

## Spotting hidden opportunities

*'The hardest thing to do is see what is right in front of your eyes.'*  
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

In order to make sense of the world and the mass of information in it, our brain learns to take short cuts. We automatically and unconsciously filter through information based on knowledge and experience. This is a very helpful skill for us to have. However, it unavoidably gives all of us what are known as psychological blind spots. When these blind spots occur we literally cannot see what is in front of us. Our brains filter information and ignores what it thinks is not useful to us. As such we can miss solutions, break throughs and opportunities that could greatly increase our performance.

Spotting the obvious has led to break throughs in science and industry. For instance it led to Newton understanding gravity and the Wright brothers constructing the world's first aeroplane. Richard Wiseman, author of 'Did you spot the Gorilla?' Has researched the psychology of luck. Over ten years, he looked at the lives of hundreds of lucky people and so called unlucky people. He found that the lucky people were just people that could overcome their psychological blind spots.

In terms of our careers, how much better would our performance be, if we could spot hidden opportunities before somebody else? We work in a climate of change and ever increasing competition. Spotting the unseen would greatly improve our growth and success. But how can we do this?

Richard Wiseman has four techniques that will help you spot hidden opportunities.

### The primed mind

A prepared mind is more likely to observe and find solutions. The human brain is very good at seeing what it wants to see. For example, when you are thirsty your brain will focus on finding liquid. Problems can arise when we become so focused that we miss what is right in front of our eyes. We can increase our ability to spot hidden opportunities by using the brain's tendency to see what it wants to see. We can prime our brains to look for opportunities and solutions that will further advance our performance and enjoyment of life. Numerous experiments have shown that the brain, if primed to look or solve something, will unconsciously sift through information, working quietly on it whilst we get on with other things. Then, once in a while, it will see a solution or opportunity that it would not have previously spotted.

### Using perspective

*'Genius is little more than the faculty of perceiving in an inhabitual way.'*  
William James, American psychologist.

During an experiment people were asked to count the number of passes in a baseball game. During the game a man dressed as a gorilla appeared amongst the players and beat his chest. 80% of people did not see the gorilla as they were too busy focusing on the task of the counting passes. When people were not asked to count the passes almost everyone saw the obvious gorilla. Perspective plays an equally important role in determining what we see in the world. It affects our potential to spot opportunities that would increase our performance. For example, any event, object, person, service, organisation, role, or situation can be seen in many different ways. Some perspectives may inhibit our potential to spot opportunities and from others you cannot fail to see it.

E.g. Take the following problem

$$101011=10.50$$

How can you add just one line to the above statement to make it correct?

There is a simple solution to the above. However, if you are caught in a perspective that is not helpful then the answer is not obvious. Most people's perspective is mathematical when they are looking at the above statement. The brain encounters numbers and automatically goes into this mode. But, if you were thinking of time when you were solving the above statement it becomes easier to solve.

The statement is about time not maths. To make the statement correct you need to add a short line over the second '1', converting the number 10 to To. The statement should then read 10 to11 = 10.50

Houdini was famous for escaping from some of the world's most secure jails. In one instance, he tried to pick a lock for hours. Eventually he gave up and put his full weight against the door. The door opened, it had never been locked! Houdini's assumption that it was had affected his ability to solve the problem.

Our brains adopt certain viewpoints for a number of reasons. For instance, upbringing, comfort, past experiences, conformity and so. The problem is, once we view the world from a certain perspective it becomes difficult for us to see things from another. We can overcome this by encouraging our brains to actively adopt different perspectives. For example, think how a child would view something, or an accountant, scientist or artist.

Spotting the unseen and gaining the competitive edge is about seeing the same situation from different perspectives. Not assuming the first answer is the right one, leaving behind conformity, familiarity, past experience. Taking off our personal blinkers and seeing something as if for the first time. Breaking rules, avoiding self criticism and giving your mind the freedom to truly wander.

## **The playful mind**

*'We do not stop playing because we grow old. We grow old because we stop playing.'* Anon

When under pressure we do not spot as many opportunities as we could. The brain becomes more stressed and results in becoming more focused on small detail rather than seeing the bigger picture. The left hemisphere of our brain is serious, analytical, systematic and focused. The right side sees the bigger picture, is playful and enjoys a laugh. By allowing ourselves to be playful we become relaxed and we can engage the right hemisphere of the brain to increase our chances of seeing the bigger picture.

Having fun, being playful and taking breaks increases our enjoyment and ability to see more, and often what is right in front of our noses.

## **Wake up your brain!**

Close your eyes and imagine a British coin. Does the queen look left or right? Most people believe left. This may well be as the queen looks left on a British stamp, however on a coin she looks right. Once something becomes very familiar your brain can miss what is right in front of it. Essentially, when you come across something again and again your brain tends to switch off. It goes on autopilot - stops thinking and starts assuming. This is not good news for those of you that want to be exceptional at work. You cannot afford for your brain to be snoozing on the job if you want to be a peak performer. But, how can you turn auto pilot off and get back in the driving seat?

Wiseman suggests two possibilities:

- 1) Kick start your brain into being curious whenever you encounter something surprising or unusual. Be curious, ask why rather than accept or ignore.
- 2) Look at everyday experience in a new way. You can do this by supplying it with interesting and novel ideas.

To kick start our brains we need to move from mindless to mindful. You can simply do this by making your brain believe it is looking at something for the very first time.

So if you want to be extraordinary rather than ordinary you need to encourage your brain to switch off autopilot and into gear. Be curious, notice what you are noticing, look, ask why, imagine you are seeing the world for the first time, change perspectives, break old habits and rules that confine you, prime your mind as to what you want to be, do or have, relax and most of all, have fun!

*Note material came from 'Did you spot the Gorilla?' By Richard Wiseman and I highly recommend the read.*