

Your ever helpful brain

Submitted by Kellie Mundell on Sun, 2015-03-22 22:48



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The world is becoming increasingly complex. Yet only 300 years ago or so (no time at all in evolutionary terms) we had probably just five basic thoughts between rising from bed and retiring. It might have gone something like: Is it raining? Where are my boots? Is this cow ill? Am I hungry? And so on. Now we may have hundreds of “inputs” before breakfast!

To deal with this massive amount of data humans have developed what is effectively a filter in our brains, called the reticular activation system or (RAS).

The RAS is hugely helpful. Without it, everything coming into the brain would be passed on to the thinking and conscious processing part and we’d be utterly paralysed by input overload. Clear thinking is perhaps the closest thing to a magic bullet there is and I’ll talk more about that in a future post, but there’s a contradiction here because what the RAS does automatically is to start to filter out things we are used to; like daily risks.

Basically, repeated exposure to risk leads to us habituating very real hazards and dangers. Worse; we can quickly move from no longer being all that concerned about these risks to no longer even noticing them as we concentrate on other inputs. These may be new issues or matters the organisation have taught us are more important. You may have seen the famous video of basketball players that

illustrates this so well. If you haven't, [it's here](#) [1].

And the problem doesn't stop with us, as we can *pass it on* to others. We know that if the old hands seem unbothered by something then the new starts learn from them really quickly. It doesn't mean the risk has gone away — it has simply become something we're no longer mindful of. As an individual. As a work team. As an organisation.

Many advances in our understanding of risk perception and risk taking behaviour have been driven by a clearer understanding of psychology and physiology. Everyone should know about their RAS. If it could speak it would say "But I was only trying to help!" But that's no consolation after things have gone badly wrong.

Two challenges:

- Where are the real risks in your organisation that could be hidden by the RAS?
- What active steps are you taking to be sure that the Reticular Activation System isn't filtering out these real risks?



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