DEVELOP YOUR SYNTHESISING MIND

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Ways to developing a synthesising mind

1. Establish strong competence in at least one field, perhaps more. Synthesis often comes from a deep understanding of a body of knowledge and applying its principles in other contexts. In reverse, you pick up models from different fields and apply them to enhance understanding of your own areas of competence.

2. Engage your emotions (e.g. passion, enthusiasm, curiosity etc.) Your brain's emotional centre (emotions) is the channel for your long term memory. Emotional connections allow you to access and link prior knowledge with new ideas.

3. Train your brain to allow a little extra time to try and make disparate items fit together. It's programmed to discard data that doesn't seem to fit as quickly as possible – so you'll need to overcome this.

An easy way of developing this skill is to intentionally seek to make connections between apparently unconnected ideas or concepts. Continue intentionally until synthesising becomes an automatic part of your thinking process.

4. Allow your ideas to incubate – quite often connections may not be immediate but will pop out after a period of sub-conscious gestation.

Making sense matters

Like many, you've probably found yourself cursing the quantum of information you're expected to process. Email is surely the main culprit, especially those where you're cc'd but are not the primary recipient! Add to this formal and informal input at meetings, reports and presentations. And we haven't even mentioned the internet and other sources of information like the media.

Estimates of the rate of knowledge-doubling vary quite considerably. Mid-twentieth century, the estimate was every decade. The web, it is suggested, saw that fall to every 18 months. IBM estimates that, in the not too distant future, knowledge doubling will occur every 11 hours!

Irrespective of the actual rate of knowledge doubling, you'd have no doubt you're living and working in a knowledge economy. You may have given less thought to the fact that you probably make a living from the way in which you acquire, make sense and then use available knowledge. There's little doubt that the organisation you work for owes its existence to these capabilities also.

Complexity demands more complex processing

If you'd lived a thousand (or even a few hundred) years ago, chances are your life would have been a lot less complex. Most people lived in fairly small, close-knit communities. Many of the population would not have ventured further than a few miles from their town or village in their entire lives. Connectivity was limited and knowledge extremely scarce.

The constraints you face today still relate to connectivity and knowledge. However, in this regard, it is abundance rather than scarcity that is likely to be at the core of your challenges. Which information is important in your context and who needs to know?

The challenge of information overload is critical. To this end, Nobel Prize winning physicist, Murray Gell-Mann, proposed that, "in the 21st century the *synthesising mind* is going to be the most important mind".

Developing a synthesising mind

Howard Gardner, who developed the now widely accepted idea of multiple intelligences, agrees synthesising is important. He speculates on the "5 Minds for the Future", including the synthesising mind as one of the essential mindsets. Two others, *disciplined* and *creating* also relate to cognition. *Ethical* and *respectful* acknowledge the value and need for people-focused perspectives in a complex, connected world. Although all are important, we'll focus more closely on the synthesising mind.

What is a synthesising mind?

At its core, a synthesising mind is able to integrate ideas from multiple disciplines or spheres of knowledge into a new, coherent whole. Let's use public transport system as an example. It is useful that bus, rail, ferry and road transport operators are experts in their own mode of transport. While there are definite differences, there are also many principles that could be usefully applied in the other modes. A synthesising mind would seek out those connections.

The level of synthesis in the example is basic, yet unpractised by many. Think for a moment how people working in the same company, pursuing the same end-goals, so often fail to synthesising. They don't consider how different functional/operational perspectives of colleagues might add substantial value through synthesis that results in innovation to current methods and perspectives.

Linking diverse bodies of knowledge

Back to our example, the power of synthesis ramps up exponentially with greater diversity of bodies of knowledge. What can public transport systems learn from the transport systems used by ants or that operate within individual cells in our body? Increasing distance between fields even further may decrease the chance of finding meaningful and valuable connections. However, the pay-off of making a connection can result in breakthrough thinking that delivers quantum-leap innovation.

Making sense to others is essential

Importantly, Gardner reminds that a synthesising mind includes the capacity to successfully convey our new ideas to others. Step one is making sense for self. But, just as important, step two is making sense to others. It reinforces the notion and role of connectivity, not just of ideas but also of people.

This can be tricky, but it's useful to be reminded of how you synthesised ideas in the first place. You took two or more frameworks and then created a new model of how they are inter-related. Others will also need to start off using a framework they understand. Then, show them the connection and, ultimately, they'll get the new ideas you've synthesised.

Other components of synthesising

It's helpful to be aware that synthesising relates to how you filter information. We're bombarded by millions of pieces of data, mostly dealt with automatically and subconsciously. Efficiency means that your pattern-recognition system won't try too hard to accommodate data that doesn't obviously fit. You'll need to train yourself to intentionally subvert this hard-wired system, causing it to work harder than usually to find less obvious connections.