

Cultivating mental agility

Understanding mental agility, the benefits of nurturing it and how we can use it for ourselves



What do we mean by mental agility?

The importance of building our mental agility is featuring evermore frequently within our daily conversations.

When considering how it can be scoped, one way defines:

“Mental agility as the ability to pause, step back, reflect, shift perspectives, create options and choose wisely.”

HBR, June, 2016: page 5

In other words, it is being conscious of our own mental models and learning to think in new ways and shift our thinking (HBR, 2016: page 5).

Why is it useful?

Building such cognitive flexibility is useful in a world of increasing demands, complexity and change (HBR, 2016: page 3) for both organisations and us as individuals.

Having the ability to develop new mental maps and interpretations to understand an evolving physical landscape is becoming paramount (HBR, June 2016: page 3).

Some have even gone as far as saying that:

“An organisation's financial survival will increasingly be dependent on the managers' ability to be mentally agile.”

The Futurist, September, 1993: page 49

Researchers are now emphasising how for leaders their mental agility may be more valuable than intelligence, education, skills and even 'social graces' (Chief Learning Officer, November, 2014: page 19).

Moreover, Christina Lattimer reports that leaders need “bigger minds” to keep pace with a rapidly changing reality (Leadership Excellence, February, 2015: page 22).

As well as leaders, mental agility can be beneficial for us as individuals.

It can bring with it personal benefits as:

“It can open up new horizons for most employees to enjoy a more productive and satisfying life.”

Chief Learning Officer, November, 2014: page 19

How can we cultivate it?

We can learn techniques to promote mental agility and enable ourselves to change mental approaches and our behaviour.

Developing our thought processing can help us to nurture greater agility. Within conversations, letting go of the need to know answers can be hugely beneficial. Investing more time listening and being patient and comfortable with discomfort can allow solutions to surface (Chief Learning Officer, November, 2014: 21). Clarifying

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what others are saying, reflecting back and exploring together can release others' insight.

Moreover, research in neuroscience reveals how we can gain greater mental agility. Recent research in this area has led to the discovery of the default network, which is engaged when people aren't concentrating on a task (HBR, July-August, 2013: page 105):

"The discovering of this network is ground-breaking. It leads us to believe that having unfocused free time is an important factor in breakthrough innovation."

Waytz and Mason (HBR, July-August, 2013: page 105)

By switching off from external stimuli - phones, emails and calendars - we can encourage our subconscious mind to make connections and be agile on its own accord. Organisations are already actively harnessing this; Google now have a 20% time policy, allowing company engineers to work on whatever they want for one day a week.

Furthermore collaborating with others can help to nurture greater levels of mental agility. Allowing each other to share new perspectives, make new connections and gain a greater understanding of the wider context can be a source of innovations (HBR, 1990: page 10).

In addition using the physicality of our body can promote greater mental agility. Embodied cognition describes how movement in the body drives cognition and the body's mental state. In other words, we can

trick the brain into becoming more mentally agile by using certain behaviours (Chief Learning Officer, November 2014: page 20).

Therefore by role modelling who we want to be by mirroring their behaviours, our minds will naturally follow and match this new way of being.

Furthermore, our level of fitness has been shown to impact our mental agility as well.

"Physical fitness has been found to be a direct link between physical movement and mental agility."

Friedman (HBR, November, 2015: page 3)

Exercise improves our concentration, memory, creativity and mood.

What are my next steps?

Having reflected on how mental agility can be cultivated, it may be of value to consider what habits you can embrace to promote greater cognitive flexibility in your work and life:

1. **Collaborating with others** – think about who you know who you could work together with to brainstorm ideas. By working together with open, like-minded people, we can act as scaffolds for each other developing new perspectives
2. **Creating time to dream** – reflect on how you can tap into your default neural network. Consider how you

can weave into your daily life more time to just be and dream, allowing your brain to generate new connections beyond your experience and known reality

3. **Building physical fitness** – explore how you can open up more time for developing further your physical fitness. By adding just a few minutes into your weekly habits it will create greater acuity of thought

Top tip



Consider what difference a greater level of mental agility would make to you in your work and life

Share with others how mental agility can be cultivated and what benefits it can bring

Develop a supportive community of like-minded people where new habits can be experimented with to encourage greater cognitive flexibility



About the writer

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Cathy Brown is a Chartered Occupational Psychologist, consultant and author. She runs Evolve Consulting Services Limited which works with individuals, teams and businesses to manage transition and change.

She works as a transition coach and a career counsellor with individuals and teams. She is also a guest lecturer at Nottingham University Business School. In addition, Cathy is a founding trustee of the Evolve Transition Trust, which supports disadvantaged people through life transitions.