Mental maps: When the road to top performance means changing the way we think

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Imagine that you are going sledding on a toboggan. You head out early in the morning. You are the first person at the top of the hill. The sky is clear blue. The snow is pristine with not a track or footprint in sight. You jump on your toboggan and slide down the hillside, plowing a fresh track in the snow.

Maybe the first run is a little slow, since you have to compress the snow into a track and decide on the best route down. But subsequent runs go faster and smoother. Over the course of the morning, your toboggan and your body weight compress the snow into a smooth, fast track. Pretty soon, you can zip down the hillside practically without thinking. The toboggan knows where to go, simply following the track that you already blazed.

The toboggan run is an apt metaphor for the mental maps that we all carry inside our heads. In many ways, our lives are based on patterns and repetition. We are creatures of habit. We take the same route to work each day, eat the same foods for dinner each week, spend our leisure time repeatedly enjoying a few cherished hobbies and performing our jobs according to a comfortable set of routines. As these habits become second nature, we develop mental maps as a way to organize information.

These mental maps guide our behaviours. They let us test out and plan actions in our heads. A surgeon, for instance, accumulates mental maps that help him or her pre-plan which actions to take in various patient scenarios. These mental maps are shortcuts that save us the time, energy and risk that we would otherwise have to face if we tackled each problem from scratch without relying on the benefit of our accumulated experiences.

(Incidentally, mental maps are not just a nice metaphor to help us visualize ingrained business and lifestyle practices. Mental maps are real neurological phenomena that govern our responses to physical stimuli such as taste and sound.)

Ordinarily, this process of building mental maps is beneficial. Day after day, the toboggan run gets smoother, deeper and easier to travel. Our mental maps get etched more deeply in our brains. But what if circumstances compel us to change these mental maps? In his 2007 book, *The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science*, Dr. Norman Doidge discusses case histories of people who have re-routed their mental maps after a portion of their brain is rendered dysfunctional because of mental limitations or brain damage. While each of these stories look specifically at brains that have been damaged, the book concludes that each of us has the ability to re-route our own mental maps to enhance most aspects of our lives – including professional development.

Therefore, what if we are promoted or transferred or asked to take on some new business challenge? Again, we stand on the hilltop with our toboggan. This time, we want to reach a slightly different destination, but our toboggan is practically preprogrammed to follow its existing route – our existing mental map – and take us where we have been going all along.
How can we break free from the limitations of that old trail and blaze new trails, writing new mental maps that are better able to get us to our new goals? It’s not easy updating our mental GPS, but in his 2010 book *Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation*, UCLA clinical professor of psychology Dr. Dan Siegel not only claims that it is possible to redraw our own mental maps, but that the rewiring process itself has beneficial side effects.

“Our brain is like a muscle that can be exercised to create new neural connections,” says Siegel. “When we focus our attention in specific ways, we create neural firing patterns that permit previously separated areas to become linked and integrated. The synaptic linkages are strengthened, the brain becomes more interconnected, and the mind becomes more adaptive.”

So in the real business world, how can executives who have taken on a new role go about redrawing their mental map so that their thought processes—and ultimately their actions and problem-solving strategies—are tailored to their new circumstances?

Broadly speaking, there are three primary ways in which you can redraw a mental map. You can:

1. Change the way you think about yourself
2. Change your behaviour
3. Change the context in which you operate

None of these changes is necessarily easy to make, but sometimes redrawing the mental map is critical for executives who find themselves thrust into new roles with different types of challenges and responsibilities. If you wouldn’t want to rely on a GPS with outdated map software, then you certainly do not want to depend on an outdated mental map for navigating the business world.

Let’s look more closely at each of the three suggestions listed above for updating your mental map to help you stay on track and reach your professional goals.
Upgrade and redraw your mental map to find the best path to success

Our mental maps help us to navigate society by allowing us to build experience-based expectations of the world. We learn to predict the likes and dislikes of spouses, whether or not we can depend on a coworker to get a job done right and what constitutes acceptable behaviour at cocktail parties.

But perhaps the most important and complex mental map we have in our heads is our self-image map: how we see ourselves in our mind’s eye. Self-image can include memories of key life events, what motivates or engages us, and our deeply held beliefs about the traits and characteristics that define who we are. Our self-image, along with other social mental maps, enables us to test out courses of action and predict the likeliest outcomes in our interaction with others.

You can think of these projections as resembling an endless game of chess that we are constantly playing in our heads every time we step into a meeting, have a discussion with the boss, make a presentation or reprimand someone. The most important chess piece is you.

Our self-image map can determine success or failure in the world. But our self-image tends to lag behind when the social environment changes, e.g., when we get a promotion, transition to a new organization or experience some other major life event like getting married or having children. We are usually unaware of how an outdated self-image map may be wreaking havoc in our internal game of social chess and keeping us stuck in old patterns of behaviour.

So how do we nurture and develop a more up-to-date self-image map when we need to see ourselves in a different way? In our experience, people have the greatest success in redrawing their mental maps three important ways:

1. **Change your thinking:** Ingrained old self-images frequently serve as stumbling blocks when people are trying to rewrite their mental maps. For example, on a recent Hay Group project with a hospital client, we worked with an excellent nurse who was struggling after having been promoted to nurse manager. It turned out that she still had a very active mental self-image of being a bedside nurse, which made it very difficult for her to hold others accountable or engage in the confrontational discussions that are sometimes painful, but necessary, for managers. It was only when she broadened her self-image from ‘nurse’ to ‘nurse leader’ by deepening her understanding of what her leadership role really required that she was able to perform to expectations in the nurse manager position. Here are two techniques that you can use to redrew your self-image map:

   - **Rewrite your story:** Your self-image mental map is continuously reinforced by the story you continually tell yourself about who you are. This constant narrative lies just below your level of awareness. Any self-image story is usually defined by a central theme and may be more rooted in the past, present or future. For example, in director Steven Spielberg’s self-image story, the central theme is one of being an outsider. As a child, he had trouble fitting in, experienced anti-Semitism and was bullied. These early difficult experiences defined
how Spielberg saw himself growing up and influenced his career as a revolutionary filmmaker and the characters he created. Winston Churchill’s self-image story was defined by a sense of his own grand destiny. If your self-image story needs a rewrite, try taking a piece of paper and drawing a timeline of your career – chart the ups and downs beginning at the start and ending today. What patterns do you see? When were you most engaged? When did you feel most miserable? What values were with you throughout and helped you navigate those changes? What is the theme that defines who you are in your career in five words or less? Now, think about how your story needs to change or expand to meet the challenges you will face over the next few years. It can be helpful to study the lives of great leaders, read their biographies and seek inspiration from real or fictional characters from the past and present who embody the values and behaviours that you admire.

- **Understand your role:** Most of us have a weak understanding of what a new role really requires. Ask any new mother or father and they will tell you they were unprepared for the true demands of parenthood despite having observed friends and relatives perform parenting roles. The same thing happens when we move to a new business role and find that our old mental maps have us bumping into roadblocks as we try to navigate the requirements and responsibilities of our new position. One of the best ways to update your mental map is to talk to your boss, direct reports, and your peers to get their perspectives on what they expect from you in your role. These conversations can give you a deeper sense of the true demands of your role and what you need to do to fulfill them. Getting feedback through multi-rater assessments can also be helpful by feeding you important information on what you need to change to succeed.

2. **Change your behaviour:** An accumulating body of evidence shows that real-world actions can have an impact on brain processes and by extension, on mental maps. Stroke victims with partial paralysis who force themselves to use their weaker sides are sometimes able to regain significant control and movement in their limbs. Brain scans of these stroke patients show that mental connections that were destroyed in one part of the brain have been rebuilt in other undamaged parts of the brain. There are many other examples of this same sort of phenomenon. London taxi drivers who must memorize a vast amount of information about their city tend to have an enlarged hippocampus, the portion of the brain devoted to spatial memory and navigation. Playing the piano – or even visualizing playing the piano – seems to boost the size of a portion of the cortex, an outer layer of the brain responsible for higher brain functions, including the voluntary hand muscle movements used by pianists.

The idea here is simply that something new can seem very uncomfortable at first. In my previous article introducing mental maps, I gave the analogy of a tobogган rider who builds a mental map by taking the same route over and over again. In this analogy, trying to change your behaviour would be like asking the tobogганist to leave the smooth track and forge a new trail – there are sure to be some bumps and maybe even some spills along the way. Over time, new tracks are built and the way gets easier.

Reprimanding an underperforming nurse might have seemed painful to the reluctant nurse manager the first time she tried it, but the second time was probably easier. After five or ten difficult discussions, the nurse manager would most likely have become more comfortable
with that aspect of her role. She would have built a mental map that would guide her through the situation and its possible permutations. How can you take a concrete step toward changing your mental map?

- **Pick one thing:** A single drip of water over time can carve a hole in a rock. It’s all about focus. Which behaviour would have the biggest impact on your leadership if you could change or strengthen that behaviour? Benjamin Franklin pioneered this method for self-improvement. Write down the behaviour you want to develop or change. Be specific, as if you were giving directions to someone else. Each day look at the behaviour to remind yourself of what you need to do. Track how often you demonstrated the behaviour and when you failed to do so. At the end of each week, and for a period of three weeks, monitor how you are doing and commit to increasing the frequency of the desired behaviour. Soon, the new mental wiring will take over and the new behaviour will become an integral part of you.

3. **Change your context** – A physician friend of mine got some good advice. She had recently been promoted to a leadership role in her hospital. Three months later, she approached her supervisor complaining that none of her peers would talk to her anymore because of the difficult decisions she had to take in the department. Her supervisor told her to get new friends. This advice sounds harsh, but newly promoted executives may in fact wish to broaden their circle of associates in order to have a better chance of successfully redrawing their mental maps.

Why should we make new friends when we take on new jobs? The problem here is that we all carry around mental maps not only to guide our own behaviour, but also to anticipate how the people around us will act in a given situation. As we get to know people, we develop experienced-based predictions for how they are likely to act in a variety of circumstances.

People tend to reinforce or reflect back at us the self-image that we project outward. In normal circumstances, this is often healthy and beneficial. But problems can arise when one person tries to evolve professionally – changing how she thinks of her own self-image, acting differently to change behavioural-based mental maps – and then has coffee, lunch or drinks with former co-workers who can undercut all that change progress by mirroring back an old, outdated self-image. Such interactions can erase much progress made toward changing the mental map – like an artist who paints a canvas with one hand and hurriedly scrapes off all the paint with his other hand.

We are not suggesting that professionals who are promoted should jettison former friends and colleagues. We are saying simply that it is vital for executives to expand their network so that it includes people who have no preconceived notions of a person’s mental map and can thus start from scratch and assemble a mental map that corresponds with existing behaviours.

Thinking about self-image and changing our mental maps is critical both for someone getting promoted to a new executive position, as well as anyone who still has his or her existing job, but whose company has changed its strategic priorities, gotten acquired or completed a spin-off.
Trying to navigate unfamiliar business terrain with an outdated self-image would be like trying to make one’s way over rough territory with old GPS data. It may be possible, but you are likely to reach your destination more quickly and successfully by updating your mental map to a version that helps you accurately find the most promising path to success and satisfaction.

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