

## GROWTH STRATEGIES

# You Are What You Think

4 steps to creating your perfect world using the power of thought

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According to neuroscience studies, the adage that you should "be careful what you ask for" has more teeth to it than you might imagine. Your brain is very good at attending to whatever you direct it to. It's kind of like when you go to buy a car and you think you're the only person in the world who will have that shiny, bright purple VW Bug; then you drive it off the lot, and it seems every other car is just like yours. The Bugs were always out there, but it took a focusing event to get them onto your radar screen and noticed by you.

Thoughts, goals and ideas work the same way, and you can increase your brain's considerable input on them if you learn to ask your brain nicely and deliberately to get involved. You can create your perfect world if you know what you're looking for and--perhaps more importantly--if you pay attention to how your brain is fed.

This process works with negative thoughts, as well. As I teach in classes on emotional intelligence, crap will find you all day long, especially if you expect it. It will parachute into your office without an invitation and typically won't leave when you want it to. You don't have to go looking for it. It will find you. If you are dwelling on the bad stuff, it will find you more quickly and readily, and you won't be primed for the things that will make you successful. Good things need to be

noticed. We generally have to be more deliberate about the positive. Your brain will help you find innovative ways to do it. Just prime it, and it will be there for you.

Here are a few tips on how to make your thoughts work for you:

1. **Keep a sleep journal.** Every night before you go to bed, write a few pressing questions in a notebook. Go to sleep. Research shows that much of the insight you experience happens while you're focused on not focusing. You read that right. For the brain to do its magic, it needs to be untethered from biases and judgment and negative self-talk. That freedom happens while you sleep. If you continue to do this on a regular basis, you'll train your brain to make the connections to find the answer you're looking for. It worked for Edison; it can work for you.
2. **Play.** Innovative and creative Google is famous for its play areas. Many look at the Ping Pong tables as a quirky perk. In reality, they are a genius way to unlock the brain and allow it to wander without paying attention. The brain gets to do the awake version of what it does when it sleeps. Any play activity is just a way for the brain to attend to the problems you've been focused on without your cognitive brain butting in with its biases and opinions. Play allows you to see new things.
3. **Incubate.** When you have a big question--like "How am I going to be successful?"--the worst thing you can do is to try to solve it immediately. When you do, you limit the more than one quadrillion possible connections in your brain to just a few old tried-and-true tricks. If you have something huge that needs to be solved, give it time. Have deep discussions with your trusted pals and then leave it. Research shows that the "aha moment" comes after you've worked a problem from every angle without coming up with an answer. You might actually get

frustrated searching for the answer; then you walk away from it and let your subconscious take over. In a few hours, a few days...maybe a couple of weeks, your brain delivers because it's been scanning the environment the entire time, looking for connections and answers. The slap you give yourself on your forehead when you realize the solution was so obvious is a product of your cognitive brain finally recognizing what your subconscious brain has been up to for the last few days.

4. **Pay attention past your nose.** Consider a product named one of the best inventions of 2005. It was recognized and subsequently adopted by Target stores, and it was the result of being open to ideas everywhere. It's a prescription drug bottle, conceived by graphic designer Deborah Adler, an idea that turned bottle design upside-down--literally. The bottle stands on its cap. It is flat, not round, making it possible to read the labels without turning the bottle. Why is this so revolutionary? Today, baby boomers are taking more and more prescription drugs, and a growing number of people are living well into their 70s and 80s. The flat design allows for less confusion and increased ease of handling. The bottles also come with colored rings to put around the mouth of the bottles so that different members of the family don't mix up their prescriptions. Mom gets yellow, Dad gets green, and so on. Warnings and pullout information are on the flip side of the bottle. The design is considered so innovative that a sample bottle is on display at the world-famous Modern Museum of Art in New York City. Where did Adler's design insight come from? Not from mimicking or competing with other designs. As it turns out, Adler's grandmother once mistakenly took her husband's pills instead of her own. Open your brain up to ideas everywhere, not just in your industry or service area.

So tell your brain about the life you're looking for. Let your subconscious do its

magic. Put good things in your head, be open to success showing up in unlikely places. And then get out of the way. Aha! You knew that already.