

WHY CAN'T WE SEE THE FUTURE?

Dr Norman Chorn

MY PEOPLE CAN'T SEE THE FUTURE!

This is a cry I hear often from leaders who try to implement change in their organisation. They complain that people don't "get it" and seem rooted in what they know from their previous experience.

What causes this inability to see the (hopefully better) future? And what can we do about it?

WHY CAN'T WE SEE THE FUTURE?

Three factors contribute to this:

1. **Our brain is "lazy"** and tries to conserve energy by seeking the quickest path from 'A' to 'B'. By favouring 'fast thinking', the brain often makes decisions based on associations and compatibility with pre-established beliefs. This makes it more difficult to see and understand ideas with which we have had no previous association.
2. **Difference signals danger.** The brain has an overarching organising principle to minimise danger and maximise reward, but is roughly five times more sensitive to danger than reward. Social danger is the dominant threat in organisations, and this is manifested by social exclusion, loss of autonomy and a change in social relationships.
An unknown future produces this sense of danger, which in turn results in emotional defensiveness and resistance to change.
3. **We have no memory of the future.** Memory has important implications for the way we might understand the future - particularly a future we have not yet experienced. *Semantic memory* is an important part of long-term memory, and stores general knowledge about the world we live in. Although we might not have directly experienced certain phenomena, our educational, cultural and social environment will assist in us "knowing about" these things.

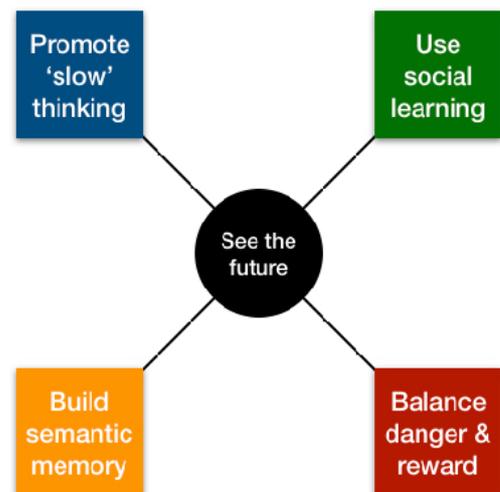
If our semantic memory lacks the necessary networks, pathways and structures, we may be unable to process the information to which we are exposed. We will not be able to 'see' the picture of the future that is presented - our memory has no access to the information and structures to make sense of it.

HOW CAN WE HELP PEOPLE SEE THE FUTURE?

Approach	Rationale	How to do it
Promote slow thinking	'Fast' thinking is the brain's default mode - essentially reflexive decision making. We need to induce a more logical and rational set of responses to change - and promote a more reflective approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up facilitated cross-functional teams to share experiences and understand different perspectives • Space out the sessions to allow for reflection and brain 'downtime' - this facilitates better processing of information
Use social learning	Collective and group problem solving addresses the brains preference for social connection and collaboration - and promotes a safer environment for exploratory thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use scenario thinking and planning processes to allow people to explore possible futures in a non-threatening way - "what if" scenarios. • Set up group problem solving sessions in which people exchange ideas in a safe environment
Build semantic memory	Enhancing semantic memory will create new pathways and classification systems - increasing the ways of "knowing" and considering new possibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use well designed experiential programs to teach new skills and give people opportunities to apply them in their work context • Set up study tours to outside organisations - these can help to construct alternative mental models for a different future
Balance danger and reward	While the brain reacts to potential danger by activating its avoidance circuitry, the possibility of reward can activate the reward and self-regulation circuitry. This promotes focus, optimism and heightened levels of creativity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote the use of "toward" imagery (as opposed to "away" imagery) in the change messaging - eg: promote movement towards some future state that rewards people and the organisation • Carefully introduce "gamification" into the performance management process to balance feedback and incentives - eg: balancing teamwork and competition



Dr Norman Chorn is a strategist and organisation development practitioner with the BrainLink Group. He uses principles of neuroscience to address the challenges of developing strategy in a complex and uncertain environment. His particular areas of focus are: strategy in conditions of uncertainty; organisational and cultural alignment; and strategic leadership.



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