

by Mike Hawkins
mike@alpinelink.com



You accidentally glimpse inside a coworker’s bag and see a knife—what do you do? You hear your company is merging with another company—what do you think? Your wireless network connection stops working—do you get upset or do you start troubleshooting it? Your colleague sends an email that could be interpreted as complimentary or derogatory—which way do you interpret it? These and thousands of other circumstances present themselves to you every day. You give attention to what you see, hear, smell, touch, and taste throughout the day. These can be pleasant or unpleasant experiences. They can be handled rationally or impulsively. Yet, the leading determinant of how you react isn’t the experiences themselves, but rather your mind and in particular your mental predispositions.

We all have biases and patterns of thinking that cause us to interpret our surroundings and circumstances in unique ways. We handle change, threats, social interactions, and other situations depending on how we individually think. We each have a unique combination of memories, knowledge, and abilities encoded into our mental networks of neurons. We have varying levels of mind-altering hormones and neurotransmitters that rise and fall daily based on our thoughts and lifestyle habits.

There are also parts of our brain that we have little control over such as our amygdala that exists to watch out for threatening situations. These parts of our brain cooperate, and sometimes compete, with the parts of our brain that we do control such as our prefrontal cortex, the part we use to make our rational decisions with. So it is through a combination of our uncontrollable genetic makeup, the physical habits we engage in, and our self-developed mental capabilities that we become predisposed to think and act in certain ways.

For people who easily become anxious and upset, their minds give more attention to threats—whether real or perceived. In the extreme, they have phobias such as the fear of snakes or crowded places. They become abnormally anxious about public speaking or social settings. They can be generally pessimistic if not chronically depressed. Others give more attention to opportunities and see circumstances more positively. Their attention is generally biased toward seeing the good in things rather than the bad. They are more optimistic.

In addition to giving more attention to threats versus opportunities, some people tend to act more impulsively while others are more thoughtful. The former tend to “fire-ready-aim” than “ready-aim-fire”. They allow the automatic response part of their brain to take the lead. They say or do things without much filter. In the extreme, they have little self-control. They prefer immediate rewards even though their actions may have long-term negative consequences. They can be highly emotional. Others in contrast are more controlled and thoughtful. They use their brain’s cognitive ability and logically think through their options before speaking or taking action. They consider both short-term and long-term implications.

Which is better—to be generally positive and hopeful or negative and paranoid? To be impulse driven or deliberate and thoughtful? Studies find that in most cases, you will enjoy life more if you are positive. You will have better relationships and live longer if you think before you act. Yet there are exceptions. People who are generally negative think things through in more detail. They are also more likely to see the risk in risky behaviors and ventures. People who are more impulsive can also better react to a crisis or truly life-threatening circumstance. They are more decisive.

For these personality traits and many others, the ability to have balance is key. The broader your capabilities and more adaptable you can be, the better. Like a tradesperson, the more tools in your tool belt, the more likely you will have the right tool for the right occasion. When in balance, you can most effectively adapt to your circumstances. You can draw upon your ability to think logically as well as emotionally. You can confront reality as well as make the best of your situation.

Despite the unchangeable differences in our genetic make-up, most of our patterns of thought can be changed. We can use our cognitive abilities to develop new ways of thinking that counter balance the ways we might naturally think. We can change our biases, where we give our attention, and how we interpret our circumstances. We can also adopt new lifestyle habits such as exercise and good nutrition that impact the creation of hormones and neurotransmitters that impact the parts of our brain we don't cognitively control.

We can learn and develop patience, optimism, and social skills. We can become more comfortable with public speaking. We can be more collaborative with our colleagues. We can become more knowledgeable, skilled, motivated, efficient, and effective. We can even embed new ways of thinking into our subconscious that drive our instinct to act impulsively in more desirable ways. The bottom line—we can and do change.

The next time you get frustrated about a person's attitude or behavior, realize that it can be changed. Or when you make a mistake or want to change in some way, know you too can change. Don't accept behaviors that prevent you and others from being successful and achieving your goals. Set and maintain an objective to continuously learn and develop. Leverage the many learning, training, coaching, and development resources at your disposal. Add to and improve your tool belt of predispositions.



Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.ScopeOfLeadership.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.AlpineLink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

For other articles on reaching your peak potential, visit www.alpinelink.com/Leadership_Sales_Management_Consulting_Papers_Tools_Templates.aspx.