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RIGHT BRAINER

Survival handbook
of original thoughts



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THERE YOU ARE!: It's you! The one who has spent a good portion of thirty thousand hours' training to get here. Learning, improving. Studying, sitting and passing exams. All this. The culmination of which is this magnificent manifestation of self. The proud, fully-functioning office professional, holding this

book. Hoorah! Congratulations on all of your accomplishments, your skillset and degrees. By the way, you missed a spot.

Actually more like half, the right half of your brain. You missed that. You know the typology, left hemisphere for all things theoretical and methodical. The one you depend on, and the right half that is tagging along for the ride in case we suddenly need to pick out a new color scheme for the office. That right half. So, no harm no foul, right? Wrong.

Work has changed. Repetitiveness has been replaced with autonomy in the workplace and autonomy comes with responsibility. With it, your work routine is frequently uprooted by work problems without immediate answers. Your ability to mentally process and somehow ‘solve’ corporate conundrums has become a core skill not just improving your chances of sustained employment, it is essential to your professional survival. Thinking outside the proverbial box has become a critical work skill. Love it or loathe it, this ‘thinking’ is the differentiator in the global job market and across industries, from agriculture to aerospace.

The tables have turned. Your right brain is now in dire need of rescue and resuscitation, and it hasn’t been schooled academically or technically. Leaving you untrained and professionally, hopelessly ill-prepared.

Frequently asked question: ‘Why is this type of thinking difficult?!’

Whether you know it as creative thinking, lateral or divergent thinking, out-of-the-box thinking or abstract thinking, this

type of thinking is left to chance because we don't recognize the familiar left-brain handle on things. There are no right-brain textbooks, no step-by-step-by-step process. We feel our thinking is uncontrollable. As a whole.

Make no mistake: IT IS! We can put our right brain to work in a structured manner and get results by constructing an actual thing ... with our minds. A thought construct with a clear purpose, a logic, and a scaffolding of reasoning. An asset of great value and the key to your sustained employability. It is always present, yet at the same time essentially overlooked in creative methodologies and innovation processes. It is the foundational building block of all forms of non-linear thought. It cuts through complexity like a knife through butter, allowing you to assert control over questions and problems without immediate answers. Finally! The missing link in our primarily rational, linear work brains, programmed to go from problem straight to solution, the foundational element: the idea.

MISSION CRITICAL: Here are the statistics to back up this inconvenient truth. Over thirteen million people were represented in a global survey on future job skills by the World Economic Forum (WEF). One of those bobbing data points is you. The researchers wondered how you could sustain yourself in a constantly-changing professional environment. What skills were required and subsequently, which lack of skills would render you professionally obsolete? The outcome? All right-brain. They examined correlations between different disciplines, in different professions. Collected data across all the domains from every corner of the world. What they con-

sistently found lacking wasn't some concrete, programming skill or some form of emerging technology savviness. On the top of the list of essential job skills were original thinking abilities. Specifically, creative thinking, complex problem-solving and critical thinking. The message was clear, if you want to keep your job for the foreseeable future, then you need to be able to think on your feet. All they missed was the end product of these three elements put together.

The idea.

AFFIRMING MY COMMITMENT TO YOU: The WEF is onto something here. How do I know that? My area of expertise is ideas. In this book, I will show you how you can survive on yours. I have more than twenty years of experience in studying and researching ideas as well as professional experience in the field, and two degrees to back it up. One is from the same school Warren Buffett attended. The other is from a famed design school in the Netherlands described by *The New York Times* as the school for New Dutch Masters, so there's that. I discovered early on how to survive using my original thoughts. I learned by falling down and getting back up, without any textbook or packaged methodology. I persevered.

After finishing school, I then built a career selling my ideas for profit. My work is now part of the collections of illustrious cultural institutions such as the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. *TIME* magazine called one of my designs a must-have. As a

result, I know how to turn on inspiration by flipping a switch in my right brain. I know how to survive based on my ‘creative’ thoughts and outsmart others if necessary. I learned the hard way so you don’t have to! If you make it through these pages, that is.

This book is neither textbook nor methodology. It consists of personal accounts and professional advice that will help you harness the power of your original thoughts when the shit hits the fan. How to reacquaint yourself with your right brain and to start exercising it and uncover *your* unique thought process so you can use it effectively. I will show you how to become self-reliant in the workplace when it comes to your ideas. As we go along, we will do away with some major misconceptions when it comes to ‘creativity’.

All of this will help achieve a single goal: bringing your original thinking skills up to the level of your rational thinking skills, to sustain your career for the long haul.

‘THE BOOK’: Three decades ago I was given a book. *The SAS Survival Handbook*. This handbook of handbooks was given to me before I took a job or career seriously, or knew or cared what an idea was. My high-school buddy Michael Young presented it to me as I was about to leave for design school. The SAS in the title stands for Special Air Service, as in the British Special Forces SAS regiment, and coincidentally was also the acronym for our high school in Singapore. I took it for a clever joke as I packed it into my suitcase. I couldn’t have been more wrong. It was exactly what I needed in the creative jungle I was about to enter. A guiding light through gruesome

assessments and trials in becoming my professional self. The voice of reason in taking on work challenges step by step. A life manual equipped with many metaphors for dealing with complexities in a corporate environment. Everything in written form with a deep sense of purpose, namely getting your ass out alive. Though over the years much of my experience has been acquired in the field, I attribute much of my professional perceptiveness to *The SAS Survival Handbook* by John ‘Lofty’ Wiseman. Its wisdom will be bestowed upon you throughout the rest of this book, in bite-size chunks of course.

U: So how do you creatively think your way out of a rut at work? Or generally speaking, how do you regain control over situations where there are more questions than answers? The simple response is to stop looking outside for answers in creative business methodologies with tools and templates, and look inward. Because you hold the key.

You *are* the key.

Chances are, though, you are unaware of this. You think the key is more of a mental keycard that you swipe in the hope that a genie called ‘inspiration’ appears and magically gives you all the answers.

Why rely on chance when it comes to breaking down a complex work problem? Why resign yourself to coming up short because you can’t force creativity? You can start by never calling it that ever again. After all, you have the perfect instrument to deal with complex problems: your right brain. And

you don't have to wait for it to light up. You can activate it and put it to use. Train and improve it, hone those survival skills. Generating and developing ideas is not a mystical talent but a common skill executed by a finely-tuned instrument. You.

So we're going to focus on you, and just you. We will help the process along by removing any obstacle that stands in the way of your right brain reaching its full potential, such as group sessions with Post-its full of brainstormed ideas. With proper instruction, you will be able to take control of your ideas and be 21st-century-job-proof as a result.

OBSTACLES: Talking about obstacles, you are currently one of them. Why? Because you rely on others, on creative experts. Thereby you shift the focus of your personal survival onto things you do not directly control. Isn't there a workaround then? Short of tying a designer to the leg of your desk? No.

Since anyone born after 1970 doesn't accept no for an answer, the "Why is this all happening to me?" aspect will probably crop up frequently throughout this book. In the end the answer will still be no.

BODILY REFLEXES: Have you ever been blindsided in a brainstorm at work? Asked to come up with an idea on the spot by your boss? What happens to you when your ideas do not immediately float to the surface? All of a sudden you are mentally clutching at straws. I have seen people unsuccessfully try to bullshit their way out of difficult projects or use their intellect to overcompensate for their lack of originality. Why do we freeze up this way in brainstorms? Experts say surviv-

al is about a 20 percent physical and 80 percent mental experience. Before dedicating the remainder of this book to the 80, let's get the 20 percent out of the way first.

Your body has a lightning-fast response system in threatening work-related situations. There are four possible reactions. They convey your immediate responses when negotiating a disaster in the office.

To make essential survival information palatable for your brain, we experts rely heavily on acronyms. Acronyms have a way of sticking to your brain, like duct tape, which we like even more than acronyms. In this case the acronym for bodily responses to stressful work situations is FFFD. It stands for fight, flight, freeze, deflect. First letter and response: *fight*.

AN EXPERT'S OPINION: As explained by clinical psychologist Dr. Leon Selzer, "Accurately or not, if you assess the immediately menacing force as something you potentially have the power to defeat, you go into fight mode. In such instances, the hormones released by your sympathetic nervous system, especially adrenaline, prime you to do battle and, hopefully, triumph over the hostile entity."

You can't really put up a fight in the office. In the animal kingdom physical strength is a way of ascending the social ladder, whereas in the office throwing punches is known to decrease one's chances of promotion. On more than one occasion I have seen fellow basketball players go full-out kung-fu on each other because of a disagreement over a call, only to make good just moments later. I have yet to see someone get yanked over a conference table.

EXIT HERE: Which brings us to the second bodily response in stress-full situations: *flight*. However near you may be to the exits, escape is not really an option in a creative session. This is where the mental 80 percent comes in. To make it back to safety we require our minds, our wits and our cunning. Being asked for creative input is more of a veiled threat, rather than a direct challenge. It's innocent enough, but make no mistake: it is as much a test of strength as a physical confrontation. If it is about winning this battle of the minds, and it clearly is, then the goal is not to punch the opponent, but to *outsmart* them with your bigger, better ideas.

DEFLECT: Alternatively, you can choke, getting stuck in the third familiar bodily state: *freeze*. The effect of freezing is so profoundly uncomfortable that many instinctively proceed straight to the fourth state and final letter in FFFD: *deflect*. That's all about dodging accountability and shifting responsibility. Throwing a colleague under the bus is a time-honored tradition in the office. But it doesn't work here because there's nowhere to shift the blame. Ideas are supposed to be inspiring and, by definition, non-threatening. That's because the act of generating ideas is supposedly conducted in a spirit of 'anything goes.' You can't point the finger at someone else if the whole exercise is about suspending judgement.

BIG BANG: Caught unawares in this work situation, your primal reflexes are off. You are suddenly required to have work skills in this brainstorm that defy almost everything you've learned, every academic principle in which you have

put your trust, everything that allows you to communicate and function. You have to stop thinking the way you have been so used to doing, if you want to unblock pathways toward original thought. If you want to do it, you must somehow switch off your highly-trained, rational, thinking mind.

For all of the business processes that deal with creativity, agility, and even design thinking, we have no firm grasp of the building blocks of our own thinking. We can talk a big game and hide behind a ton of corporate jargon. However, to truly understand how we originally think, we need to start at the beginning with the one thing that spawned everything else. We need to return to the origin of the evolution of our original thinking. We have to return to our ideas.

SYNERGY, WITH THE LOT: By understanding and mastering our ideas we can apply them throughout our daily work, independent of workshops and sprints, bridging the gap between the left and right brain. The two are seen as separate, you are seen as either left- or right-brained in your thinking. That doesn't apply in the world of ideas. Here abstract thinking will blend into rational thinking and vice versa. Thus by improving your creative, critical thinking you are boosting your rational, methodical thinking too.

Better yet, if you master original thinking, then you will be truly independent in your work as a free thinker. After you dust off your intuition, of course.

TRAVELING LIGHT: As survival goes, the quest for ideas will be arduous but rewarding. We haven't done much prep-

ping though. We are embarking on our expedition packing nothing but a toiletry bag, trusting we can buy what we need when we get there.

We need to start by taking some ownership of our original thinking. Currently we place our idea-generating abilities and our original thinking outside of ourselves. We believe we have to hit the pause button in our brain for the solution to present itself in a eureka moment. Let's root out that concept first. That is if, on the far side of our quest, we are to come out on top. If we are to survive in the world of corporate tools, bureau clowns, computer monkeys and office canaries, we need to adopt a different thinking approach!

The problem with our ideas is that we're starting out wrong. We think we have to empty our minds. We don't.

Clearly, we need to fill them up with some knowledge first. The *right* kind of knowledge.