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'Your brain can sabotage the ability to come up with novel ideas'

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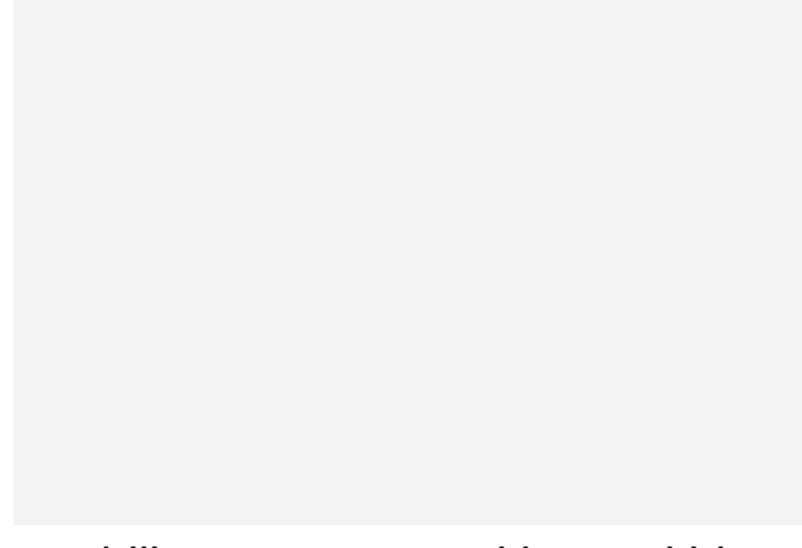
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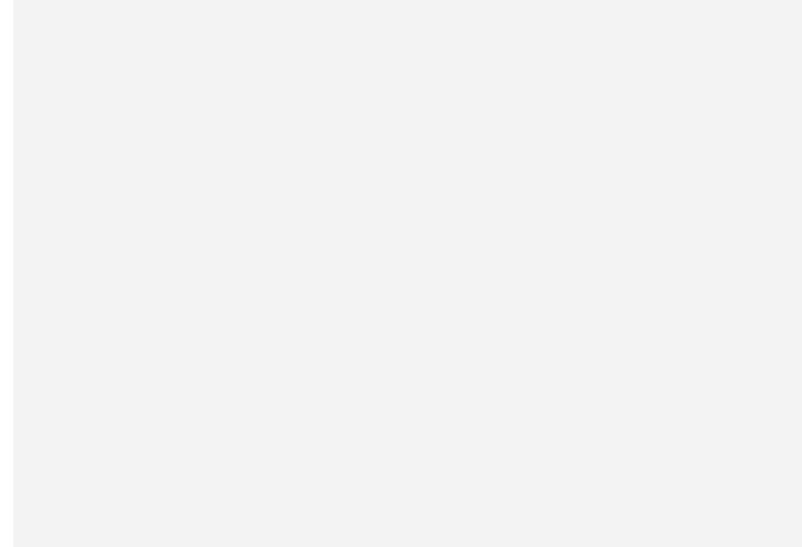
New Delhi, Feb 4 The brain looks for ways to simplify the way information is processed and tends to take shortcuts that inhibit the ability to generate novel solutions. We are thus "stuck with ideas from the past" that prevent us to step back and look at alternatives – and need to avoid falling into this "cognitive trap", Debashis Sarkar, one of Asia's leading organisational improvement experts, writes in a new book on making businesses customer-centric and operationally excellent.

Our brain looks for ways to simplify the way we process information. It uses shortcuts and saves mental energy for harder tasks. Hence, it takes shortcuts and refers to past solutions to solve a problem. The familiar thoughts inhibit our ability to generate novel solutions," Sarker, Managing Partner at Proliferator Advisory & Consulting, writes in "Little BIG Things in Operational Excellence" (SAGE).



"Our brain sabotages our ability to come up with novel ideas. Hence, you have to look for ways to break the pattern," Sarkar writes.

For instance, if problem 'A' has been solved in a specific way in the past, when problem 'B' occurs which is similar to problem 'A', our brain tells us to take the same approach adopted earlier.

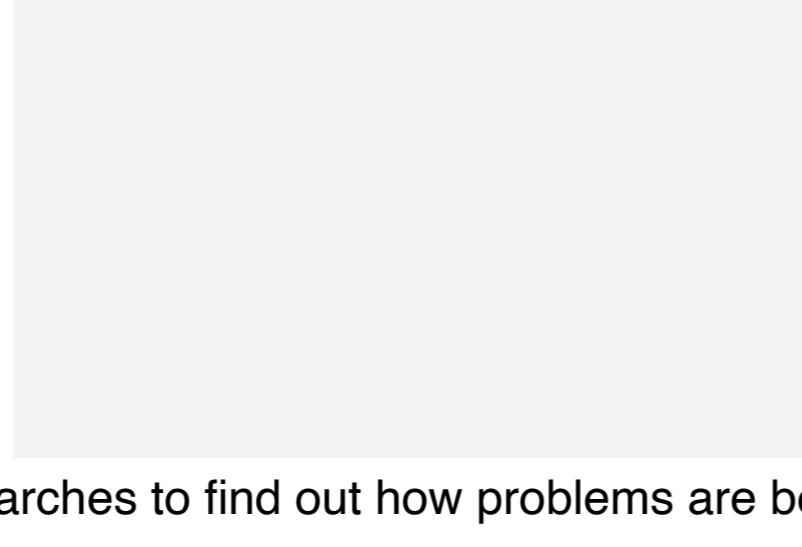


"Clearly, our past knowledge stops us from looking at alternatives," Sarker writes, adding: "This is what happens to experts who steadfastly stand by what they know and have done in the past. Their rigidity blinds them from interesting possibilities. What happens here is that we tend to use similar thought patterns and past experiences to solve a problem even when it may not be relevant. We are stuck with ideas from the past which prevent us to step back and look at alternatives."

So, how does one arrest this phenomenon?

Sarkar suggests a six-point approach:

When entrusted with solving a problem, don't jump into brainstorming solutions; instead, pause and reflect. Understand if the problem statement reflects the issue or needs to be received to represent the reality.



Regularly carry out searches to find out how problems are being solved across industries, disciplines and functions. A small team can be entrusted with this responsibility. They hold regular sessions to share what new they have discovered in their searches.

Set up a team with a mandate to find solutions from outside their organisation. When other employees see how innovative approaches are being used to solve problems, there is always the rub-on effect.

At times, gaze mindlessly into open space while not looking at anything nor thinking of anything either; stare at the clouds, look into the garden and stare at the leaves without thinking – what the Japanese call *boketto*. It's healthy, reduces our heart rate and clears our mind – and also increases our creativity towards problem-solving.

Avoid solving a problem when you are tired.

Take regular breaks. During that time, do something else or just let your brain rest. Go for a walk, take a swim, run on a treadmill, go around on your bike, go through a book of art, etc. When you are taking a break, your thinking is unconsciously re-energized.

This is just one of the bite-sized chapters in the book that elucidate concepts of the 7 Ps of Operational Excellence, 10 Laws of Process Work, Power of Early Wins, Power of Conflict, Laws of Customers, and other compelling practices. It also includes real-life events from the business world such as McDonald's Kolkata Food Safety Issue, Bedsheet scandal, Punto Fiasco, etc.

In sum, the book dovetails insights from the author's experience spanning over three decades, industry trends, and eminent scholars to shed light on the concepts of process, customers, data, automation, change management, culture, and behavioral science.

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