

## THE AUSTRALIAN

### Rehab for the brain: Winning the Brain Game



Rodin's The Thinker.

KAREN CHRISTENSEN THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM March 17, 2017

Lazing thinking can be habit forming. Former creative adviser to Toyota Matthew May explains how.

**KC: You have identified seven “fatal flaws” of thinking. The first three are leaping, fixation and overthinking. Describe how they play out.**

MM: Leaping is when we immediately jump right to solutions in an instinctive or reflexive “brainstorm”. We have been so conditioned through formal education to seek the right answer as quickly as possible that it has become hardwired. Unfocused brainstorming has become our go-to creative problem-solving process. It does little more than produce top-of-mind ideas, almost all of which fail to solve the problem.

Fixation is my umbrella term for our general mental rigidity and linear thinking – our “go-to” mindsets, blind spots, paradigms, biases, mental maps and models – that make it easier for us to make it through the day but harder for us to flex and shift our perception.

Overthinking is on the other end of the spectrum from leaping. It can be thought of as our knack for creating problems that weren’t even there in the first place. Overthinking is a rather deep bucket filled with a host of variations on a theme: over-analysing, over-planning, and adding unnecessary complexity and cost.

**You have developed a fix for leaping: “Framestorming”. Describe how it works.**

We will make far more progress if we redirect and channel the leaping impulse, the instinct to act, into behaviour that feels like brainstorming but actually involves generating questions instead of answers. Framestorming is injecting a step focused on quickly generating multiple ways to frame the problem, using prompts such as Why? What if? How might we?

**Describe the role of “attention density”.**

The denser your attention is, the more likely it is a specific habit will be wired into your brain. Repeatedly focusing your attention on something strengthens brain circuits, which explains how learning to ride a bike becomes automatic and why many habits are so hard to break. Attention can work for you or against you. When you focus your attention on a strong and enduring brain circuit it can slow you down, or even shut you down. Athletes and other performers experience this as “choking”.

**We all make assumptions. What is the best way to bring them to the surface?**

I learned the most powerful technique for not only surfacing assumptions but also turning them into an advantage from [former Rotman School of Management dean] Roger Martin. His approach amounts to a single but powerful question: What must be true? Answering it produces a fairly robust set of conditions for success, educated guesses about the future. The task then becomes identifying those you’re most worried might not be true and constructing experiments to test the guess.

## **Tell us about the two flaws of mediocrity, satisficing and downgrading.**

Nobel laureate Herbert Simon coined the term satisficing in his 1957 book *Models of Man*. It's a combination of satisfy and suffice, and refers to our natural tendency to glom onto what's easy and obvious and stop looking for the best or optimal solution. Too often we over-compromise and sub-optimize, accepting the halfway solution and relying on our ability to push it forward. We fool ourselves into thinking "good enough is", creating something that demands massive work to succeed. By thinking less, we end up working more. Downgrading is when we formally revise our stated ambition in a downward or backward direction. [It's a] pre-emptive surrender that enables us to do what we really want to do – declare victory. To feel like a winner, we will back off the original goal and tell ourselves a happy but fictional story of triumph. Politicians are masters of this, but it happens all the time in business too and can result in wholesale disengagement.

## **Tell us about the “Not-Invented-Here” (NIH) flaw and your fix for it, “Proudly Found Elsewhere” (PFE).**

NIH is defined as an automatic negative perception of concepts and solutions developed somewhere external to the individual or team, often resulting in a reinvention of the wheel. It means “If I/we didn't come up with it, I/we won't consider it,” and “I/we can do anything you/they can do, better.” PFE is the term Procter & Gamble's innovation group came up with for the executive mandate by then-CEO A.G. Lafley to source fully 50 per cent of P&G's innovation from outside or external entities: start-ups, small companies, researchers, inventors, etc.

## **Tell us about the “outsider effect” on problem solving.**

Most people find other people's problems much easier to solve than their own. Mentally distancing oneself from the source of the problem can have a dramatically positive influence on creative performance. There's a simple technique you can use to flip on the outsider effect – talk to yourself in the third person: “Matt, don't overthink it.”

Using the third person engages the cerebral cortex, which is your centre of thought. As researchers at the University of Michigan Self Control and Emotion Lab explain it, using the first person engages the amygdala, which is where fear emotions reside. Toggling between the two moves you toward or away from your sense of self and its myriad emotional attachments. The greater the psychological distance, the more self-control you have, in turn enabling you to think more clearly, objectively and creatively.

## **The Seven Fatal Flaws of Thinking**

**Leaping:** Leaping to solutions, jumping to conclusions, or brainstorming in an instinctive or reflexive way almost never leads to an elegant solution to a complex problem.

**Fixation:** The umbrella term for our deeply grooved thinking patterns – mental models, mindsets, biases, assumptions – that can make it hard for us to “think different”.

**Overthinking:** The art of complicating matters and causing problems that weren't even there to begin with, something we tend to do because our brains abhor uncertainty.

**Satisficing:** Nobel Laureate Herbert Simon's term for our tendency to glom onto solutions that are easy and obvious but mediocre, thus failing to solve our problem in a creative way.

**Downgrading:** A close cousin of satisficing, this is a formal revision of a goal in what amounts to pre-emptive surrender, simply so that we can declare victory. No one likes to fail.

**Not-Invented-Here (NIH):** “If we didn't come up with the idea, it won't work.”

We naturally reject, stifle and dismiss ideas simply because we didn't think of them ourselves.

**Self-censoring:** The mindless act of rejecting our own ideas, usually out of fear, before they ever see the light of day. The deadliest of the fatal thinking flaws because it stifles creativity.

Matthew May's latest book is *Winning the Brain Game: Fixing the seven fatal flaws of thinking*, McGraw-Hill Education, 2016. Interview by Karen Christensen reproduced with permission from Rotman Management, published by the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management. [rotmanmagazine.ca](http://rotmanmagazine.ca)

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