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BY SUSAN CRAMM

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Everyone wants to be more productive. And as a result, there is a significant industry of books, conferences, and speakers pitching miracle cures for getting things done more effectively. To a degree, each addition to the genre seems counterproductive. Wouldn't it be more, um, productive to spend our time plowing through the dozens of primers already on our shelf than to spend the time and money to buy a new one?

In most cases, the answer to this question is *yes*. But in his writing and in a recent interview, Charles Duhigg makes a convincing case as to why his new book, *Smarter, Faster, Better: The Secrets of Being Productive in Life and Business* (Random House, 2016), deserves our attention. It is an engaging, fast, and worthwhile read.

Duhigg's first book, *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* (Random House, 2014), is a seminal guide for anybody wishing to understand why habits exist and how they can be changed. *Habit* was a *New York Times* bestseller for well over a year,

was named one of the best business books of the year by the *Wall Street Journal*, and has been praised by such highly respected authors as Daniel Pink and Jim Collins. All of which makes it a hard act to follow.

By and large, however, the author delivers. Duhigg, an editor at the *New York Times*, writes that he embarked on a quest to understand productivity when his "life felt like a treadmill of to-do lists, emails requiring immediate replies, rushed meetings, and subsequent apologies for being late." As he met people who clearly "exist on a different plane of getting things done," Duhigg hit upon an important insight: Productivity isn't a function of resources or smarts, but of "making certain choices in certain ways."

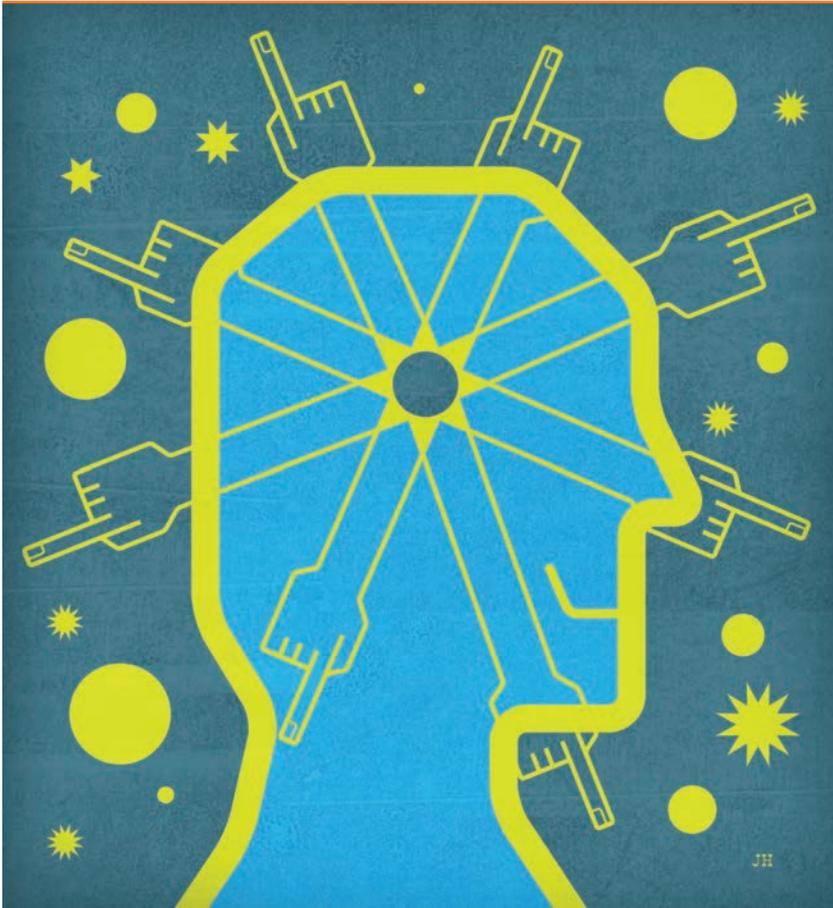
In his book, Duhigg defines productivity as "the best uses of our energy, intellect, and time as we try to seize the most meaningful rewards with the least wasted effort." To convey his productivity message, he uses constructs similar to those used in *The Power of Habit*. An excellent storyteller, Duhigg smartly interweaves captivating narratives with academic and scientific research. The book was designed with the right mix of substance and story to be credible and to capture attention and imagination.

In a recent conversation, Duhigg emphasized that the only thing that separates the truly productive from the rest of us is their ability to "design their lives in ways that force them to think more deeply." Duhigg asserts that the truly productive understand how to hijack their lazy brains using the eight contemplation devices outlined in his book. To support his thesis, Duhigg shares research from academia and brings it to life using case

studies lifted from organizations including the FBI and Google, and from diverse, nontraditional sources such as Broadway theater, public education, and the Poker Hall of Fame. Each chapter is devoted to one of the contemplation devices, which he believes are "at the core of why some people and companies get so much done."

The eight devices are fostering motivation, tapping into collective intelligence, paying attention to the right information, managing the tension between SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-bound) goals and stretch goals, empowering people to act, guessing probabilistically, innovating through brokering, and manipulating data. Here are some of the ideas that I found particularly enlightening.

To increase the collective intelligence of teams, Duhigg cites research that confirms that smarter teams have members who feel psychologically safe to share information in a free and open manner. Google's research reveals that healthy teams encourage full participation, no interruptions, reflective listening, vulnerability, non-judgmental response to emotions, and constructive conflict. The author dispels any notions that healthy teams are polite and courteous. In reality, interactions in healthy teams can appear counterproductive (they may exhibit rambling, interruptions, gossiping, losing track of their point, etc.), and the stories told of the "tensions and infighting" among the *Saturday Night Live* writing team highlight this point. The *SNL* writing staff "all felt safe enough with one another to keep pitching new jokes and ideas," according to Lorne Michaels, executive producer and creator, who added, "You know



that saying “There is no *I* in *TEAM*”? All I wanted were a bunch of *Is*. I wanted everyone to hear each other, but no one to disappear into the group.”

In a chapter that reads like a thriller, Duhigg contrasts the tales of two plane disasters to illustrate the downfalls of cognitive tunneling and explain how to make the right decisions in the moment by focusing on the right information. Keeping our brains calm and focused in chaotic environments requires paying attention to the right things by creating mental models that serve as scaffolding “for the torrent of information that constantly surrounds us.” Duhigg recommends taking control of attention by envisioning your day while driving to work, finding people “to hear your theories and challenge them,” and “getting into a pattern of forcing your-

self to anticipate what’s next.”

Managing our brain’s need for cognitive closure, defined as “the desire for a confident judgment on an issue,” requires defining SMART goals in light of stretch objectives that are challenged as new information becomes available. To illustrate this point, Duhigg shares a captivating story. The need for cognitive closure left Israeli leaders off guard

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**“You know that saying ‘There is no *I* in *TEAM*’?” said Lorne Michaels, executive producer and creator of *Saturday Night Live*. “All I wanted were a bunch of *Is*.”**

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in the run-up to the 1973 Yom Kippur war — despite overwhelming evidence that Egypt was readying for an invasion. At the 40th anniversary of the war, Eli Zeira, the head of the Directorate of Military Intel-

ligence, conceded that he had erred by ignoring the “seemingly impossible” because he “hadn’t thought through all of the alternatives as deeply as he should.” In a tragic oversight, he admitted that he had neglected to consider a simple note that he always kept in his pocket, reading “and if not?” We all have to continually challenge our assumptions about what we are doing and why we are doing it.

In one of my favorite chapters, Duhigg makes a convincing case for dusting off our college statistics textbooks. He shares the thinking of poker professionals to illustrate the point that playing the odds, with the long term in mind, is the key to success. To convince us that this skill is within our grasp, he describes research performed by scientists from the University of Pennsylvania and the University of California. Their studies demonstrated that “simply exposing participants to probabilistic training was associated with as much as a 50 percent increase in the accuracy of their predictions.” The key is to envision the future as having multiple possibilities and to develop intuition about relative likelihood by exposing ourselves to a wide spectrum of successes and failures. This takes discipline, he says, because we are more inclined to focus

on our successes, but it is well worth it: Successful people, Duhigg writes, “spend an enormous amount of time seeking out information on failures” by reading about companies that have gone bankrupt, asking col-

leagues who haven't gotten promoted what went wrong, and asking themselves why a certain meeting or phone call did not go well.

Duhigg performs a valuable service by cataloguing, critiquing, and curating the most important contemplation devices. He deftly combines insights from psychology and behavioral economics with lived experience. "For the first time," he says, "we understand how to train

hind, and whether they feel panicky under the weight of excessive stimuli, no matter what they do. If you feel these things, he says, it's a signal that you are "not tackling the right problems." As a result, you are likely to act out in ways that are reflexive and counterproductive, such as pushing your child aside when she reaches out for help or lulling yourself into a false sense of accomplishment by checking email rather than

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## We are more inclined to focus on our successes, but successful people, Duhigg writes, "spend an enormous amount of time seeking out information on failures."

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our brains to think better," by using "techniques that are often counter-intuitive." *Smarter, Faster, Better* thus serves as something of a user's manual for one's own brain.

As is unavoidable with such books, not every insight is original and brilliant. It's my guess that readers will already be familiar with some portion of the insights shared in *Smarter, Faster, Better*. But it is still worthwhile to engage with it all the way through because Duhigg encourages readers to consider how to apply much of what they already know to improve their productivity.

I wish there were more discussion of how to apply the concepts practically — either in the book or on the author's website, as there was for *The Power of Habit*. In the appendix, Duhigg attempts to illustrate the ideas by sharing how he applied them when writing the book and being held accountable by his editor.

In his conversation with me, Duhigg recommended that people stop and think about whether they are falling further and further be-

digging into an important but difficult assignment. Duhigg believes that everyone knows which parts of their lives they are "failing at." To improve, it's a matter of reviewing the contemplation devices and acting on them.

Duhigg admits that it's not going to be easy to adapt the insights from *Smarter, Faster, Better* to redesign our lives amid the non-stop meetings, voluminous emails, and weekly grind. Realistically, the book will be only as valuable as the extent of our willingness to "toggle from automaticity," think deeply about the challenges we face, and act accordingly. +

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