

Ready for Enduring Change?

The Red Pill Executive
Workbook

CHAPTER 5



WORKBOOK INTRODUCTION

Now you know our secret... You know that there is a Red Pill way and a blue pill way. You might have had a feeling all along that something like this was true. Maybe you've butted up against blue pill thinking and wondered why it was so hard to drive projects that succeed by the "Iron Triangle" measures. Perhaps knowing that a Red Pill approach exists was novel and inspiring to you. Either way, after reading the book, the next question becomes, How do I navigate my own Red Pill journey? This workbook can serve as a guide, prompt valuable reflection, support your own and your team's Red Pill development, and drive Red Pill conversations and practices.

You'll find exercises and tools to help you think through Red Pill operations in relation to:

- Yourself
- Your Team
- Your Organization

Leverage the Workbook

Roll up your sleeves and dive into this work. This exercise will do very little if you skim over it. Think deeply, write down your thoughts, be brutally honest in your assessments, make Red Pill choices and learn from the results.

Make the workbook work for you. This chapter is part of a larger series, you can download the full workbook here: <https://www.thinkconsulting.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Red-Pill-Full-Workbook.pdf>. The work is not meant to be completed sequentially. Use the tools in the order that makes sense for you, your starting point, and your journey.

Re-use the tools and exercises. This exercise can and should be used more than once. Assess and reassess over time. Use the completed exercise as a reference point to measure growth and adoption or as justification for making new choices.

Enlist others. Gain valuable insights by having colleagues, peers or subordinates complete part or all of a tool/exercise. Use the workbook to develop Red Pill thinking in others.

READY FOR ENDURING CHANGE?

To learn more about these concepts, review Chapter 5: Rewiring the System.

*What makes us expertly human is
the ability to slow down and interpret the direction from System 1.
- The Red Pill Executive*

Introduction

Changing the way you instinctively react to situations is what Chapter 5 refers to as, “Limbic Learning.” This process is based in neuroscience and actually comes with a fairly simple recipe. The question is, “Are you getting the right stimulus, in the right way, and at the right time?” By the way, if you setup conditions correctly, you don’t need a sage floating around waiting to notice when you are about to make a mistake. This can be self-taught and self-learned behavior, though it is admittedly easier to do this with a mentor or team that can help with safety and strategic information provisioning.

Before you took the Red Pill (read The Red Pill Executive), you probably didn’t even know that hacking your brain to perform better was even a thing that you could do for your professional career. It’s no wonder that you haven’t already set up your environment to hack your brain in a productive manner, or for that matter, set up conditions so your direct reports could do the same thing.

In Chapter 5, you learned that you need the proper conditions to make System 1 perk-up and pay attention: Stress and safety; novelty and uncertainty. You also learned that once System 1 is engaged you need both experiential variety—a stream of situations never seen before and strategic information provisioning—a resource for tips and insights. There it is; the recipe in a nutshell. The problem is that every executive’s situation is just different enough that there isn’t a simple one-size-fits-all solution. You have to build your own.

1

Let's start by thinking about your professional environment. Rate the how much you experience each of the following with 1 representing very little and 10 representing frequently:

Stress

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Safety

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Novelty

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Uncertainty

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Examples:

- Plenty of stress and very little safety
- Plenty of uncertainty and very little novelty
- Plenty of stress and uncertainty; little safety and cannot even gauge novelty
- Little Stress, plenty of safety; nothing but unicorns and rainbows
- Little novelty and practically no uncertainty; I work at the Motor Vehicle Administration

We know these things work in pairs, but don’t let that distract you. We’ll identify how to make a strong pair next.

2

Now identify the most useful pair. Select the pair that contains that one item that you experience the most frequently in your professional environment.

1. Stress and Safety
2. Novelty and Uncertainty

This is the first step in building your own environment to create that neuroplasticity brain chemical cocktail to trigger. You'll work on balancing your pair next.

Examples:

- I'm kind of middle of the road on stress and safety, but novelty and uncertainty are rare. I'll select Stress and Safety.
- Plenty of stress, little safety and a lot of uncertainty but stressful situations are more frequent. I'll select Stress and Safety.
- Safety is high and stress is low; not much in the way of novelty and uncertainty. I'll select Stress and Safety.
- Uncertainty is high, but it doesn't matter much so stress is minimal and I guess safety is not really high or low. I'll select Novelty and Uncertainty.

3

What is the strongest component of your selected pair?

1. Stress
2. Safety
3. Novelty
4. Uncertainty

The key here is in triggering System 1 to let System 2 know that it's time to pay attention. This often takes a little setup. One of the best ways to do this is to create sort of an internal mental agreement that causes System 2 to recognize that this condition is present. System 2 can then reframe it for System 1 so that it recognizes a match pair.

Examples:

- Plenty of stressful situations. My chest gets tight, blood pressure builds. Most of the time I barely realize it but I can pay more attention to use that to trigger reframing what I'm experiencing.
- I haven't thought of situations being safe and mundane, but there's plenty of that. If I pay attention I should be able to identify those situations to trigger reframing what I'm experiencing.
- When I provide input, the downstream impact is uncertain, but that's for someone else to manage. I've not spent much time thinking about it, but could probably use that uncertainty to trigger reframing what I'm experiencing.

4

What is the weakest component of your selected pair?

1. Stress
2. Safety
3. Novelty
4. Uncertainty

This is the hard part and the piece of this brain hack that is difficult to build as a one-size-fits-all. You are tasked with conceiving of some way to let System 1 know that the condition opposite of the one you are experiencing is present too. You may need:

- pre-built safety nets,
- ways to introduce stress (if you are too safe),
- some way to make mundane situations novel, or
- learn to recognize the uncertainty of the situation you are in.

Examples:

- Safety is the weakest of my pair. But if I stop and leverage the tools and processes I have around me, there is some level of safety. At the end of the day, I am going to be able to figure things out, I just need to remind myself of that.
- I guess I'm lucky, but stress is the weakest of my pair. Usually, I'm just part of a process and don't really feel the stress of the people who need things from me. It would be easy to create "what-if" scenarios that would enable me to feel just a little of that stress. Might even put a new edge on things.
- Novelty is the weakest of my pair. It's groundhog day, every day. I could create whacky, make-believe scenarios that provide a sense of novelty to what I'm doing. I might even start to notice things that I've been blind to if did that.

5

Experiential variety and strategic information provisioning. Devise a framework that feeds you ways to look at things differently. This can be a coach-like figure who is immediately accessible or it can be a system that you can use for self-coaching. Which is best for your situation?

1. I have a coach/mentor
2. Going to need to develop this on my own

Remember that once you have triggered the neuroplasticity cocktail by recognizing your pair, you only have about 7-10 minutes to develop new neural connections. What you do next is critical. If it's the same thing you always do, you'll simply reinforce that behavior. You now need to alter your instinctive reaction to the situation to reinforce arriving at a different and better way of thinking about things.

In sports, a coach would recognize that you just missed, or are about to miss something. They'd point it out and ask you to look at the situation differently. You'd wonder why you didn't recognize what the coach saw (novelty) and try to imagine that if you did recognize the situation you could try do something differently (uncertainty) to lead to a new outcome. We rarely receive such coaching in business so it's likely up to you to create a system that can help you self-coach.

Examples:

- I have a mentor that I can engage to help me identify new ways to think about things at the right times. I'll need to orient them on this process and explain how I intend to use neuroplasticity to rewire my thought processes, but I think they can do it.
- I'm going to need to develop this on my own. As long as I can trigger conditions needed for neuroplasticity, I can teach myself to step back and look at each new situation independently. From there I can use any number of pre-formed questions to cause the cognitive frame shifting needed to challenge my working model of the world and to develop new instinctual responses to certain situations. This is essentially the same thing as self-coaching. I just need a system in place to do it.

Key Takeaway

You can hack your brain to improve your instinctual reactions but you need to be deliberate about it. Executives have often been through enough hard-knocks to figure out some of this, but you probably also have areas where you'd like to react differently. Remember that you need to recognize opportunities when your brain is ready to develop new neural pathways and then have the wherewithal to look at each situation independently. If you understand that what you did last time, in a similar situation, may not provide you with the best outcome you are on your way to setting up experiential variety. Next you challenge how you are perceiving the situation and look at from multiple perspectives. This causes the cognitive frame shifting needed to identify new ways to react to the situation. In this whole book, this is the closest equivalent to actually taking the Red Pill. Unfortunately, you may have to do it a few hundred times to really begin to change the way you intuitively react to situations. It's brain training.

If you need help with cognitive frame shifting aspect of this process, let's look at how Think has operationalized using BKPM principles to provide off-line coaching to our consultants when a mentor is not available. We have developed our own pocket guide that we require our consultants to keep with them. In this guide, we have documented our basic operational framework, standards for completing often-repeated activities and a list of BKPM principles. We coach our consultants to learn to feel stress (our most likely driver in our business). When they recognize stress, they know they we have standards, process and back-up, to address that stress. It's a "safety" net that we've operationalized.

Given that each situation is unique (experiential variety) the only thing needed to complete the brain hacking recipe is strategic information provisioning. Our list of 30+ BKPM principles are used to help our consultants look at things from a new perspective. All they need to do is scan the list of these principles and they take full advantage of their lightning fast System 1. When a principle triggers a new way to view what's going on, it's like a coach is whispering in their ear, "Ah! You've found yourself on the wrong side of the three-sided table, haven't you? You'd better find a way back to your side and reinforce that arms-length relationship model." Soon, recognizing that they are getting co-opted by the sponsor or fulfilment team becomes instinctual.

One final thought. What can you do to help your direct reports do the same thing? Can you build the safety net and help them develop into higher level performers?

EXERCISE CREATED BY:



JEFF WELCH, VICE PRESIDENT, CHIEF SERVICE DEVELOPMENT OFFICER

Jeff Welch is a technical executive, specializing in the use of technology to deploy training, simulations, and performance-enhancing information systems. Jeff is an engineer by trade, an Agile Transformation Coach, and he has worked as a lead Learning Solution Architect for Pearson Performance, Vangent, and later PDRI. His first co-authored book, Bare Knuckled Project Management (BKPM): How to Succeed at Every Project, by Tony Gruebl and Jeff Welch, has more than 15,000 copies in circulation. Jeff is also a co-author of The Red Pill Executive, Morgan James Publishing, 2020, to which this workbook is a companion.
