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Boost Your Brain

Sometimes you need to slow down to achieve more.

by Kindra Gordon, field editor

Ask what the greatest innovation on the planet has been, and you would likely receive a variety of answers. Behavioral scientist and business consultant Holly Green advocates that we all have one really cool tool — our brain.

Green acknowledges that in today's hyper-paced world, many of us feel like we are running every day and struggling to keep up. "The world is only going to get faster," she says.

How do we adapt? The key is in better understanding and utilizing our brain, Green says. "I want to teach you to slow down, so you can go faster, keep up and update constantly."

Green, who is author of the book *More Than a Minute: How to be an Effective Leader & Manager in Today's Changing World*, spoke this winter at the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) annual convention in Nashville, Tenn.

Learning about the brain

Green reports that the brain weighs about 2.5 pounds (lb.), and men's and women's brains are not physically different. Scientists are at the infancy of understanding the brain. More information has been learned about the brain in the past 10 years than in all the years prior. She anticipates much more will be learned about the brain in the decade ahead.

Contrary to popular belief, Green says

there is no evidence to suggest the right/left brain theory that one side of the brain is more creative and the other side is more analytical.

Also interesting, when you are sleeping the synapses in the brain occur at 90% the same rate as when you are awake, suggesting the brain never really rests, says Green.

Brains like what they've experienced before, she emphasizes. "Our brain looks for what it is most familiar with, so it can be our greatest enemy." She explains that this focus on the familiar may prevent us from seeing new opportunities.

Recognizing this, Green says that by learning to pause for a few seconds — maybe a whole minute — you can learn to become more intentional about examining choices and making decisions.

How we gather data

Green says most people follow a pretty similar pattern in how they gather data and eventually move to their chosen behavior or action. The scientific framework for this pattern is called the "ladder of inference," which became popular in the 1990s.

This process starts with observable data and experiences — the day-to-day things we

are inundated with. Green explains that our brain picks up about 10% of what we are exposed to and ignores about 90%.

She says this is why five people could all witness a car accident and each give different stories as to how it happened — and they could all be right in their accounts. The stories may differ because each brain chose to pick up a different 10% of the data compared to the other witnesses.

With the data that your brain collects, you begin to layer on meaning to that data. Again, Green explains that someone else may apply different meaning to the data their brain collects because they've had different experiences in their life.

She explains that words have different meanings to different people and gives this example: The word "police" might mean "protection" to one individual; "speeding ticket" to someone else, or the name of the former 1980s rock band to someone else.

Green says that based on the meanings we apply to the data our brain collects, we then move to forming assumptions and conclusions, and then beliefs and actions.

Green says understanding this process can help you become a more effective leader, manager, communicator, employer, employee — whatever your role.

As another example, she points to a meeting you might attend. Typically everyone at the meeting agrees to what has to be done, but a few weeks later the work is not happening. Why?

Green says it is often due to the fact that

Brain test

For unique insight into your brain, watch this 1-minute selective attention test at www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJG698U2Mvo.

each of our brains selects different data and applies different meanings to what was discussed at the meeting.

This underscores the need for better communication, assigning specific tasks and timelines so that everyone — and their brain — is on the same page.

Feed your brain something new

Remember that Green said the brain likes the familiar? She wants everyone to be aware of this because she says it can be a pitfall.

"You only see what you already believe is true; and we seek constantly to prove ourselves right," she explains. "We are so sure of what we see that we are often blind to other factors. This means we can miss some really important things going on."

That said, Green emphasizes that once you understand how your brain works, you can develop strategies to be more effective. Namely she suggests developing awareness and understanding and asking "what if"

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questions to assess, “What if I’m wrong? What if someone is interpreting differently?”

Green adds, “Every now and then pause; look up and look around. By stepping outside of your normal day-to-day activities and doing something different, you’ll prompt and feed your brain with new thoughts and ideas.”

She suggests watching lectures from world leaders and business gurus on

www.TED.com or taking 15 minutes a week (or day) to read magazines from completely different industries.

“Your brain digs thinking. Give it stuff that’s different from what you are normally doing,” Green says.

Green also advocates visualization.

“What does winning look like beyond the financial metrics?” she asks. “See yourself winning. If you are not clear on the target, your team can’t be, either,” she adds.

Surprisingly, she reports, with visualization

the brain does not know you haven’t already done it. So the more you visualize yourself winning, to which many sports icons can attest, the more likely you are to achieve your goal.

Green notes that the fast pace of today’s world is a reality that isn’t going to change. However, she concludes, “When you pause, think and focus, it’s a lot more fun, and you’ll have your team running more efficiently with you.”



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Editor’s Note: *Kindra Gordon is a freelance writer and cattleman from Whitewood, S.D.*