Are You in Mental Fight or Flight?
By Holly G. Green

Have you ever made a dumb management decision?
One that seemed like a good idea at the time, but after it fell flat you looked back and wondered, “What was I thinking?”

We all do this from time to time. But you may be surprised to learn that one cause of this particular human trait is rooted deep in our evolutionary past and in our brains. In fact, it has a lot to do with an evolutionary process we’re all familiar with – fight-or-flight.

Modern research has discovered that humans apply our fight-or-flight reflexes not only to predators, but to data itself – a finding that has serious consequences for today’s business leaders. Mental fight-or-flight causes us to miss obvious information that affects our markets, our customers and our business.

It encourages decisions based on outdated assumptions rather than hard data. And it leads us to cling to the past rather than opening up to new possibilities – an essential skill for keeping up with today’s hyper-paced markets.

Holly is CEO of The Human Factor, Inc.,
Holly helps companies achieve excellence by creating clarity on what winning looks like and determining how to get there.
Learn more at: thehumanfactor.biz
Here’s how it works.

Back in the old days, when our brain said “saber-tooth tiger!” we didn’t stand around debating the pros and cons of running away. We instinctively kicked into high gear and high-tailed it to a safer place. These days, when we hear an idea that threatens our prevailing view of the world, the same reaction takes place.

Our bodies don’t physically run to a safer location, but our brains mentally do. We either reject the information out of hand (flight) or argue vociferously against it (fight).

This leads to behaviors that do not support well-reasoned management decisions. When we’re in mental fight-or-flight, we give greater credence to evidence that bolsters our beliefs. We vigorously dispute arguments, information and points of view that contradict our own. We constantly screen in the data that proves us right, while screening out data that might prove us wrong. And so we miss seeing information that could prevent us from making a costly decision.

Mental fight-or-flight is why we don’t see the competitor who comes in from left field and turns our entire industry upside down. Or, as often happens, we see the competitor but ignore their presence because “they don’t know what we know about our customers.” And besides, if you want to make money in this business you have to do it the way we’ve always done it…right?

It’s also the reason we keep pumping scarce resources into products and projects that no longer match up with the needs of our customers.

The data that those needs have changed is staring us in the face. But our brain chooses to run from the data because it would require restructuring our thought processes about who we serve and why.

How can you tell when you’re in mental fight-or-flight mode?

When you find yourself getting defensive when people challenge you. When you feel threatened by a statement, idea or issue. When you see others as stupid for having a different point of view. When you refuse to even consider an idea because “you know it isn’t true.”

You can also tell by the words that come out of your mouth. Phrases like:

• That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard!
• That won’t work for us or our customers.
• Where on earth did you get that idea?
• You have got to be kidding, right?
• That would take too much time and money to do.
• That’s not even worth discussing.
• That’s not what (insert name of boss here) wants.

One big problem with mental fight-or-flight is that it happens instantaneously, just below the level of consciousness. We hear a new idea, the brain perceives a threat, and our minds instantly run to safety. To avoid this mental knee-jerk reaction, we first need to become aware we’re in mental fight-or-flight, and then pause for a moment to let the conscious brain take over.
Any time you find yourself having a strong, instantaneous emotional reaction to an idea or a statement, pause and ask yourself:

- Why am I reacting so strongly to this issue?
- What is my underlying assumption or belief that is being challenged?
- Is this assumption or belief still true?
- What do I stand to lose by having my point of view challenged?
- Is it time for me to update my thinking?

We’re not going to change a million years of brain evolution overnight. But we can minimize the damage by becoming aware of when we’re in mental fight-or-flight, and then logically assessing our reaction.

TIP: Pause and Evaluate

To track how often you go into mental fight-or-flight, keep a list of every time you say (or even think) something like “that’s the dumbest idea I’ve ever heard”!

The more we practice pausing and evaluating our mental fight-or-flight responses, the more distance we can put between now and our most recent “What was I thinking?” decision.

Holly is CEO of The Human Factor, Inc., and helps companies achieve excellence by creating clarity on what winning looks like and determining how to get there.

An experienced business leader, behavioral scientist, and keynote speaker, Holly has a rare combination of extensive academic training and in-the-trenches experience working in and leading organizations. She was previously President of The Ken Blanchard Company and a biotech start up. Her clients include companies of every shape and size from Google to pest control to healthcare, as well as professional and nonprofit associations.

Holly is also a bestselling author. Her newest book, Using Your Brain to Win, has just been released to international acclaim.

Contact us or visit our website for more information:
Info@PenChecks.com | 800.541.3938
www.PENCHECKS.com

Learn more: thehumanfactor.biz