

## **Influence and Persuasion - The Power of Subconscious Communication**

As psychologists further explore the still largely unknown workings of the human brain, more and more is learned about subconscious thinking and how it critically impacts on our attempts to influence and persuade others.

**Ways in which we experience it** We all experience subconscious thought in some form or other: We wake from sleep to find clarity over problem issues. We have “Eureka” moments when unresolved questions are suddenly answered. We complete a long journey having driven the last stretch on “auto pilot.” Brand logos, product strap lines, roadside hoardings, TV commercials, product placement in TV programmes all use peripheral or subconscious communication. They anchor images, sounds and thoughts in our minds, and subsequently trigger off “impulse” buying decisions. The next time you pass Macdonald’s notice how you will actually experience the taste of a burger.

Music teachers and sports psychologists coach their students into a state of unconscious competence. It’s just not possible to repeat all the complex mental and physical elements that combine in an instant to perform a brilliant shot. Top tennis players and golfers achieve this excellence through being in “the zone.” They practice and perform all the physical elements of a brilliant shot over and over again, storing a coded memory into their brains. They anchor that coded memory with a thought or “ritual,” and apply that thought or “ritual” to trigger the coded memory into action..

**Explanations for it** Things we learn are stored away in our memory rather like data being stored in folders on our computer’s hard drive. Millions of thoughts, feelings, memories, responses etc., are “filed” in billions of neurons. Chemicals “wire up” these neurons, and the brain “works” by the transmission of electrical impulses in a vast and complex electro-chemical network. When the brain receives a message it scans the “files” for meaning; similar to the search functions of a computer. However just as we see with computer searches, or predictive text on mobile telephones, the brain anticipates intended meaning and takes short cuts to what it thinks is meant. This may not always be the intended meaning.

This gets especially interesting when we learn that the non-conscious part of this “database” could be 10 billions times larger than the conscious part. Just how the mind scans, and the way we think, feel and respond is largely determined by the “wiring” chemicals and their state. Sleep, exercise, nutritional state, drugs **and external stimuli** all affect the levels and healthiness of these chemicals. For example, inadequate sleep leads to serotonin depletion which leads to melancholia and negative thinking. Rigorous exercise creates serotonin and dopamine which lead to feeling good and positive thinking. Whilst stress creates cortisol, which effectively disconnects the network, shutting down clear thinking!

We can also see how brain wave patterns play a part in subconscious thinking. As the wave cycle slows from the active and concentrating Beta state down through the relaxing Alpha state and then into the

“hypnotic” Theta states (the motorway auto-pilot state) we become more creative and also more positive and open-minded to suggestion.

We also know now that information enters the memory simultaneously through channels that are independent of conscious thinking; and that this “preconscious processing” is faster, smarter and significantly more efficient than conscious thinking **in the interpretation of stimuli, and the triggering of emotional reactions.**

The left-side, right-side division of the brain also offers part of the explanation. Left-side thinking with its sequential, logical, rule following bias suggests a more conscious analytical approach towards expected conclusions. Right-side thinking is holistic, intuitive, fantasy based, offering a more imaginative approach to possible outcomes.

**How we need to work with it** Putting these explanations together we can now better understand why communicators have long been saying that the interpretation of meaning is “determined 50% by visual and 40% by auditory stimuli, with the words themselves account for less than 10%.” It is mainly because of subconscious thinking that **Visual stimuli** from the speaker and the environment - facial expression, body language, dress, animation, colour, light - will trigger recognition and interpretation.

Why similarly, **Auditory stimuli** - pitch, accent, diction, tone of voice, rate of breathing, frequency, volume, accompanying music and environmental sounds - will connect with “stored” references to interpret meaning.

So to persuade effectively and gain understanding of our intended meaning we must learn to communicate through two channels. As we speak directly to the conscious mind, we must also “speak” indirectly to the subconscious mind through those powerful external stimuli, so that they reinforce the message in a congruent manner. Also, we must remember that the indirect channel accesses a part of the mind that is more imaginative, more able to see the bigger picture, less prescriptive and regulated. And therefore more likely to consider what we’re suggesting!!

Certainly if we pursue excellence in influence and persuasion we must accept, like it or not, that **the subconscious mind of the other party is likely to have the final say.**

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