

[Get Smarter by Using Associative Learning, Cognition and Thinking](#)

One of the odd things about our species is that we can reflect on ourselves in ways other animals cannot. As our knowledge of ourselves evolves we find ourselves literally as spectators of our own development. Not only is it fun to watch ourselves but this very act is one of the most interesting aspects of being alive and there is no better show!

One of the interesting new developments in our understanding of the brain and mind is what we can call associative or relationship thinking and learning. What we have discovered is that our brains are actually networked in a manner that is changing the way we have previously thought about thinking.

We are discovering that the brain is not neatly divided up into pigeonholed functions as we once thought. Through research on brain-damaged subjects we have discovered that if one part of the brain cannot function other parts try to compensate.

Depending on the damage, the entire function may shift to another part of the brain. Amazing! But beyond being amazing, it gives us some insight into how our brains are constructed and how our minds function. And it is much more complex and incredible than we once thought.

Business provides a great laboratory for observing the thinking process and the mind. Thinking, intelligence, knowledge and innovation are becoming more important in the business world: work smarter not harder. We know for example that linear or logical thinking is not enough. There are many rational business thinkers that go under.

The basic concept of associative learning is that everything is connected and networked, just like in our brains. This concept alone is enough to turn away the linear, rational thinker. The hard part is believing that everything is connected because on the surface everything seems so disjointed, chaotic and separated. Yet we know now that is not the case.

A personal example for me is the way I have learned to approach business. My clients ask why do you come up with the ideas and innovations that you do? We have been trying to do this for years and couldn't do it! Am I smarter than my clients are? Not really. Perhaps I am more experienced. My typical day involves dozens of business decisions and if I practice anything enough I should get better.

I use my past experiences and associations and apply them to new problems and strategies. I honestly feel that I am not really more intelligent but just associate more. And because I have been in hundreds of businesses I am less likely to put my thinking in a limited box. I have seen businesses that were very successful operate very differently.

Even my consultant colleagues ask where I get my skills. I tell them I am still going through an apprenticeship! I tell them that I have actively sought out diverse industries to increase my exposure and ultimately associations. When I look at a business I am not just looking at that business through that business but through every business I have been in.

I first started my consulting business by taking best practices from one industry and applying them to another industry. I am perceived as an out of the box thinker but in reality I consider myself more of an associative thinker.

The obstacle is that we are most definitely creatures of habit and it is extremely difficult to change our thinking habits. We consider people stubborn if they have rigid thinking yet most of us really are stubborn. So how can we get out of the rut and think out of the box?

There is no easy answer. But like any other type of learning, awareness is the key. Once we are aware of the potential and once we focus on that potential things begin to happen. Our perception begins to shift. When our perception shifts we begin to think and act differently. If we understand intellectually that everything might be connected then we might begin to see the possibilities.

I remember very vividly the terror I had when I did my first restaurant. I had little direct experience in managing restaurants. I did one restaurant then another, and another and so on. Now I choose not to do restaurants but I highly value the knowledge, insight and skills I developed working with restaurants. I can use what I learned in restaurants and apply that to other industries.

And now, because of my associations, I will consider almost any business as long as it is legal. And deliver high value to clients in industries that I have never experienced. As a consequence I am doing more cutting-edge types of businesses.

We really do not know how the associations and links in our brains function. But we do not have to understand the chemistry of internal combustion

engines to drive a car. By associating everything, and having a lot of fun doing it, we can create and think on levels that we previously thought impossible.

And sometimes, even get out of that restrictive box!

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