

## Give your brain a break and imagine new possibilities for the future

By Bill Taylor

Imagine this scenario: fictional but not at all improbable. A scandal in your global organisation has become public and is destroying trust among customers and supporters everywhere. Income has collapsed. At the same time, political changes across western democracies dictate that your core work with immigrants and refugees no longer has the humanitarian support it once did. The media – especially social media – is tearing your reputation to shreds in a vicious way and at breakneck speed.

As CEO, you believe that if your leadership team don't do something quickly the whole organisation might collapse, with all its good work lost. But the more you focus, the more elusive good solutions seem to be. So you call in Dr Srinivasa Pillay, a Harvard educated psychiatrist and a specialist in how the brain works best. He is also an adviser to worldwide corporations and a noted writer on disaster psychiatry.

And what might he say? Well, the brain works its magic best when you strategically set aside time to let your mind wander ... to doodle and daydream as a creative way of helping to imagine new possibilities for the future. Perhaps even laugh a little! Or as the title of his latest book puts it: *Tinker, Dabble, Doodle, Try!*

"People can be taken back initially," he told me. "I'm all for focus, but if you only focus then you're going through the world with blinkered vision. Focus drains the brain of energy. We need to learn how to refuel our brains throughout the day.

"If someone approaches me, it's usually because they see something big is failing. But implementing strategy without addressing mind-set is a fatal flaw. If the mind-set doesn't shift, people won't be able to act in a new way.

"I agree that at some point we need to focus. But we face problems of immense magnitude which linear thinking does not appear to be able to solve. If we are to solve these problems, then we need to look outside the linear and purely strategic and we need to look at something more creative. When you are going forward with your nose to the grindstone, you're not actually looking to see what's ahead."

In a keynote session at FRED Forum in Chicago, Dr Pillay will offer delegates some ideas on how to improve our "cognitive rhythm" – changing the structure of our day to take regular brain refreshment breaks. "At ground level, building 15-minute breaks for 'un-focus' throughout the day will help the brain to refuel. All of us, including me, spend nearly half our day daydreaming. So learn to daydream in a productive way."

Regular brain refuelling stops, says Dr Pillay, will help us in those moments when fear of future catastrophe seems about to overwhelm us. "Especially when you're under stress, too much blood flows to the anxiety centres of the brain and we need to redirect some to the thinking brain."

Doodling may sound playful, but it can improve memory, relieve stress and also help draw surprising solutions out of the unconscious (and the unconscious accounts for more than 90 per cent of our mental processes). “If you hesitate to doodle on the job in order to super-task,” says Dr Pillay in his book *Tinker, Dabble, Doodle, Try*, “consider the fact that by 2007, 26 of 44 US Presidents were self-confessed doodlers. If there’s any job where you need to be a super tasker, that’s the one, right?” Ronald Reagan evidently doodled cowboys and football players and John F. Kennedy doodled dominoes.

The brain has its own GPS and will often move you towards your goal before you know it in a process known as pre-emptive perception. “If you are lost, look inside. And if all else fails, use your imagination. Whether you drive a tractor or a Ferrari, the most important GPS in your life is in your brain.”

According to Sriniv Pillay, it may be brain freeze on a massive scale that is contributing to global intolerance. “I’m a fervent believer in collaboration across philosophical differences. That’s a habit we have filtered out of our society. The very strong divisions in the world are preventing conversation. I think we are experiencing a polarised form of thinking where people are responding out of fear for their own safety ... responding with exhausted brains.

“We know that worldwide, close to nine out of ten people are not engaged with their work. You have to ask the question, ‘What is going on here?’ Are we building a culture of burnout? The more burned out you are, the less engaged you are. In order to be engaged, you need your ‘self’ to be involved in what’s going on. But the universal brain is under panic and that is affecting how we’re thinking. It’s making people look for a way out, doing impulsive things and then becoming addicted to that point of view.

“If anything, I believe we’re promoting a world of divide and split. But differences can be stimulating. You learn through discourse how to appreciate another point of view. There is a difference between passion and preaching.”

After more than two decades of studying and researching the brain, the one thing Dr Sriniv Pillay is convinced of is that we are “wired funny”. As rich as the experience of being human is, it is also fraught with things that just don’t make sense. That is why we have to work with evolution to give our brains the best possible chance of working well and creatively. “We must challenge the survival brain with possibility thinking and a brain that is more willing to understand the vast possibilities of the world by being in cognitive rhythm.”

For a clinician who researched the pharmacology of fear and was also director of the Panic Disorders Research Program in the Brain Imaging Center at McLean Hospital in Boston, Dr Pillay is surprisingly and touchingly optimistic about the future. “The quality I most value in any human being – and all of us have it – is ingenuity: the internal capacity to respond to the environment in a way that makes sense for themselves and the environment. No-matter what you have thought about yourself before, the one thing you always have to serve you is your curiosity. Knowing yourself will allow you to understand when your purpose is aligned and when it’s not. Curiosity can create a future you hadn’t been able to imagine. A culture of ingenuity will allow that future to emerge into the light.

“To the extent that companies can plug into ingenuity, they will discover an energy source far greater than any goal direction imposed on someone. Coaching for compliance is inferior to coaching for compassion.”

However, this culture of ingenuity is not well served by our present systems of schools, universities and organisational learning. They need to be turned completely on their head, Dr Pillay believes. But that is a whole other story ...

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