

HARNESS THE POWER OF BEHAVIORAL
SCIENCE TO TRANSFORM YOUR WORKING LIFE

HOW
TO HAVE A
GOOD
DAY

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Harness the Power
of Behavioral Science
to Transform
Your Working Life



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INTRODUCTION

How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.

—ANNIE DILLARD



Thirty years ago, I picked up my first paycheck. It wasn't a check, in fact—just a small collection of bills and coins in an envelope, my wages for working as a clerk in a local supermarket. On the face of it, it wasn't a great job. It was poorly paid, and certainly not glamorous. I stacked shelves, mopped floors, and wore a company-issued uniform marked with stains from its previous owner. The manager was gruff and kept an eye on the store from a booth high above the shop floor. And yet, somehow, I liked it. There was camaraderie among the staff, and even the occasional night out together. I took pride in pleasing customers with my speed at the register. I felt useful.

Six years later, I landed a far more upscale role as a researcher at an economics institute. I had my own office and a surprisingly large number of recycling bins all to myself. But I soon felt strangely miserable. I couldn't get anyone to pay attention to my work, and I drifted. I wrote an enormous, earnest report—on economic development in post-Communist Europe—that I'm pretty certain nobody read. I was dealing with what we'd these days call a “first-world problem,” and I knew I was lucky to have the job. But it became hard to summon the energy to turn up to work every day. And at that point in my life, I didn't know how to turn it around. I treaded water till my contract was up, then quietly moved on.

Over the course of my life, I've done a lot of different types of work, some of it worse and some of it better than those two early jobs of mine. I've been a hotel maid, receptionist, and waitress. I've had demanding careers as an economist, a management consultant, and an executive coach. I've worked in the private sector and the public sector; I've been part of a huge global company and I've launched my own tiny start-up. And through it all, I noticed the same thing over and again: that the

quality of my day-to-day experience wasn't necessarily defined by my title. It was possible to have good days in "bad" jobs, while the more prestigious roles didn't always correlate with great contentment.

That paradox seeded my lifelong curiosity about what it takes to flourish at work, both mentally and emotionally. It became something of a personal cause as I sought to find the right way to handle the increasing intensity of my professional life—and even more so once I noticed how my colleagues and clients often felt frustrated and worn down, making it hard for them to function at their best. In fact, survey after survey suggests that half (or more) of all employees feel disengaged in their work.¹ Add to that the off days experienced by those of us who generally feel motivated and happy, and we're looking at a lot of lost human potential. Yet we often talk about professional dissatisfaction as if it's a casual disappointment, something to be endured until the weekend rolls around, and perhaps joked about with friends. ("What happened to you today?" "Oh, work, you know." "Ha ha. Me too. Have a drink.")

So I've devoted much of my career to figuring out how to improve our chances of saying a cheery "yes, thanks" when we're asked "Did you have a good day?" My twelve years with McKinsey & Company (the management consultancy) helped greatly in my pursuit of that goal, since it gave me the opportunity to find out what everyday life was like inside hundreds of workplaces. I specialized in projects that helped organizations shift their culture in a more positive direction, which meant I spent a lot of time studying behavior, attitudes, and processes. And whenever I could, I'd ask my clients the same three questions: What does a good day look like for you? What about a bad one? What would it take to have more good days? Then, I'd get to work, helping them turn their bad days into better days. Sometimes that would involve coaching individual leaders; other times, I'd convene large groups to help them rethink the way they worked together. Repeatedly, I observed how fairly small changes—for example, fine-tuning the way people set priorities or handled disagreements—could result in major improvements to performance and job satisfaction. It was uplifting to see.

Throughout those years, my work leaned heavily on the growing body of behavioral science findings on what it takes for human beings to thrive. My first career was in economics, but I became deeply interested in developments in the other behavioral sciences, too, so I

did some additional training in psychology and neuroscience. Then I spent countless hours reading academic articles and books (more than six hundred at last count) in the three disciplines, looking for findings that I could translate into actionable advice for my clients. And that abundance of research and practical experience is the bedrock of *How to Have a Good Day*.

SO WHAT IS A GOOD DAY?

Over the years, I noticed some common answers to my “what is a good day” question—answers that resonated with the small delights of my humble supermarket job. First, people often talked about getting a buzz from feeling productive, and from knowing that their efforts counted toward something worthwhile. The best days also tended to involve people feeling confident that they were doing a fine job, and that they had the support they needed from others. Finally, people talked about good days leaving them feeling more energized than depleted, overall. I don’t mean that the work wasn’t physically or mentally tiring—just that it gave back enough enjoyment and motivation to make up for whatever it was taking out of them.

Of course, whether we get to have all that agreeable stuff on a given workday is partly the result of luck. If we’re handling a cranky colleague or a crisis, it’s obvious that we’re not entirely in control of the way the day feels. But my experience has led me to a heartening conclusion: we have more room to maneuver than we generally realize. The secret lies in learning some of the science explaining how the brain works, and why people behave the way they do. Less of the day seems driven by chance once we understand some of the forces that shape our choices and our emotions, and once we recognize how our thought patterns can affect everything from our perception of reality to the moods of those around us. Grasp these essentials, and it becomes far clearer how to bring the best out of ourselves and others. And that puts us in a much stronger position to create the kind of day we really want to have.

For example, an executive who shares his story later in the book talks about starting to have “unexpectedly great meetings” after he learned something that behavioral scientists know well: that even small challenges to a person’s sense of competence will put their brain on the defensive, making it harder for them to think clearly (in turn creating something of a self-fulfilling prophecy). In his meetings, the executive’s

take-no-prisoners personal style had inadvertently been triggering this defensive reaction in the people around him, and it was causing a lot of tension. But once he tweaked the way he expressed his views, the quality of his interactions changed within moments.

Elsewhere in the book, another seasoned professional tells us about “suddenly” securing new promotion opportunities after trying out new science-based techniques to sharpen her focus and self-confidence. We hear about a leader who delightedly discovered hidden talents in her team after acting on research showing that people think more creatively when given a particular type of space to think. Once an entrepreneur learns a little about the brain’s reward system, he finds he can say no to people while making them feel almost as good as if he’d agreed to their requests. And so on.

How to Have a Good Day is all about the ways we can create more of these sorts of lucky breaks once we know more about the science of our magnificent minds.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

I’ve arranged the book around seven building blocks that echo the themes in people’s answers to my “good day” question. First, there are two sections designed to give you a strong foundation for everything you’re doing, by showing you how to set the right kind of priorities and make the best possible use of your time. Next, you’ll find three sections that explain how to transform more of your tasks into a pleasure and a triumph, by helping you to ace every interaction, maximize your creativity and wisdom, and boost your personal impact. Finally, I’ve written two sections on ways to maintain your joie de vivre throughout the workday, by showing you how to boost your resilience in the face of disappointment, and laying out strategies for generating more energy throughout it all.

As a bonus, you’ll find advice at the back of the book showing you how to use the book’s insights to improve two fixtures of modern working life: meetings and emails. There’s also a handy checklist to help you use the book’s tips to reinvigorate your morning-to-night routine.

SCIENCE, STEPS, STORIES

Throughout the book, you'll find a blend of scientific evidence, practical techniques, and real examples from people who've used those techniques in their own lives. Let me say a few words about each of those.

First, every piece of advice in *How to Have a Good Day* is backed up by rigorous scientific evidence from psychology, behavioral economics, or neuroscience. I've taken care to focus only on findings that are widely accepted and have been replicated by multiple research teams, though I've sometimes picked out quirky experiments that manage to illustrate a particular point while raising a smile (or a groan). My aim has been to keep the science as simple as it can be while remaining correct. To help with that, in the "Science Essentials" section which appears right after this introduction, I've written a short guide to three big cross-cutting themes that frame every idea in the book. That's all you'll need to navigate this fascinating evidence with ease.

The central purpose of the book is to translate all that science into step-by-step techniques for improving your day-to-day life. Each chapter is designed to allow you to quickly find the advice you need, because the practical pointers are highlighted with bullet points; each chapter also ends with a box that summarizes its advice for quick reference. I've laid out the chapters in a sequence that I hope is helpful—but if you're wrestling with a specific challenge at work right now, you might choose to flip ahead to material that speaks directly to your current concern. Skipping around should work, especially if you've first read the Science Essentials section.

As I've already hinted, you'll also hear real stories from dozens of successful people who describe how the advice in this book has helped them improve their working lives. Together, they represent most major industries and span every continent of the world (except the coldest one). Some are at the peak of their careers, while others are on their way up. I've used their real names in all but a couple of cases, although I've not included their surnames or organizations to keep them from being deluged with requests for advice once their wise ways are made public. I hope you'll find them as inspiring as I do. And in case you're wondering, I *do* take my own medicine every single day—so I'll also share some examples of times that these techniques helped me flourish in my career.

SPREADING THE WORD

As well as showing you how to be in top form, *How to Have a Good Day* can be used to help you bring the best out of people you lead, manage, or collaborate with. Most of the techniques here can be used in groups, to improve team interactions, or provide structure for important meetings—whether or not you refer to the science behind the techniques. (If you would like to gather colleagues together to talk about the book’s suggestions, you’ll find materials to help you facilitate group discussions at www.howtohaveagoodyday.com.)

I’ve also seen the book’s advice make a positive difference in settings beyond conventional workplaces. Whether you’re a college student or a community volunteer, a retiree or a homemaker, you can use the principles in this book to boost your effectiveness and your enjoyment of the day. Many of my clients have even confided to me over the years that these techniques have improved their marriages and strengthened relationships with children and friends. Some grin when I ask them how it’s going, telling me they’ve surreptitiously used their nearest and dearest as guinea pigs before trying out new approaches at work. So do have some fun experimenting with these suggestions, wherever you are.



We all face things we can’t change. But behavioral science is sometimes startling in showing us just how much influence we have on the way we experience the world. When we choose to take this evidence on board, the effect can be nothing short of transformational. We can exert more control and start to enjoy more “well-planned luck.” And as a result, we can all have many more good days. Now let’s get started.

The Science Essentials

Note: "The Science Essentials" section offers the reader a concise synthesis of three cross-cutting themes from the latest research in neuroscience, psychology and behavioral economics. It is not included in this excerpt, but can be found in the book itself.

PART I

Priorities

Setting Intentional Direction and Focus for Your Day

Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate.

—CARL JUNG

Let me begin by telling you about a morning some years ago, when I took none of the advice I'm about to lay out.

I was in a bad mood from the moment I woke up. I'd just been asked to join a new project that didn't interest me, and it was my first week on the job. In persuading me to sign up, my boss had suggested I would nicely complement Lucas, another senior colleague on the project. Lucas was a hard-driving operations guy, and I was all about the so-called human side. Lucas would produce reams of analysis and ideas; meanwhile, I'd help our clients create plans that their colleagues could rally around. I understood why our boss thought we'd be a great combination, but I couldn't shake a concern about the mismatch in our working styles.

On this particular morning, our team was about to have its first big meeting with some new clients, and I fell out of bed with barely enough time to get ready. On my way in, my head was a fog of lingering annoyance and tiredness. When I arrived, I discovered the meeting was taking place in one of those dark, cramped, low-ceilinged videoconference rooms that are so common in modern office buildings. Everyone was sitting in a row, as though we were at some kind of judicial hearing, while disembodied faces floated on the video screen in front of us. My heart sank further.

As I thought about how badly I could use another coffee, Lucas plowed into the brick of paper in front of us, without much introduction and with an evidently clear sense of what he wanted to say. I did my best to go with the flow and contribute constructively, but the long

discussion felt to me like pushing a boulder uphill—lots of little misunderstandings, people talking over each other, the air thick with unspoken irritations and concerns. By the end of it, I didn't feel I'd made much of a positive impact. It was just as I'd feared, and it left me with a cloud over my head for the whole day.

Some time later, in a better mood, I felt compelled to talk to Lucas about my concern that we'd started on the wrong foot with the clients. But as I gave him my take on the meeting, he looked incredulous. Lucas hadn't thought the room was particularly unpleasant; he had no recollection of the frowns and awkwardness I mentioned. He'd been excited about the new project, happy to have found a time for us all to talk, keen to make progress. He knew what he wanted from the meeting, and he'd achieved it.

Of course, we had different personalities, and that explained some of the variation in our perspectives. But only some of it. Something else was going on: it was truly as if we'd each been in an entirely different meeting. He hadn't seen through his rosier-tinted glasses what I'd seen. From my side, it quickly became obvious that I hadn't paid much attention to his side of the story. He pointed out, convincingly, all the things we'd gotten done; he reminded me of moments of levity, smiles that I barely remembered. It wasn't that either of us was completely wrong, and we avoided outright insults as we traded viewpoints. ("Why are you being so blind? Were we even in the same room? Sheesh. Get real.")

But we'd experienced the same few hours very differently. How could that be? And, of particular interest to me: why had he enjoyed the meeting so much more than I had? The answer, I came to realize, was in the way each of us had approached the day. Lucas had been deliberate in deciding what he wanted to see, what he wanted to accomplish, and how he wanted to feel. But I'd let the morning kind of happen to me. I'd been professional, yes, but I'd drifted into the day.

And that lack of direction made me miss what I now know were three big opportunities to influence the quality of my morning. First, our priorities and assumptions determine our perceptions to a surprising extent. Second, setting the right kind of goals not only reliably lifts our performance but also makes us feel good. And third, what we imagine in our mind's eye can shape our real-life experience. In the following three chapters, I want to show you how to exploit each of these major behavioral science benefits, to have a much better time than I had with Lucas that day.

ONE

Choosing Your Filters

We so often cruise through our busy days on autopilot, rolling from task to task without pausing to stop and think. We work hard and do our best, and we're glad if it all works out to our liking. Sometimes luck is on our side, and sometimes it isn't. "That's just life," we might tell ourselves.

But I'd like to make the case that we can do better than that, thanks to an important aspect of the way our brain makes sense of the world: the fact that we consciously notice only a small selection of what's actually happening around us, and filter out the rest. Because the things that get through the filters are strongly influenced by the priorities and assumptions we take into the day, that gives us a huge opportunity. It means that with a few minutes of mental preparation—involving a quick check and reset of those priorities and assumptions—we can shift the way we experience the day, making it more productive and enjoyable. This mental preparation is a process that I call *setting intentions*, because it's about being more intentional about your approach to the day.

Before I talk about a quick daily intention-setting routine for you to try, let me explain why the reality we experience is so dependent on our filters.

OUR SUBJECTIVE REALITY

As we learned in *The Science Essentials*, our brain's deliberate system (responsible for reasoning, self-control, and planning) has only so much attention to give to our complex world. So as we go through the day, our automatic system prioritizes whatever seems most worthy of the deliberate system's attention, while screening out anything that

doesn't seem important. This filtering happens without us being aware of it, and it's central to our brain's ability to cope with the complexity of the world. But this selective attention also leaves us experiencing an incomplete, subjective version of reality—one that may or may not serve us well.

Obviously, it's a good thing that our automatic system filters out things that are truly unimportant. Otherwise we'd be obsessively counting carpet fibers or getting mesmerized by the ingredients of our lunch, making it hard to get anything done. The downside, however, is that even potentially useful things can be tagged by our automatic system as "unimportant." For example, if we're intently focused on checking our messages, our automatic system might decide it's not worth diverting some of our attention toward understanding a question we've just been asked by a colleague. When she raises her voice and finally breaks through into our consciousness with a "Hey, did you hear me?" we might apologize and swear we hadn't heard her before. And we'd be technically correct. We *didn't* hear her—not consciously, anyway.

Now, we can't switch off our automatic system's filtering function—by definition, it's automatic. But we *can* adjust the settings, by being more proactive in defining what our brain sees as "important" each day. If we do that, we can affect what our conscious brain gets to see and hear. It's one of the most powerful ways to steer our day toward the reality we'd most like to experience.

On Autopilot, What Does Our Brain Treat as "Important"?

Our automatic system uses several selective attention rules to decide what's important enough to bring to our conscious attention and what should be filtered out. If we can understand how some of those rules work, we have a better chance of hacking into the system and adjusting its settings.

The first thing to know is that if we've got a task that we're consciously prioritizing, our automatic system will make sure we see anything directly relevant to that specific task, and it will tend to blank out anything that seems off topic. *Anything?* "Surely," you're saying, "if something striking cropped up in front of us, off topic or not, we'd see it, wouldn't we?" Well, an enormous amount of research suggests we might not.¹ Take this recent study, for example. Psychologist Trafton Drew and colleagues at Harvard's Visual Attention Lab asked some

experienced radiologists to look closely at a bunch of medical images to spot abnormalities. The radiologists were given a stack of genuine lung scans to work with, some of them with sadly genuine nodules. But the last image was different: it showed a picture of a gorilla inserted inside the lung. (The researchers were paying wry homage to the original gorilla/basketball experiment described in *The Science Essentials*.) Astonishingly, 83 percent of the radiologists failed to spot the gorilla, although the image was forty-eight times the size of the average lung nodule. Even more remarkable is the fact that the Harvard researchers used an eye-tracking device that showed that most of the radiologists looked directly at the gorilla—and yet they still didn't notice it.² It's not that they saw it and discounted or forgot about it. Their brains simply didn't consciously register the ape. In other words: because they weren't actually looking for it, they didn't see it.

This type of selective attention is what scientists call *inattentional blindness*—that is, we see what we've decided merits our attention, and we're remarkably blind to the rest. So the priorities we set for ourselves really matter.

We don't even have to be deeply focused on a task to encounter inattentional blindness. In fact, as soon as we have something on our mind, we become much more attuned to anything related to that concern and less attuned to everything else. In one study that was conducted by psychologist Rémi Radel in France, where mealtimes matter, volunteers who'd been forced to skip their lunch went on to see food-related words more clearly and quickly in a word-recognition test. That is, the hungry people noticed the word "gâteau" more readily than "bateau."³ (If the researchers had taken their volunteers out on a boat, they might have seen "bateau" even faster than "gâteau.") Our automatic system will generally prioritize information that resonates with anything that's top of mind for us.

Even our attitude can play a part in setting the perceptual filters we apply to the day. Joseph Forgas and Gordon Bower, professors at the University of New South Wales and Stanford, respectively, conducted an experiment designed to put volunteers into a slightly good or bad mood by giving them random positive or negative feedback about their performance on a minor test they'd just taken. After that, the volunteers were given some descriptions of fictional people to read. Those descriptions were carefully calibrated to be neutral: the volunteers could easily interpret the subjects as being either energetic or chaotic, calm

or boring, depending on their reading of the text. And what did Forgas and Bower find?⁴ That their happier volunteers were significantly more likely to see the people described in a positive light, compared with the volunteers they'd deliberately put into a funk. And it's not just interpersonal judgments that are affected by our mood. Another research team found that sad people perceived a hill as being significantly steeper (and saw scaling it as a less pleasant prospect) than people who were feeling more upbeat.⁵

So it really *is* possible to get up on the wrong side of the bed. Our perceptions of the world can be strongly influenced by our starting point, good or bad, because our brain's automatic system makes sure that we see and hear anything that resonates with our conscious priorities, our top-of-mind concerns, and even our mood. Meanwhile, it downplays everything else.

What Are Your Filters Doing to Your Reality?

Now let's think about how we can apply this knowledge. Suppose you and I were sitting in the same room, participating in the same conversation. My priorities, concerns, and mood would shape my perceptions of what was going on, while yours would shape yours. As a result, it's entirely possible that I would miss things that matter to you, while getting hung up on things that don't register with you at all. With all this in mind, it's little surprise that my meeting with Lucas didn't seem like the pinnacle of my professional life, given my crankiness when I walked in. Meanwhile, of course, he had a blast. We're each living through our own private reality, a reality shaped by our hardworking automatic system's attempts to allocate our attention to the right things.

So what particular reality would you like your brain to pay a little more attention to? Take your next meeting. If your primary concern is to get your point across, you'll probably find yourself noticing every instance of being interrupted, and every moment of airtime that others take up. You'll probably lose some of the thread of the conversation, without realizing it, because you'll be focused on your desire to tell people what you want them to hear. You're not being willfully closed-minded; your automatic system is just efficiently prioritizing information that relates to your state of mind. Turn all this around, and the reverse is true, too. For example, if you instead decided to focus on finding new opportunities for collaboration or on hearing useful input

from your colleagues, chances are you'd discover more of *that*. As we change our intentions, our brain's filters change, and the facts can appear to change with them.

SET YOUR INTENTIONS, SET YOUR FILTERS

The point behind all of this is clear: we miss a big opportunity if we simply let the day happen to us.

We *can't* control everything (there are different types of books for those who believe that's possible). But we *can* tweak the way our working hours feel, by being more deliberate in setting our perceptual filters. And that's where it helps to have an intention-setting routine, one that has us pay explicit attention to the priorities, concerns, and mood we're carrying into the day.

Here's an approach I like. It involves taking just a moment to look at something from three angles:

- ➔ **Real aim:** Think about each of the most important of today's activities—the people you'll meet, the work you'll do. What really matters most in making them a success? That's your real aim.
- ➔ **Attitude:** As you think about the upcoming workday, take a moment to notice and acknowledge the concerns that are dominating your thoughts or your mood. Do these concerns help you achieve your real aim—and if not, can you set them aside for now?
- ➔ **Attention:** Given your real priorities, where do you want to focus your attention? Figure out what you want to see more of, and then make sure you look out for it.

Most people I've worked with find it's ideal to think about these questions before the day gets under way, either in the morning or even the night before. But because the whole routine takes no more than a couple of minutes, it's never too late to set your intentions as you're flying from one thing to the next.

For example, how differently might my meeting with Lucas have gone if I'd taken a moment to answer those three questions just before walking into that conference room? I might have had these things in mind:

- **Real aim:** “What really matters to me is to help the team get off to a strong start with our new clients, by encouraging a collaborative tone and helping everyone feel good about the prospect of working together.”
- **Attitude:** “I admit that I’m feeling grumpy and tired right now. I can’t make myself less tired. But I can decide to set aside my irritation at the way the project is set up, in favor of focusing on the real priority: making the team a success.”
- **Attention:** “I want to spot opportunities to help the team gel, by highlighting common ground in their ideas. I want to look for chances to inject warmth into the meeting.”

Going over this mental checklist would have taken me no more than a few moments as I stashed my coat on my way into the video-conference room. (And yes, ever since that day, I’ve made sure to do this before embarking on anything that matters to me.) It simply doesn’t take much effort to focus your filters more firmly on the kind of day you want—especially if you can make it a regular part of your daily schedule.

To see a great example of someone who knows the value of setting intentions, let’s meet Martin, the strategy director of an aircraft manufacturer. Alongside this role, he somehow finds time to sit on the board of several technology companies and provide advice to high-tech entrepreneurs seeking to get their start-ups off the ground. He’s thoughtful, focused, and successful—partly, he says, because he’s learned to be as strategic about his daily personal intentions as he is about his business.

What led Martin to establish an intention-setting routine? “Well, I’ve always had a problem with concentration,” he says. “I’d get into the office and immediately get pulled into low-value tasks, chatting to colleagues, checking news websites, and so on. I started to realize my days weren’t as good as they could have been because I was just drifting through them.” One morning, by accident, Martin discovered how to give his day more direction. “I was sitting on the bed before going to work, feeling kind of overwhelmed by everything I had on my plate,” he says. “For some reason I just started thinking about what really mattered to me. I picked up a notebook and I just wrote and wrote, about why I was doing what I was doing, and how I wanted to do it. I wasn’t

writing full sentences; it was more of a visual map of things that were important for me. It was incredibly clarifying.” He was struck by how much more upbeat and purposeful he felt afterward, with his intentions so much more crisply and constructively defined.

Naturally, Martin wanted to inject more of that intentional direction into each day. He realized he couldn’t sit on his bed and write for hours every morning, but he came up with a short version of the routine that he could fit into every day. “Before leaving for the office, I spend a moment clearing my head, just breathing deeply. Then I ask myself what’s most important today, given what I’m trying to achieve at work, and make a few notes about where I want to focus my attention. It’s that simple. And things come to the surface that I hadn’t realized were there until I stopped to think. Often it means deciding to take a particular approach to a challenge at work, like thinking longer-term and being more tolerant of delays.”

Martin says the payoff has been clear. “My first hour at work used to be all over the place, very unproductive. Now I’m 100 percent ready to go when I arrive. I’m calmer and in a better mood.” Moreover, throughout the day, he makes a point of recalling his intentions, to help him stay on track. “It reminds me what my real priorities are for the day, if—*when*—I start to feel frazzled.”

Make Your Intentions Positive (or: “Snark In, Snark Out”)

When you’re contemplating a particularly challenging day, it can be easy to find yourself coming up with intentions that are a little sarcastic or negative, like: “What really matters to me is never again creating a two-hundred-page document for a meeting.” Or perhaps you find yourself thinking that your real priority is to persuade one of your colleagues to understand that he made a stupid mistake last week.

But making sure a co-worker realizes his stupidity? It’s not the most uplifting way to articulate an intention. It’s a little petty—and that will have your brain subconsciously prioritizing petty observations. If you genuinely want to have a good conversation, it’s better to articulate a more generous intention that speaks to the bigger picture. Ask yourself what you *really* want to achieve. In the case of dealing with your error-prone colleague, a bigger intention might be to help him work out how to avoid making the same mistake again. Thinking bigger still, you might decide you want to improve your working relationship, so in the

future you can be more honest with each other about how things are going.

Setting these more solution-focused intentions doesn't mean avoiding challenging topics with your errant colleague. But a less combative approach will make it easier for you to spot ways to resolve the situation when you have that conversation. It will also make it easier to avoid triggering a defensive fight-flight-freeze response, whether in his brain or in yours—meaning you'll both be smarter and better able to reach a useful outcome.

ONE MORE THING: CHECK YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

To make our positive intentions an even stronger base for the day we want to have, there's one more step we can take, which is to check and challenge any negative assumptions we're carrying into the day.

Like our priorities, concerns, and moods, our assumptions are another selective attention filter that our automatic brain uses to simplify our experience of the world. It works like this: If we encounter some information or behavior that matches what we're expecting, our automatic system will probably make sure we're aware of it. If, however, we encounter something that runs counter to our expectations, our automatic system will tend to disregard it. Known as *confirmation bias*, this is a cognitive shortcut that saves us considerable mental energy, since it stops us from having to develop a new mental model about the world every time we run into evidence that contradicts our beliefs.

It's Bananas

In fact, confirmation bias doesn't just cause us to filter out information that might challenge our expectations; it can even distort the things we hear and see to match our expectations. Scientists have designed countless clever experiments to demonstrate this, and a favorite example of mine involves bananas. (Yes, I admit this could be construed as another gorilla-related experiment.) When volunteers looked at a black-and-white picture of a banana, tests showed they saw it as slightly yellow—even though in fact it was purely gray. The researchers demonstrated this by asking the volunteers to adjust the background on a screen until it was the same color as the banana shape. Without realizing it, the volunteers selected a background with a slight yellow tinge.

They had such a strong presumption that the banana would be yellow that their brains decided it actually was.⁶

If confirmation bias can affect how we see a tangible object like a banana, you can be sure it sways our subjective judgments of situations at work. In my case, it would have been a great start to set the right personal intentions for the project meeting—for example, to inject warmth rather than frustration into the room, and to look for opportunities to build team spirit. But I also had a deeply held assumption that it's impossible for a new team to bond properly in a videoconference, as opposed to a face-to-face meeting, so my confirmation bias had me quietly looking for evidence that the videoconference wasn't working. Sure enough, that was a big negative factor in how I experienced the meeting; for Lucas, not so much.

Of course, this doesn't mean we should discount our past experience completely—we may have good reason to feel wary or worried. We just want to notice whenever we're feeling strongly attached to some negative expectations about a situation or a person, and recognize that our attachment may cause us to filter out any evidence to the contrary. That flash of self-awareness can be just enough to remind ourselves to be a little more open to taking in new information.

Absolute Language

One helpful sign that you may be falling victim to confirmation bias is when you catch yourself using what I call *absolute language*: words like “never,” “always,” “completely,” “totally,” “absolutely,” or “definitely,” perhaps with a dash of “terrible” or “awful.” The author Theodore Sturgeon once wrote, “Nothing is always absolutely so,” and he was right—very little in life is truly completely good or bad.⁷ So the use of absolute language is a flashing neon sign that you're probably seeing only part of the picture. Martin, the aviation strategy director, agrees. “I tend to overexaggerate the negatives, saying things like “*Nothing's* working.” It feels so good to wallow in your extreme language. I'm getting better, though, at catching myself saying these sorts of things, and asking myself, “Hang on, is that really true? How about checking that?”

So if you find yourself using strong words as you think or talk about the tasks ahead, or the people involved, take that as a helpful trigger to step back and check your perspective. Ask yourself:

- What negative assumptions do I have about this topic, person or activity?
- What am I likely to focus on to **confirm** my assumptions?
- If I had to **challenge** my negative assumptions, what would I say?
- What **counterevidence** can I look out for, to help me keep an open mind?

And here's how I would have answered those questions if I'd acknowledged my negativity on the morning of the ill-fated project meeting with Lucas:

- **Assumption:** "It's going to be a terrible meeting because it's a video-conference."
- **Confirmation:** "There will probably be some technology glitches, and I'll tend to get fixated by them (and any signs of annoyance in other people) if I'm not careful."
- **Challenge:** "Lucas knows the clients and their preferences better than I do. It would probably have taken longer to find a date for us to meet in person. Video technology is better than it used to be."
- **Counterevidence:** "I can choose to notice what actually works well in the setup. I can look for ways to get the meeting back on track if the technology stutters."

With that small dose of additional open-mindedness, my intentions about making a positive difference in the meeting would have become easier to bring to life.

STARTING YOUR DAY THE NIGHT BEFORE

Now let's meet Audrey. She runs a widely respected government-funded agency that helps small companies get the advice and support they need to innovate and grow. An average day might see her delivering a new training course, negotiating for more funds, or encouraging mom-and-

pop firms to take full advantage of the resources her agency offers. She's deeply committed to her work and has a strong sense of what these businesses need, since her own parents have run a small business for some years (an actual mom-and-pop, you might say). Like most leaders, she finds she has to be thoughtful about prioritizing her attention. Otherwise, she says, "I'd just end up doing whatever was most urgent."

So, like Martin, she has a daily intention-setting routine—but Audrey prefers to start her routine the evening before, on the train home. "I first reflect on the day I've just had. I go over what went well, what didn't, why, and what I could have seen coming. Then I look ahead to the next day, to think about what I want from it and what deserves the most attention." She jots down some notes, then starts the next morning by rereading them. "I remind myself of what's most important, and add anything that has occurred to me overnight. And as I go through the day, I refer back to them, especially just before I dive into the biggest things."

Audrey takes particular care to think ahead to the most demanding task of the next day. In her role, that's often a challenging conversation. She gives an example of how intentions have helped her there. "For a long time, I worked with someone who was passive-aggressive, though she could become 'aggressive-aggressive' if rubbed the wrong way," she laughs. "I'd often have to ask her to do things she wasn't keen to do, and she usually responded by listing all the things that could go wrong. When I didn't prepare mentally, I'd respond instinctively and see her behavior as a personal attack." Once Audrey started setting more positive intentions, her relationship took a turn for the better. "When I explicitly decided that collaboration was my aim, I'd see the same conversation quite differently. I found myself able to interpret her comments less personally, seeing them as an expression of her own frustrations or even of her desire to get things right. And you know, maybe she was still being a pain. But I found time and again that my state of mind made such a difference to my perception of her behavior, and therefore my reaction to her."

For Audrey, much of the breakthrough came from challenging her assumptions. "One of the big shifts for me was managing to get out of the habit of assuming ill intent. I used to have a very competitive mindset and expected everyone else to be competitive, too—which meant that was exactly what I saw. I'd pay a lot of attention to signs of potential sabotage, like someone sending a nasty email to my boss about some work I was involved in," she says. "But now, if I see bad behavior

from someone, I don't assume they're a bad person—I consider the possibility that they're just having a bad day. Your assumptions really color what you see and how you react.”

With practice, Audrey has also found she can reset her intentions in the middle of a tough situation. “I've realized that even when things are going down the wrong path, I can take a step back and do a version of what I should have done beforehand. That passive-aggressive colleague of mine used to tug her ear when she was getting stressed—so as soon as I saw that, I'd use it as a prompt to pause and say to myself, ‘Time to rethink.’ I'd shift in my seat to give myself a second to reset and remember what I really wanted from the conversation. I'd sometimes even say out loud, ‘Give me a second—what are we really trying to do?’ It didn't always allow me to have the conversation I'd have had if I'd prepared beforehand, but it meant I could usually make the situation better.”

Take a moment to think about the day ahead, or an important conversation you have coming up. Ask yourself these intention-setting questions:

- **Real aim:** What matters most in making this a success, and what does that mean your real priority should be?
- **Attitude:** What concerns are dominating your thoughts or your mood? Do they help you with your priorities—and if not, can you choose to set them aside for now?
- **Assumptions:** What negative expectations do you have going into this? How might you challenge those expectations? What counterevidence might you seek out?
- **Attention:** Given your real aim and your assumptions, where do you most want to direct your attention? What do you want to make particularly sure you notice?