

MARKETING

Alter Self-Sabotaging Behaviors

5 ways to override the negative effects of 'danger surfing' in yourself, your employees and your customers

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The road to success is filled with obstacles. Finding your way around them predicts winning and losing. Some of the obstacles show up in the form of survival behaviors brought on by the brain's innate wiring to protect us from the dangers of the world. The only thing is, the dangers have changed from 200,000 years ago when the wiring evolved, and we have to find a way around it or suffer the consequences of what is called "danger surfing."

In a previous column, I've discussed the concept of [danger surfing](#), wherein the brain surfs the horizon for threats and helps us react properly in order to survive. It's automatic and was useful when we were more beastly than we are now, but in present day, danger surfing often leads to behaviors that can be harmful to achieving your goals. It's helpful if you know when you, your colleagues, competitors or clients are danger surfing so you can override it or use it to your own benefit.

The brain is organized primarily to maximize reward and minimize danger, and our behaviors are molded by these two things. The danger receptors in our brain are more active than the reward receptors, as we spend a good deal of time danger surfing. In short, danger surfing sometimes shows up as childish behavior. There are five basic ways we danger surf.

Recognizing them before or as they are happening can help you take steps to avoid them in yourself and others, as well as taking the edge off their damaging effects. The acronym we'll use is C.H.A.S.E.

C = Choice. Our brains like choices. Autonomy is one of the things we look for as humans. If something is presented as an ultimatum, then you can expect stubborn, childish pushback. Also, if you give a person one choice, you have a 50/50 chance of a "no." However, when you offer choices, the likelihood of one of the options being chosen goes up tremendously.

Choice Tip: *The magic number seems to be three choices. Influence psychology tells us that when you give people options, start with the luxury model first, then midline, then economy. More times than not, the midline will be chosen. But when you start with the economy choice, people tend to split between economy and midline. Make sure all options are ones you can live with if chosen.*

H = Hierarchy. Our brain pays a lot of attention to pecking order or status. You see it in a roomful of people when the boss's boss walks in. Everyone becomes more polite and less forthcoming. On a one-on-one basis, you can tell when someone feels like their status has been questioned. It typically happens when you offer advice, make criticisms or give "feedback." Defensive-toned retorts like "I already knew that," "I've tried that already; it didn't work," or a putdown like "What's your point?" are clues that the other person is danger surfing and is going to shut down, get defensive or offer very little to the discussion. Until they feel their status is restored, the conversation won't move forward.

Hierarchy Tip: *People get into status battles when they feel like others are commenting on the quality of their work or their competence. Something as innocent as offering someone advice can be seen as a status change because we're in the driver's seat as the advisor. Ask before dispensing advice to ease the danger surfing defensiveness that comes when status is shifted without permission. A simple "May I give you some thoughts about how I'd approach it?" goes a long way.*

Another quick tip is that when you go into a meeting, figure out the roles everyone thinks they are playing. Are they the leader, a participant, a listener, encourager, feedback giver? If someone else thinks they are the leader of the meeting and you wrestle control from them, essentially becoming the leader, you have a status battle.

A = Assurance. When things feel uncertain, the brain goes into survival mode, and we begin to think and behave in ways that make us feel safer. In times of uncertainty, you won't see a lot of extraordinary thinking going on. In fact, people tend to do what they know is a sure thing. That's why when things at work feel very uncertain because of a merger, acquisition or layoffs, people vigorously protect their turf.

Assurance Tip: *When things are shaky, over-*

communicate the things you know are certain. Give people a sense of safety so they don't danger surf too much and fall into auto-pilot, uncreative thinking. If you feel unsure yourself, organize a drawer or your office. The sense of knowing where things are brings down the anxiety from uncertainty.

S = Social. We are a tribal species. Before we established our dominance and lived in caves, we had to take care of each other in order to keep our species around. If you were exiled from the clan, you died. It still feels the same way when we aren't included in a group we want to be in. The next time someone holds a meeting you believe you should have attended, take notice of how you feel about it--probably snubbed. Dr. Naomi Eisenberger studied inclusion and exclusion at UCLA and found that emotional pain switches on the same part of the brain as physical pain. It hurts to be left out. When we're hurt, we don't communicate as much or as well. We withhold important information, get angry or become agitated and don't perform as well.

Social Tip: *The social realm is dictated by the rules of the group. Have a departmental meeting about the rules the team should live by. Everything from what's acceptable dress to how tardy you can be to meetings to expectations about how people behave after hours are all about understanding the social makeup of a team. The more everyone understands the rules, the less confusion and hurt will result from being treated as an exiled clan member.*

E = **Equitability**. When things feel equitable or fair, the reward part of the brain turns on. Conversely, danger surfing occurs when something doesn't feel fair.

If you offer someone a proposal with something that feels unfair, they will scan the rest of the proposal more stringently for inequitable items and begin inspecting the relationship for other things that might violate a sense of fairness. When something feels unfair, we might not always be able to put our finger on it, but our behavior becomes more cautious and cynical until we pinpoint the inequality and make it right.

Equitability Tip: *To discover someone's definition of fairness on certain issues, simply ask what feels fair to them. If you're selling a product or idea and someone asks a lot of questions about one topic, they could be trying to get fairness clarification. Check to see if the issue in question is out of balance in your favor, no matter how trivial you might think it is.*

Danger surfing isn't going to go away; your brain has been doing it since you came into this world. If you think about each of the pieces of the CHASE model, you'll find examples where danger surfing affected your behavior. Be aware of it and you can offer choice, switch up the status, communicate certainty in uncertain times, pay attention to tribal rules of inclusion and exclusion, and be sensitive to what is fair for everyone.

Danger or reward? It's up to you and your brain.

