

*New York Times* bestselling author of *Brain Rules*

# brain rules



for



The Science of Thinking Smarter  
in the Office and at Home

J O H N M E D I N A

# Teams

## Brain Rule:

*Teams are more productive,  
but only if you have the right people.*

1. A psychologically safe environment where coworkers trust each other is the key ingredient to a team's productivity.
  2. To produce a psychologically safe environment, your team needs three things:
    1. The ability to read social cues (strong Theory of Mind)
    2. Team members taking turns talking without interrupting each other
    3. More women
- To improve your sensitivity to social cues, join a fiction-book club, volunteer at a food bank, or participate in any activity where you can practice focusing on someone other than yourself.
  - To avoid groupthink in your team, employ a diverse group of people in thought, race, religion, gender, economic status—and maybe even geography. The initial tension of the team due to differences will help the team become successful in the long-term as long as the team maintains a psychologically safe environment.
  - Choose the size of your team based on the project you're trying to tackle. Small groups (five or less people) work better for projects where the goal is to create something new or disruptive. Larger groups work better for building on preexisting creations and disruptions.

# the home office

## Brain Rule:

*Your workday might look and feel a little different than before. Plan accordingly.*

- COVID-19 has altered the way we conduct meetings, probably for good. Videoconferencing will play an important role in how you communicate with coworkers.
- Videoconferencing is particularly draining, siphoning more of the brain's energy than if you talked in person. To curb the drainage, occasionally switch your camera off, check in regularly with others on the call, and use formal perception checking.
- To get the best out of any meeting, create a showrunner's agenda ahead of time, send it to participants early as a pre-read with a request they come prepared to discuss the contents, and then conduct a discussion rather than a lecture.
- If you are working from home, dedicate a space (no matter how small) that is a single-use workspace.
- To optimize your workday, make a schedule. Stick to it.
- Procrastination is an avoidance of negative emotions. If meetings drain you emotionally, schedule them when you have more energy—probably in the morning.

# the business office

## Brain Rule:

*The brain developed in the great outdoors.  
The organ still thinks it lives there.*

- Humans have spent 99.987% of their history living in natural environments, and modern living can push us into prolonged periods of stress called *role overload*, which can cause burnout, mental fatigue, and even brain damage if left unchecked.
- To reverse the processes that induce stress, find ways to get yourself (and your subordinates) exposed to natural elements.
- If the great outdoors aren't readily accessible at your location, incorporate elements such as natural lighting, an abundance of plants, and the colors green and blue into the office design.
- Take a break, if you can, every ninety minutes—even better if you can take a break outside.
- To foster employee creativity, design a workspace where both prospects (open public areas) and refuges (enclosed private areas) are available to all.

# creativity

## Brain Rule:

*Failure should be an option—  
as long as you learn from it*

- If an idea is to be deemed “creative,” it needs to be both novel and useful.
- *Divergent thinking* (conjuring up many innovative ideas in an open-ended way) requires a stress-free environment with a long time scale. *Convergent thinking* (conjuring up many solutions to solve one problem) actually thrives in a stressful environment and a short time scale.
- Embrace failure. It is the mechanism that turns something novel into something useful.
- To make failures the most useful to your creativity, try to face them, examine them, and learn from them as soon as you can after committing them.
- Remember that creative failure is not a referendum on you as a person.
- Stop—or don’t start—yelling at employees. It stifles their creative output.
- If you are a leader at your company, give your employees a permission structure to fail. Companies that formalize processes that cultivate a failure-friendly environment as well as encourage employees to examine their failures are especially productive creatively.

# leadership

## Brain Rule:

*Leaders need a whole lot of empathy  
and a little willingness to be tough.*

- Leaders practice leadership on a sliding scale according to the prestige-dominance model, employing a mix of strength and force (dominance) with insight and empathy (prestige).
- The most effective leaders possess both dominance and prestige capabilities and know when to deploy them—prestige for the majority of everyday tasks, and dominance for sporadic conflicts, emergencies, or situations that require efficient and concise decision-making.
- Keep dominance-style leadership behaviors to a minimum. Too many can create fearful and often miserable work environments for employees.
- Make a concerted effort to be grateful, especially toward others. When gratitude is present in people who hold leadership positions, subordinates are more productive.
- Make an organized effort to be grateful by consistently writing down what you are thankful for, over a sustained period of time. It can enhance your ability to feel empathy.

# power

## Brain Rule:

*Power is like fire. It can cook your food  
or burn your house down.*

- Power is the ability to alter another's condition or state of mind by manipulating resources and punishments.
- Having power can cause you to place your own interests above those of a given group, reduce your ability to detect emotions and empathize, increase your sexual appetite, delude you into thinking you're more sexually attractive to others than you actually are, and even lead you to compromise your ethics.
- High-net-worthers are more likely to lie during negotiations, cheat when they believe they could win a prize, and take goods for themselves even when they are valuable to others.
- To safeguard against the harmful qualities of power, learn about them and temper your expectations accordingly.
- Prepare employees who are about to acquire power (via promotions and raises) by warning them about the potential pitfalls of power. Doing so makes them less likely to fall victim to those pitfalls.

# presentations

## Brain Rule:

*Capture your audience's emotion, and you will have their attention (at least for ten minutes).*

- When it comes to your presentations, first impressions are important. Have the first lines of your presentations memorized.
- You have ten minutes to engage an audience. After ten minutes, if they aren't engaged, it will be much more difficult to get them to pay attention. By minute thirteen, if you haven't engaged them, you won't get them back.
- Emotions prioritize which inputs the brain processes. Stimuli attached with emotional appeals help audiences pay attention to your presentation and retain more information. The most powerful appeals contain emotions relating to threat and survival, sex (preferably the results of sex, like children), and humor.
- Sprinkle emotionally competent stimuli (ECS) or "hooks" into your presentation every ten minutes or so. These hooks need to tap the audience's emotions, be brief and relevant to the topic, and have a narrative structure.
- The brain is stimulated more by images than text or audible facts. Add pictures or even short video clips to your presentation when possible.

# conflict/bias

## Brain Rule:

*Conflicts can be resolved by changing your thought life. It helps to have a pencil.*

- The first step to containing a conflict of any kind at work is to recognize your opponent's emotions and control your own emotions, especially discontentment, distrust, anger, and fear.
- If you get involved in a conflict, take twenty minutes a day during the few days afterward to write down what happened—but from the point of view of a neutral, third-party observer. This will help you to decenter from the situation.
- Remember that certain conflicts can stem from biases between two parties' different morals, deeply held beliefs, or lifestyles.
- Be wary of any HR training programs that claim to eliminate bias. Evolutionary psychologists believe biased-based behaviors were a selected-for trait, helping humans create social groupings for survival. As a result, biases are almost impossible to eliminate, both for individuals and groups.
- Though not perfect, the Implicit Association Test (IAT) is useful for uncovering implicit biases and predicting some behaviors, such as how people will vote.
- Consider the prejudice habit-breaking intervention program from the University of Wisconsin–Madison, which has shown the most promise in uprooting biases by using components of cognitive behavioral therapy to change thought habits.

# work-life balance

## Brain Rule:

*You don't have a "work brain" and a "home brain."  
You have a single brain functioning in two places.*

- Stress isn't the experience of aversive stimuli; it's the experience of not being able to *control* aversive stimuli.
- Feeling control over your work life (for example, your schedule) increases your chances of having a healthier family life. Similarly, having a healthy home life (for example, a supportive spouse) can improve your work productivity.
- While experiencing divorce, workers are 40% less productive than workers in stable relationships.
- When families decide to have children, women are disproportionately affected in the workplace. They quit their jobs more often and, during the pandemic, did twice as much housework and childcare as men, even if both were home.
- To reduce divorce rates of all employees and turnover of female employees, companies would do well to have a robust parental leave program. The long-term net cost to provide parental leave programs is zero.
- To strengthen the future workforce and its accompanying economy, companies would do well to invest time and resources to allow for child development, especially for children from birth to age five.

# change

## Brain Rule:

*Change won't happen out of determination and patience alone.*

- People are resistant to change because they risk ceding control. People tend to believe that “the new” could be worse than “the now.”
- Considering and ultimately making a change requires your brain to use a considerable amount of energy.
- To be more successful in forming a new habit, give yourself a reward immediately after practicing your new behavior.
- Increase environmental friction (make it inconvenient) around bad habits that you want to break. Decrease environmental friction (make it convenient) around good habits you want to cultivate.
- To change your habits for the long haul, create a system of friction (for old habits you want to break) and rewards (for new habits you want to start). Willpower on its own has limited utility.