EXERCISE

Naming My Neural Patterns

OVERVIEW

Learned neural patterns comprise our personalities. Certain patterns and behaviors are prosocial, providing you with an energetic sense of focus, relational connection, and embodied safety, while other patterns are self-defeating and potentially hinder team success. Unhelpful behaviors at work such as over-functioning, micromanaging, perfectionism, procrastination, catastrophizing, and people-pleasing stem from protective neural states. And all contain hidden payoffs in the service of protecting you (e.g., avoiding criticism, maintaining connection, avoiding possible failure, reducing anxiety) along with noteworthy costs to your well-being.

Self-defeating patterns at work are often invisible to us. They may feel normal or even justified. A useful way to unveil your self-limiting behaviors and neural patterns, especially the ones holding you back professionally, is to audit them. Identifying a detrimental neural pattern allows you to gain awareness of its behaviors, when it activates, where you land in your autonomic home, and what its payoff and cost are. As you pull up the veil on your fossilized neural patterns, you gain clarity for updating and reshaping them.

AUDITING YOUR NEURAL PATTERNS

This exercise asks you to face and reveal unhelpful patterns, which may be cherished and protective. Beginning to label them may feel threatening to your nervous system. As you move forward in this exercise, lean in with curiosity and goodwill toward yourself. Go gently, remembering that your self-defeating patterns were once helpful to your earlier survival—and that you have different choices now.

- To get started, pull out a blank piece of paper.
- Before you start the exercise, take a big stretch up, shake out your hands, and let out a long sighing breath for 7 to 8 seconds with your belly muscles. One more time. And now... time to settle in.

To investigate and identify your self-limiting patterns, use the following prompts to guide you. Then jot down your recurring patterns.

1. Look for “too much” or “too little” tendencies.

- “Too much” may manifest as overworking, over-directing, over-accommodating, over-explaining, over-expecting.
- “Too little” may emerge as holding back ideas, procrastinating, avoiding conflict, disengaging.
- Prompt: “Where do I consistently go to extremes?”

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2. Track the residual "ick" after certain behaviors.

- Pay attention to interactions that leave a remnant of regret, tension, cringe, or an uncomfortable replay of the conversation later on.
- Prompt: "What did I do or say just before that residual 'ick' feeling showed up?"

3. Listen for recurring feedback (especially the nuanced kind)

- Coworkers rarely come out and say "This is your pattern," but they give hints or indirect cues.
- Prompt: "What recurring feedback do I hear regularly from my colleagues?"
- Hints you may hear: "You don't need to do that by yourself." "I'd love to hear your perspective on that." "It's OK to let them figure it out on their own." "You certainly wait until the last minute to get things done."

4. Notice subtle triggers

- Neural patterns tend to activate from predictable situations.
- Prompt: "When X happens, I tend to Y."
- For example, subtle triggers of unclear expectations, inefficiencies, time pressures, or being advised or questioned may activate old recurring behaviors.

REFLECTIONS OF YOUR NEURAL PATTERNS AT WORK

Making neural patterns visible gives you options for how to meet, understand, and update them. To gain more context and clarity of your identified neural patterns, run each one through a quick audit with the following questions:

- Which situation activated the behaviors of my neural pattern?
- Where did I land in my autonomic home?
- What did I do in the situation?
- What was the immediate result?
- What was my payoff? (What does this behavior protect me from?)
- What did it cost me? (How does it affect your long-term well-being?)

As you continue to explore and reflect on your neural patterns, you can reduce their perseveration by shifting your neural state toward more *CAKE*. A more regulated nervous system will allow you to increase your awareness of them and provide an opportunity to reframe and repurpose them.

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