

Your Brain Is Actually On Your Side – It Just Doesn't Feel Like It

The human brain is a threat detection, pattern recognition machine. Its main job is to continually scan your environment for any threat of physical or social pain, and help you avoid situations that put you at risk of either.

It is continually telling you what it thinks you need to hear to keep you safe. You know that annoying little voice that tells you you're going to be terrible in the Board presentation or that you're going to embarrass yourself in front of your boss or that no-one will come to your event. That little voice is actually on your side. It just doesn't feel like it.

Its motivation is to keep you from exposing yourself to something that might cause you social pain – rejection, ridicule, shame – all the things that threaten your belonging in the groups you treasure. And all the latest neuroscience tells us that we need belonging more than we need food, water or shelter, so your brain interprets a threat to your belonging as though it is a threat to your life.

And it's tempting to just tell that little voice to shut up and leave you alone. Trouble is, that doesn't work. In fact, taking that sort of combative approach to your own brain's deeply hard-wired early warning system is far more likely to result in the exact opposite happening. Far from calming down, your sub-conscious is likely to fire up even more.

If at first it was casually waving at you to warn you about something that could go wrong, now it will jump up and down and scream at you until it forces you to pay attention. It will keep escalating these warnings up to and including making you physically sick.

I will never forget a colleague of mine who was working crazy hours over a prolonged period who lost her sight for three days. No doctor could ever point to a physical cause, so they just put it down to 'stress'. That was her brain forcing her to pay attention and, in this case, to stop.

So, if telling your brain to shut up and leave you alone doesn't work, then what does?

It's counter-intuitive, but you need to thank it. Yes, thank it.

Next time your self-talk is all about how terrible you're going to be in the next project steering

committee meeting, you need to notice it for what it is – your brain doing its job of trying to protect you – and say thank you. Out loud preferably, though you might want to try and reduce the chances of men in white coats arriving by doing this in a way others can't observe.

And don't just stop at thank you – go further by saying something like: "Thanks so much for the warning, I really appreciate that you're trying to keep me safe – I hear you, but I've got this." If you feel like elaborating, try adding: "I don't like this situation, but I can handle it. I'm safer than you might think."

It might take a few tries, but eventually talking to your own brain like this is likely to result in your sub-conscious calming down. After all, it has done its job of warning you, so if you want to go ahead and risk ridicule, that's on you. After the presentation or the meeting has passed and nothing calamitous has happened – you're still breathing, your colleagues haven't shunned you – then you can say to your brain: "See? No-one died. I know you're trying to help, and I promise I'm deeply grateful, but maybe next time your warning could be a little less confronting."

Knowing how to work with our hard-wiring instead of against it makes any kind of change so much easier.



Fiona Robertson is a culture transformation speaker, facilitator and executive coach who helps senior leaders create cultures that people really want to belong to.

She can be contacted via fionarobertson.com, fiona@fionarobertson.com or +61 (0)474 031 546.