

Train Your

CEO BRAIN

and Become Your Best Self

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Table of Contents

Preface 6

PART I GAINING SELF-KNOWLEDGE 14

- 1 A Goal to Set Your Sights on 18
- 2 The VUCA World 32
- 3 The CEO Brain 48
- 4 A Recipe for Success 78
- 5 Pitfalls 98

PART II HOW TO TRAIN YOUR CEO BRAIN: THE EFFECT PROGRAM 118

- 6 Environmental Enrichment – CHALLENGING YOUR BRAIN 122
- 7 Flow Focus – DIRECTING THE PLASTICITY OF YOUR BRAIN 132
- 8 Fixed Sleeping Pattern – UNLEASHING THE POWER OF SLEEP 154
- 9 Exercise – SHAPING AND TRAINING YOUR BRAIN 168
- 10 Connecting Today with Tomorrow – START CHANGING THE FUTURE 180
- 11 Time – GIVING YOUR BRAIN TIME TO CHANGE 198

PART III HARVESTING THE FRUIT OF YOUR LABOR 206

- 12 The Effect: Assessing the Impact of the EFFECT Program 210

Meet Your Best Self 224

Literature 226

Online Sources 246

Acknowledgements 250

About the Author 251

Preface

This book is intended to help you achieve your personal goals. Your goals may have to do with yourself, your job, your company, your family or the world around you. Perhaps you set these goals a long time ago, but they never came within reach. Maybe they slipped through your fingers because you allowed yourself to be sidetracked by everyday concerns, temptations in your immediate environment or fossilized behavioral and emotional patterns. This may have led you to think that you don't have control over your own life, or that something or someone else is in the driver's seat.

This book is useful regardless of the specific goals you have in mind. It doesn't matter whether you want to start a new business, enroll in a degree program, do a better job raising your children or stop smoking. What does matter is that your own effort can make a difference.

There are goals I can't help you with. If you want to win the lottery or turn back the clock, you're reading the wrong book. However, if you want the awareness and practical training you need to stop feeling like a puppet on a string, this book could be the game-changer you've been waiting for. It can help you develop into a puppet master so you'll no longer feel like a marionette. You could say this book is about leadership. You will learn to captain your own ship, steer your own behavior, and even guide others who you are responsible for.

I decided to write this book based on the personal problems and questions raised by people who attended my lectures and workshops. Another motive was my observations of the world around me; I see things happening both locally and globally that give cause for concern. Although we hear a lot about healthy living, wealth and care for others, it seems that people are experiencing greater levels of stress, sinking deeper into debt and leading unhealthier lifestyles than ever before. We read about mass unemployment and poverty, businesses going bankrupt, systemic problems in the banking and insurance sector, longer and longer waiting lists in healthcare, declining education standards and the list goes on. It seems we often make the wrong choices, both in our individual lives and as leaders, managers and parents: choices that prevent us from securing a successful and sound future for all of us.

This sobering summary is not all, because the suffering on a global scale demands our attention too. Around the world, people are being killed, maimed and displaced in unprecedented numbers by armed conflict. We see human trafficking, child prostitution, terrorist attacks, drug wars, environmental destruction and epidemics. It seems like an unstoppable path of self-destruction. What's more, most of us have seen video images of these horrible events: images we can no longer unsee.

The internet may well have created a global village where time zones and borders no longer matter, where everyone can be in touch with one another. And yet, growing numbers of people are feeling the opposite: a gap between themselves and others that is becoming harder to bridge. Widening divisions are causing many to retreat into a defensive stance, in which they can only see things from their own perspective. Some are prepared to give their lives and take others with them, just to maintain their worldview. This is the paradox; although we have achieved great technological progress, our emotional and social development seems to lag behind.

Gamemaster

Many of us feel life in today's world has become far too fast, too unpredictable, and too demanding. We wonder how to cope. How do I avoid going crazy from all the information I am bombarded with every day? How do I deal with the changes continually happening all around me? How do I stay healthy, grow, achieve more at work, make my business a success and do a good job of raising my children in this world? Despite all these daunting challenges, we see people around us who flourish amid this constant change, who despite all its problems seem to be more successful and happier than ever.

The common denominator is that many people feel tossed about by forces beyond their control. We all want to reclaim our position as master of the game. To put it as a question: How do I develop the right skills to be successful in this new world? I use the word 'success' in its broadest sense: in terms of private life, business, the physical self, thoughts, feelings and actions. Success on my own terms, in other words: having something to offer to my immediate surroundings or even the wider world. How can I teach myself and others to make the right choices more often so we can rid this planet of stupidity, step by step, and together create a more successful world? In a nutshell: How do I make the most of my potential and achieve my goals? That is the question I explored. In this book, and in the EFFECT program, I present the answers I found.

How to use this book

Train Your CEO Brain consists of three sections: (self-)knowledge, growth and impact assessment. These sections are subdivided into chapters. Each chapter begins with a quotation that captures the chapter's essence and a paragraph summarizing what you will learn. Next, I let you experience the feeling of being a puppet on a string, manipulated by all kinds of internal and external forces. The goal is for you to feel the main thrust of the chapter so you will retain its content long-term. Then I explain, step by step, how to develop the key areas of your brain and how to enhance the skills you need to take control of your life.

In the first chapter, 'A Goal to Set Your Sights On', you will lay the foundations for the work to be done in the rest of the book. This is where you set your own goal. This chapter is all about acquiring the basic knowledge you will need from

now on. You will learn how to set a goal that increases your chances of success, but also that setting a goal is not enough. You'll see that it is just as important to have the motivation and the right skills to achieve your goal. If you don't want to do this preliminary work yet, but would rather read on first, that's fine. Come back to Chapter 1 when you are ready and skip ahead to Chapter 2, which focuses on the VUCA World.

Chapter 2, 'The VUCA World', explains the important changes that are shaping today's world. Many of us have not adjusted our skills or assumed the right mindset to deal with this new world. This accounts for much of the disquiet, chaos and helplessness we often feel and the choices that undermine our own efforts to achieve personal goals.

In Chapter 3, 'The CEO Brain', I explain why you need to develop a specific part of your brain, the prefrontal cortex, if you are to survive in our new world. In evolutionary terms, this is the most recently developed part of our brain. The general area and the networks it is connected to are associated with such capabilities as adaptation to change, planning, learning from feedback, out-of-the-box thinking, forming an opinion or vision, making complex decisions, prosocial behavior, feeling motivated and regulating emotions. Another name for this part of the brain is the executive or CEO brain. Many studies have shown that when the networks of the prefrontal cortex and the skills related to these networks are well developed, success in life is more likely. And that means any kind of success, whether it has to do with your job, health, education, relationship, or just plain happiness.

Chapter 4, 'A Recipe for Success', reveals that you are actually suffering from a mild prefrontal cortex dysfunction and that you frequently fail to steer your own course in the midst of outside forces. In this chapter, you will learn which character traits and skills are known to foster success and wisdom and you will rate yourself for each of these. You will also learn how brain plasticity and exposure to new experiences, information and training help us to grow in the desired way and to adapt to a changing environment. You'll discover that you can literally change the brain's structure and performance, not just for yourself, but also for others. This creates not only big opportunities, but also big responsibilities. As you shape your brain, you also shape your life and the wider world.

In Chapter 5, 'Pitfalls', you will see why many of us fail to change, even when it is clear that we should do so because our current behavior gets us into trouble and does not produce the results we envision for ourselves or others. In this chapter, you will experience firsthand the mechanisms that keep you from attaining your goals. This will help you understand and overcome the forces that lead you to make unwise decisions. The insights and exercises in this chapter will prepare you for the journey toward your goals. You will learn to recognize the pitfalls, avoid them, and hopefully even pre-empt them.

These first five chapters focus on (self-)knowledge, both theoretical and self-reported. The next six chapters will explore growth.

Each of the growth chapters will deal with a scientifically proven method of stimulating the prefrontal cortex. You will learn why each method is so important and how you can master it. I will discuss the benefits of an enriched environment, and how you can optimize your ability to focus your attention. Other methods include the secret of a good night's sleep, and why physical exercise shapes not only your body and muscles, but your brain too. You will discover how the future and the present are connected and how integrating this knowledge into your behavior can help you achieve your goals. You'll also learn what the key factors are in the development of children's frontal lobes. And I will discuss the importance of allowing yourself time to change.

EFFECT Program

Because this book is meant to be of immediate use to its readers, Part II will focus on the conditions you can create yourself:

Environmental Enrichment
Flow Focus
Fixed Sleeping Pattern
Exercise
Connecting Today with Tomorrow
Time

Taken as a whole, the methods to create these conditions comprise a coherent program known by its acronym, EFFECT. In each chapter, you will find exercises that I call PFC Exercises (PFC = Prefrontal Cortex). These will have a positive influence on the development of your prefrontal cortex and the executive tasks it facilitates.

The final section of this book, focusing on impact assessment, consists of a single chapter: 'The Effect'. This is where everything you will have learned comes together: your goal, path, motivation, pitfalls and skills. You will see that you have gained a lot of knowledge about the human brain, about the achievement of goals and the difficulties you will face along the way, and ultimately about yourself. By the time you reach this chapter, you will probably have devoted time to the EFFECT program and to developing your CEO brain. Therefore you will be a lot closer to reaching your goals. This final chapter will reveal that you have not only been working toward your current goal, but also toward a whole range of other objectives you may have.

Personal commitment

This book can help you achieve your goals by offering you theoretical knowledge that raises your awareness, and exercises for self-development. You will also be asked to complete tests and watch videos. I chose to structure the book this way because research has revealed the importance of personally committing to the information you learn. This makes the entire process more pleasant and helps you grasp and retain the information better. Furthermore, personal commitment helps integrate what you have learned into your thinking, emotions and behavior. This optimizes personal growth and maximizes the odds of attaining your goals.

Most of the questionnaires in this book are not clinical psychological tests. They are intended to get you thinking and to lend you some perspective on your own feelings, thoughts and actions. Should you be interested in exploring these issues in more depth, I would suggest that you look for psychological tests that are used for clinical assessment or contact a psychologist who can assess you.

I wrote this book in an easy-to-digest style to increase the likelihood that you will actually use it and get real results. The knowledge and the accompanying exercises will enable you to develop your CEO brain and achieve your goals. Not everyone will progress at the same pace. But everyone will benefit from devoting time to enhancing their executive skills. This book is for leaders, managers, teachers, lecturers, parents and other child caretakers, administrators and all others who wish to take responsibility for their own lives and for a part of the world around them. It's about self-knowledge, self-reflection, and personal growth. By reading this book, you are taking a step toward shaping your own brain to make the most of your potential. You are putting yourself in a position to become successful in various ways: in your private life, in your professional career, and socially, with an eye to the interests of others.

This book is meant to help you train your CEO brain and grow toward your best self.

MARGRIET SITSKOORN
November 2015

PART I

GAINING SELF- KNOWLEDGE

What do I want to accomplish in life?

Why is it so hard to achieve my goals?

What skills do I have to work on
to be successful?

What internal and external forces
do I need to be aware of?

Chapter 1 A Goal to Set Your Sights on

In this chapter, you will set and clarify your goals. You will learn how to articulate your goals in a way that enhances your chances of success. This chapter will show you that the journey can in fact be broken up into stages, and you will get an idea of the obstacles you can expect along the way. Next, you will commit to your goal or choose a different one.



How do you get there?

Look at the image and try to find the way using only your eyes, so don't use your finger to trace the lines as you make your way through the maze toward the center.



This maze is based on the figures designed by Artificial Intelligence pioneers Marvin Minsky and Seymour Papert. Most people are unable to see which path actually leads to the center. Illustrations like these show us the limitations of our observational skills. We are often incapable of getting an accurate first impres-

sion. Sometimes, all we need is more time to gather more information. The maze is a metaphor: we don't always know how to attain our goal beforehand because we simply can't see and know everything. We need to spend time gathering information and developing skills.

Gathering information

Usually, when you've set yourself a goal, you assume you can achieve it. But you don't always know how to get there or whether you have the skills to complete the journey. This could lead you to choose the wrong path, because you might not see the big picture, base your decisions on the wrong information, or get distracted by whatever you encounter along the way. If this happens, you will invest a lot of energy, but your efforts will fail. All your work will likely lead to more of the same; you'll wind up on dead end streets, frustrated and disappointed, and sometimes even worse off in terms of health, wealth and well-being. Achieving a goal is like a well-planned vacation. It pays to do more than just get in the car and start driving; you're better off also putting energy into gathering information and preparing for possible problems before charting your route. This chapter will help you do so when setting your goals.



Setting your goals

Take a moment to think about the following questions. They are about your life's goals and dreams, and they are the guiding principle that will help you apply this book to your own life. Pick out the questions that matter to you, answer them as fully and honestly as possible, and add some questions of your own if you like. By doing this, you will learn something about your goals in life and why they are not immediately within reach. Think hard about what really matters to you. Don't let yourself be guided by what you ought to say, or ought to want. If you feel yourself resisting this idea, ask yourself where this resistance is coming from or skip ahead to Chapter 2.

1 How do you define personal success? _____

Why do you find the things you've named important? _____

2 How do you define personal happiness? _____

What can help you achieve such happiness? _____

3 What do you want to achieve in life? _____

Is something holding you back? If so, what? _____

4 What do you want to achieve career-wise? _____

Is something holding you back? If so, what? _____

5 What do you want to achieve in terms of your friends / family? _____

Is something holding you back? If so, what? _____

6 What do you want to achieve for the greater good? _____

Is something holding you back? If so, what? _____

7 What do you want to achieve in terms of your personality (traits)? _____

Is something holding you back? If so, what? _____

8 What do you want to achieve in terms of your physical health? _____

Is something holding you back? If so, what? _____

9 What do you want to achieve in terms of your hobbies / leisure time? _____

Is something holding you back? If so, what? _____

10 What do you want to achieve in terms of education or personal growth? _____

Is something holding you back? If so, what? _____

11 What do you want to achieve in terms of wealth? _____

Is something holding you back? If so, what? _____

12 What do you want to achieve in the short run? _____

Is something holding you back? If so, what? _____

13 What do you want to achieve in terms of _____ (fill in the blank)? _____

14 What do you want to achieve in terms of _____ (fill in the blank)? _____

Is something holding you back? If so, what? _____

Some of the things holding you back could be rephrased as goals. Suppose you'd like to exercise more often, but you usually skip it because you're tired or would rather have some family time. You could then rephrase your goal as 'to have more energy'. Go down the list you've just filled out and check for these 'hidden' goals. You might be able to find several obstacles that could be turned into goals. Later, we'll discuss how you can prioritize your goals.

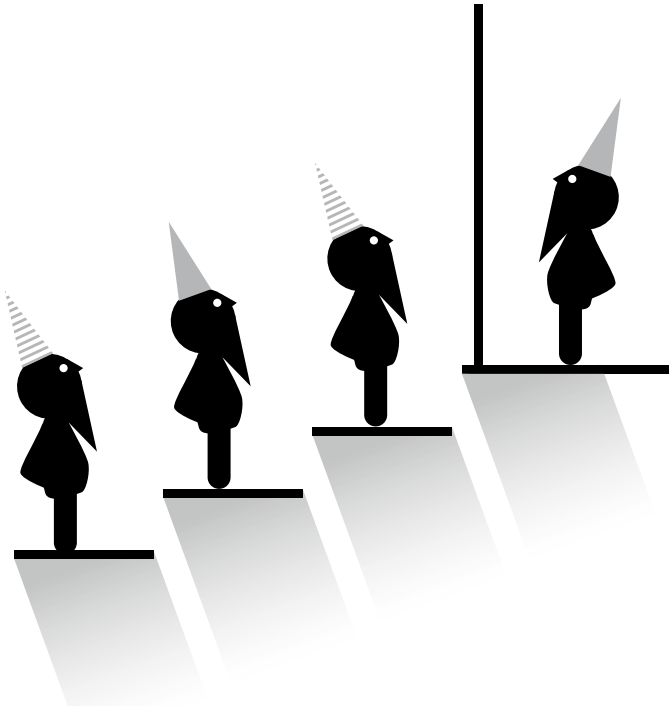
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Chapter 3 The CEO Brain

This chapter deals with what are known as cold and hot executive skills, why they are so important and what the CEO brain is. In the pages ahead, you will estimate the strength of your own executive skills, which will give you more insight into your own performance.



The Riddle of the Gnomes



Look at the illustration above. You see four gnomes on a staircase. Each of them is wearing a hat. Two of them are wearing a solid grey hat, and two are wearing a striped hat. The gnomes can only see straight ahead. They are not allowed to communicate with each other in any way. The gnome at the top of the stairs is standing behind a closed door that no one can see through. No one can see that gnome, and that gnome can see no one else.

The gnomes know that two of them are wearing grey hats and two are wearing striped hats. None of them knows which hat they themselves are wearing, but they can each see

the hats worn by those standing in front of them. The first gnome who figures out which color hat he is wearing will win € 10,000. Which gnome can be the first to know with the greatest degree of certainty which type of hat is on his head: Gnome 1, 2, 3 or 4 and why?

You can find the answer at the end of this chapter (see page 75).

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The riddle above is a difficult logical puzzle that makes you think. However, it is not a riddle that has anything to do with your personal ambitions or desires, so in a sense this task is not connected to your feelings. We call the capacities required to complete this type of task cold CEO skills or cold executive skills. When a task requires you to call upon your cognitive abilities and is also directly connected to your emotions because it is linked to something you would love to achieve or have, or that you are afraid of, we call the capabilities you need hot CEO skills or hot executive skills (see page 65).

Marshmallow Experiment

Imagine you are a child and you have been put in a room where you are about to be subjected to a psychological test. A researcher comes in and places a marshmallow on the table. ‘This marshmallow is for you,’ the researcher tells you. ‘You may eat it, but if you wait until I get back – I need to leave but I will be back soon – then you will get two marshmallows instead of just one.’ What would you do?

This was a real experiment, and the children who were given this test showed a wide range of reactions. Some popped the marshmallow into their mouths before the researcher even finished speaking. Some waited briefly, but ate the marshmallow the moment the researcher left. Others sniffed it, or nibbled it, doubtlessly betting that this would not be noticed. Those who did manage to wait used different strategies. Some kept looking away from the marshmallow or used their fingers to count, while others became physically very active or froze in their seats and stared straight ahead.

The marshmallow question seems arbitrary, but isn’t. The ability to leave the marshmallow alone indicates something profoundly important: the capacity to withstand the desire for instant gratification and the willpower to hold out for maximum returns. We know this thanks to Walter Mischel, who in the 1960s conducted this experiment, and to the follow-up studies on the same children, which revealed incredible results. Mischel originally carried out the marshmallow experiment to see which techniques children use to resist temptation. As expected, some children ate the marshmallow right away, while others managed to hold out until the researcher returned.

Researchers tracked the progress of some of these children, and years later, when they were in secondary school, made a fascinating discovery. The children who had shown willpower in the experiment were now more successful students. Compared to the children who gave in to temptation within 30 seconds, those who were able to wait 15 minutes before eating the marshmallow got much higher scores on their SATs, the standardized test used by US universities to assess student applicants.

Other researchers, such as Angela Duckworth, showed that willpower is a better predictor of educational success than IQ and test scores. Particularly the combination of willpower and a clearly articulated goal – if I wait, I will get two marshmallows – tends to increase the chances of achieving the stated goal. Just like we saw in the previous chapter.

Clearly, marshmallows are not the point. The experiment is merely a metaphor for the temptations you are not able to withstand, the ones that prevent you from achieving your goals. Perhaps the marshmallow symbolizes your unstoppable urge to drink, or the demands of your job that you never say no to, or the excuses you make so you don't have to treat the other fairly, or the colleague you fantasize about but who will end up giving you more trouble than happiness if you succumb to that scenario. The marshmallow stands for the surrender to a temptation for short-term satisfaction, while it would be better to resist because changing your behavior will benefit you far more in the long run.



.....
Your marshmallow

Recall the goal that you are trying to achieve. Describe the marshmallows that stand in your way: the sources of instant gratification that you tend to give in to and which prevent you from succeeding.

My marshmallows are _____

On YouTube you can find all kinds of interesting videos about the marshmallow experiment⁴ that clearly show how waiting for something better, bigger or nicer is

4 For example, www.youtube.com/watch?v=QX_oy9614HQ.

very difficult when you have a source of instant gratification right in front of you. In Chapter 5, 'Pitfalls', I will show you what you can do to lessen the temptation. I will first explain what executive skills are and why they are crucial to achieving your goal. I will also show you what gnomes and marshmallows have to do with your CEO brain.

Executive skills

In the previous chapter, I showed how the VUCA world makes heavy demands on us. Perhaps I didn't even need to make this clear, as you live every day of your life in the VUCA world. You have almost certainly felt its force acting upon you in your own experience. If we are to be successful in this rapidly changing world with its information overload, we'll have to learn to enjoy a new kind of game: the challenge of change. We will have to look further outside ourselves than we are accustomed to, and reflect more on our own behavior. We will also have to dare to let go of our thought patterns, like: 'It is what it is', or 'You can't teach an old dog new tricks'. We will have to develop skills like planning, flexibility, selecting the right information, learning from feedback, suppressing all kinds of impulses, self-regulation, relaxation and out-of-our-box thinking. In neuropsychology, such capacities are collectively referred to as executive skills.

Executive or CEO skills is an umbrella term for a whole range of capabilities. Roughly speaking, we can say they enable us to monitor and regulate our emotions, thoughts and behavior in such a way that we can successfully adapt to a changing environment and achieve our goals while feeling healthy and happy. Executive skills ensure that we make the right decisions and persevere when things get tough or tedious. They enable us to suppress our impulses, to keep our primary emotions in check, and to learn from feedback, to name but a few examples.

Three core executive skills

The executive skills are defined and categorized in many ways. An article by Akira Miyake and co-authors presents three basic elements that can be found in nearly all descriptions of executive skills. The same conclusions can be found in a report from the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child and the National Forum on Early Childhood Policy and Programs. This report is available from the website of Harvard University Center on the Developing Child.⁵

The three core executive skills are: working memory, self-control, and cognitive and mental flexibility. For each of these elements, I will provide the Council's definition⁶ and an explanation with examples.

5 http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/reports_and_working_papers/working_papers/wp11/

6 Building the brain's 'Air Traffic Control' system: How early experiences shape the development of executive function, p. 2.

PART II

HOW TO TRAIN YOUR CEO BRAIN: THE EFFECT PROGRAM

How to develop your
prefrontal cortex and the executive
skills that will help you achieve
your goals and be successful.

Chapter 6 Environmental Enrichment – Challenging Your Brain

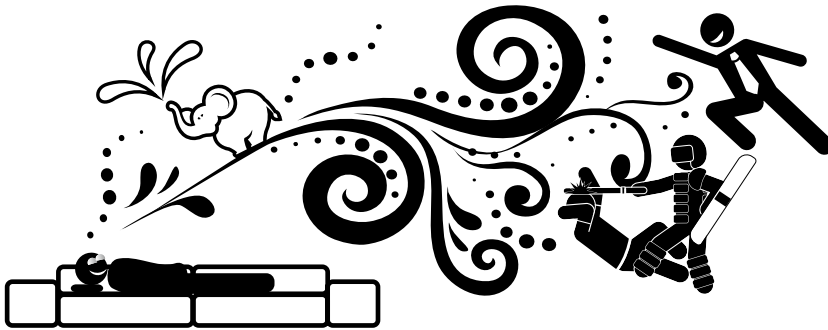
In this chapter you’ll learn why stimulating your brain is key, and how training your prefrontal cortex will encourage you to do what you’ve always wanted to do.



Ping-pong balls

This experiment requires a bit of preparation and a conscious decision. You will need:

- A ping-pong ball,
- Masking tape or Scotch tape,
- A sharp knife,
- A radio or a smartphone.



Cut the ping-pong ball in half and tune the radio to white noise (or use your smartphone for this purpose).¹⁹ Find a quiet place, tape the halves of the ping-pong balls over both your eyes, so that you’re looking at the inside of the halves, and then lie down and listen to the white noise. Now wait patiently. It is definitely worth waiting, because after a minute or two you’ll start experiencing something bizarre. Pink elephants, chocolate fountains and dancing criminals are just a few of the things people have reported seeing when doing this experiment. So, before you begin, think about whether you are sure you want to try this. You never know what you might see. I will explain why this happens after you’ve tried it.

¹⁹ For example, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldlh7OLldV8

This experiment makes use of what is known as the *Ganzfeld* effect (German for complete field). Putting the ping-pong ball halves over your eyes creates a homogenous field of vision, a blankness. This, combined with the white noise, deprives your brain of all meaningful sensory stimulation. And that is something your brain can't stand. So, it starts generating information on its own. And as you just found out, it can induce visions of practically anything.

I came across the ping-pong ball experiment in *The Boston Globe* and it really made me think. The point is to show you that your brain craves new experiences and information. The experiment is geared to that. Deprive your brain of new input and you'll lose touch with reality and start to hallucinate. Now that you understand how this works, you'll begin to see why people who never do anything new or only take in one-sided information sometimes have such strange ideas, but also why solitary confinement and sensory deprivation are so terrible and are used as a torture method.

Experience-dependent plasticity

At the end of Chapter 4, 'A Recipe for Success', you read about neuroplasticity, the brain's ability to continue to develop and adapt when exposed to new stimuli. There are different types of neuroplasticity. One key type is experience-dependent plasticity.

Experience-dependent neuroplasticity is the brain's unique ability to adapt to its environment. The importance of this cannot be overestimated; it's one of the reasons why there are so many of differences between people. To give one example: all healthy brains have an innate capacity to develop language, but which language you learn depends on the one you're exposed to. Exposure to a specific language causes specific changes in the brain, which in turn ensure that you learn to speak and understand that specific language, say Chinese rather than French. In the same vein, a football player's brain develops differently than a ballet dancer's, and a cook's differently than a stock broker's.²⁰

We used to think – and unfortunately, some people still do – that the brain cannot change its structure and functioning, or can only do so during a 'critical period' in our youth. But we now know this is untrue and that our brains continue to change in response to our environment and the stimuli we deliberately expose it to. The brain can change because it continues to form new cells (neurogenesis), because cell tentacles (dendrites) and shoots (axons) continue to grow and branch out, and because the brain keeps making new connections between

20 For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see M.M. Sitskoorn, *Het maakbare brein*, 2006, [The Mutable Brain].

cells (synaptogenesis). But that's not all. For instance, an insulating substance (myelin) forms around the dendrites and axons, improving intercellular impulse transmission; some connections are cut off (pruning); and the substances that facilitate intercellular communications, called neurotransmitters, also change. Signals grow stronger or weaker, and various cells and groups of cells strengthen, weaken or stop their collaboration. The brain can even create new blood vessels in a process we call angiogenesis. The effects of all this can be good or bad, as I explained earlier. What develops, and how, depends partly on what you expose your brain to. It's quite simple really. The things you do, think, or feel a lot, will develop and get easier to do, so you'll do these things more readily and frequently, whether this is yelling at people, singing, thinking of your loved ones, or eating cupcakes.

Many studies provide evidence for experience-dependent neuroplasticity in humans. Eleanor Maguire and co-authors (2000) showed that London cab drivers, who have excellent knowledge of the streets of their city, have enlarged posterior hippocampi – a part of the brain that facilitates memory, the ability to make connections and visual spatial skills. Furthermore, the size of their posterior hippocampi is proportional to the amount of cab-driving experience they have. Another well-known study, by Bogdan Draganski (2004), shows that the areas of the brain involved in processing and storing complex visual movements are larger in people who've spent three months learning how to juggle than in people who have not done so. When a juggler stops juggling, these expanded brain regions gradually shrink again. The same effect probably applies to all new motor skills, as other studies on people learning to play golf or do aerobics have shown. Other studies have demonstrated changes in the brain areas involved in somatosensory and auditory perception in professional musicians. On the downside, however, neuroplasticity can also lead to negative adaptations. Writer's cramp (focal hand dystonia) results from repetitive finger movements that have caused negative adaptations in the somatosensory and motor areas of the brain.

Negative feelings

Fear and addiction are also associated with plasticity-related changes. These changes seem mainly to affect the prefrontal cortex and the areas most closely associated with emotions. On the other hand, we also know that consciously influencing negative feelings and thoughts, for instance with the help of cognitive behavioral therapy, reinforces the prefrontal cortex in regulating the areas of the brain associated with emotion. This makes you increasingly better at neutralizing negative emotions and regulating your mood. Of course, this is not a one-off thing you apply when a negative thought hits you, but it is good to realize you do have the option – with the help of a cognitive behavioral therapist, for instance – to rewire your brain by consistently thinking and acting differently. This helps you to develop yourself in the direction of who you want to be, how you want to feel and how you want to behave.

PART III

HARVESTING THE FRUIT OF YOUR LABORD

What is the impact of implementing
(parts of) the EFFECT program
and the self-knowledge I have
acquired? Am I closer to attaining
my goals and what is the wider
objective I have achieved?

Meet **Your Best Self**

Not only has this book given you insight in what you *are*, it has also taught you about *becoming* – in the sense of becoming aware of why you are the way you are, and, more importantly, aware of how you can keep improving and become your best self. That was my goal when I decided to write this book. It might strike you as paradoxical, this simultaneous state of being and becoming, because one is a constant and the other a dynamic factor, but it's less of contradiction than you think. The moment you commit to your life's journey, plans and dreams, and accept the fact that nothing stays the same, you'll find yourself more willing to change and develop. That willingness will become a constant in your life. The resulting mindset will foster constant evolvement, or a state of becoming, and will gradually make changing easier. You will no longer long for change as a means of escape or salvation, based on a feeling that you can't stand it where you are, but you will perceive it instead as a natural state, an openness to new experiences and opportunities for personal development. Once you've achieved this, adaptation will no longer automatically cause anxiety and stress. You will eagerly anticipate and welcome changes in your life. Developing your executive skills is an important step in that direction.

In this book, I have focused on methods that help develop your executive skills in general. I chose to focus on these techniques because they are the most basic and effective method to improve your default mindset. My next books will zoom in on developing specific executive skills, like motivation, prosocial behavior and creativity.

Executive skills enable us to be successful, happy and healthy in the complicated times we live in. Executive skills help us transcend our cravings and knee-jerk reactions. They empower us to break with stereotypical behavior, to be more proactive and innovative, resist temptation, reduce stress, take more control, see opportunities, accelerate our personal development, take greater responsibility for our lives and those of our loved ones, and so on. These are far-reaching benefits, but they are not all. Neural plasticity enables us to develop our executive skills and, in so doing, learn to steer our progress in the direction we want. This is something I'm passionate about. I believe the mechanisms I've described in this book can help us develop from *homo sapiens* (wise human) into *homo sapiens verus* (the truly wise human, or the human being that possesses all the qualities that make us human). These mechanisms can help you reach your full potential, and become your best self. They can even help the world become a better, healthier, friendlier and fairer place to live. And to think that all that potential can be developed in your very own brain! Let's not leave it untapped. I urge you to shape your brain, shape your life, and shape the world.

About the author

MARGRIET SITSKOORN Ph.D. is a Full Professor of Clinical Neuropsychology at Tilburg University (Netherlands).

Her research focuses on the relationship between the brain and human behavior. She explores how behavior and environment affect the brain and how we can use this knowledge to influence and develop human emotions, skills and behavior. Her additional interest lies in popularizing brain research and integrating scientific knowledge into education, politics and the business world.

Sitskoorn is the director of Neuro-Cognitief Centrum Nederland. She is a sought-after public speaker and consultant.

In addition to her scientific research, she writes columns for several magazines and is a frequent guest on television. Earlier, she wrote three non-fiction bestsellers *Het maakbare brein* (2006), *Passies van het brein* (2010) and *Ik wil iets van jou, jij wil iets van mij* (2012).

Margriet Sitskoorn also offers training sessions on the EFFECT program.



Irene Sitskoorn | fotografie

Train Your CEO Brain and Become Your Best Self explains how you can use the plasticity of your brain to develop yourself. This book links theory to practice, and includes targeted exercises to train your executive brain.

Train Your CEO Brain is intended to help you achieve your goals for personal growth, your job or business, your family, or the world around you.

Train Your CEO Brain is useful for whatever specific goal you have in mind: starting a new business, earning a degree, improving your parenting skills, quitting smoking, you name it. The point is, you can make a difference through your own efforts, by changing your brain and improving your skills. Reading this book will be a game-changer. You can learn to captain your own ship and even guide others you're responsible for. In that sense, this book is also about leadership.



Margriet Sitskoorn is a Full Professor of Clinical Neuropsychology at Tilburg University in the Netherlands. Her research focuses on how behavior and environment affect the brain, and how people can use this knowledge to develop themselves. Sitskoorn is an acclaimed public speaker and consultant. She is the author of several bestsellers and her work has been translated into various languages.

