first meeting, I was struck by some common characteristics that made me aware that I was witnessing master learners in action. In the entire group, there was not one woman who had actually written out a business plan! I can just see my accountant readers cringing at this statement, but here’s what emerged. Despite deliberate flaunting of this sacrosanct rule of business, all of these entrepreneurs were highly successful and doing very well. More significantly, they all felt that their work was fulfilling, meaningful, and exciting. Here was direct evidence of what management expert Henry Mintzberg has argued. If you are to be ultimately successful in whatever you want to do, you might not necessarily have a written plan, but **you do have to have some sense of direction**. These women were highly focused, and felt definite purpose in their lives and work. At

the same time, they were remarkably open to new ideas and to trying out new ways of doing things. They felt accountable for their thinking and actions, and valued the diversity of thinking styles that were evident in the group. Indeed, sharing thoughts and ideas came so easily and amiably that the group decided to meet regularly. These women not only lived in an environment of constant uncertainty; they thrived on it. They steadfastly refused to go back to what many would call the *stability* of working for a large company. I felt that I had been catapulted into a movie full of female versions of *Indiana Jones*. I was witnessing the consequences of giant leaps of faith by women who had a vision of where they were going, even if it wasn’t written down.

If you would like to learn how to handle change better, then take a lesson from entrepreneurs and others who share a willingness to make calculated risks. In my opinion, master learners possess two key traits. First, they have an openness and an ability to be flexible in difficult situations — willing to **change their minds**. Because they are so open to new ideas, they are often unfairly accused of *changing their minds all the time*. Yet it is precisely this quality that allows master learners to adapt and flex in ambiguous conditions. Second, master learners are always looking at a situation, seeing it from different angles, and weighing the pros and cons. Their success is a direct result of their ability to take in the situation and to make meaning of it. They know that it is not the situation, but what they do with it, that matters. This requires that they plan scenarios in their minds, and then act according to the best plan

or **preferred scenario**. Master learners do this intuitively and automatically. However, this is also a powerful mind technique that can *change your mind*.

Here are a few points to keep in mind. Your brain works best at learning new patterns and making new neuron connections. You cannot *unlearn* bad habits; you can only create new good ones. Practice often enough, and your new habits will become your preferred mode of behaviour. Your brain is also incapable of telling the difference between what it experiences and what it visualizes. Visualization is a technique in which you see or feel yourself doing the actual activity, and practice it mentally. When the time comes to do it actively, the bodymind takes over to follow your inner script easily and smoothly. Why does it work? The answer again lies in the brain and how it functions. When you visualize an event, 80% of the neurons are firing, just as when you are actually doing it. In visualization, you are literally establishing new patterns in your brain. At the same time, you are setting up your brain to do what is called a *preferred scenario*.

In his remarkable book, **The Living Company** (1997), Arie de Geus documents the background and uses of scenario planning when he was Head of Planning with Royal Dutch Shell. In a search for new and innovative ways to deal with change, the planning committee incorporated the work of neurobiologist David Ingvar of Sweden. In 1985, Ingvar had demonstrated that “the human brain is constantly attempting to make sense of the future. Every moment of our lives, we instinctively create action plans and programs for the future —

anticipating the moment at hand, the next minutes, the emerging hours, the following days, the ongoing weeks and the anticipated years to come — in one part of our mind.”

Here’s the neat part. You do preferred scenarios automatically! When you get up to start the day, you begin this planning process, and you modify your preferred scenarios according to whatever happens throughout the day. This is why you can drive on the freeway with the radio playing and pay no attention to it. Meanwhile, in the background, the traffic report mentions a pile-up ahead. Suddenly, your brain is alert, picking up the information, and you begin planning a detour. You make your appointment on time **because your brain was scanning for any obstacle or opportunity that would affect its preferred scenario**. This has nothing to do with using a crystal ball. Arie de Geus notes that, “These are not *predictions*. They do not pretend to tell what *will* happen. They are time paths into an anticipated future.” This is why it’s better to **program your brain with a positive attitude** as opposed to one that is negative. **You get the information for which your brain is constantly scanning**.

Arie de Geus notes, “The message from this research is clear. We will not perceive a signal from the outside world unless it is relevant to an option for the future that we have already worked out in our imaginations. The more ‘memories of the future’ we develop, the more open and receptive we will be to signals from the outside world.”

This function is hard-wired into your brain to deal with the constant information overload that your senses experience. The process acts as a filter while your brain scans the

environment, selecting only what is pertinent and relevant. When this happens in a series of crucial events, it is called *synchronicity*. You meet the right person at a critical time, and coincidence seems commonplace. On a larger scale, preferred scenarios can become personal visions of your life and work. New Age proponents call this the *Theory of Abundance*, and claim that the universe gives what you ask. Scientists, on the other hand, say that you create your own perception and reality. **Finding a sense of purpose or meaning in your life and work programs your brain to scan for opportunities that otherwise you would have missed.**

I believe that the one thing that keeps me, and others I know, centered and able to deal with anything that life hands us is a profound commitment to a personal vision. In the event that you feel that you don’t have a sense of vision in your life, it is imperative that you find at least a sense of purpose. Better still, do what I did long ago. Take the advice of the great mythologist Joseph Campbell. Follow your bliss. Find work that you love, and you will never have to work another day in your life.

“When you’re falling — dive!”
— Joseph Campbell, **Mythos**
(video) Part 1 (1996)

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