

# The power of the mind at work

Diversity specialist **Stephanie Haladner** explains why embracing and unleashing subconscious thought patters could be the secret to professional success

As soon as I decided to write a piece entitled ‘The power of the mind at work’, a curious thing happened: my mind didn’t want to get started. My writer’s block probably had something to do with the complex nature of the subject matter. After all, considering I don’t know my hippocampus from my amygdala, where would I begin?

Inspiration can be a bit like love in that it often comes when you aren’t looking for it. And in this case, inspiration caught me by surprise towards the end of my weekly samba class; when we samba as fast as we can for five minutes straight. At the four-minute mark our fiercely feminine Brazilian teacher yelled: “Come on – the power of the mind!” Aha! The fact that my samba teacher had echoed the title of my unwritten article provided the perfect catalyst. We all know that mental toughness is one key to success. No matter how difficult the challenge, if we use our mind in the right way, nothing can stop us from achieving our dreams (and if not our wildest dreams, at least our incremental goals). But the question remains, how do we use our mind in the right way? Put another way, how can we access the full power of our mind at work?

To answer this question, I thought it would be useful to call upon a few minds with considerable experience and expertise in the area. And as I do

**Mindfulness is increasingly recognised as an effective tool for stress management and to enhance business performance**



not discriminate on the basis of gender, these three minds happen to belong to three respective men.

First is the Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius. In *Meditations*, Marcus reflects on how he maintains balance in the face of challenges such as barbarian invasions, famine, and natural disasters. The one tool he called upon was – you guessed it – his mind. In addition to the maxim ‘all is as thinking makes it so’, he offers the following advice:

‘Remember this retreat into your own little territory within yourself. Above all, no agonies, no tensions. Be your own master, and look at things as a man, as a human being, as a citizen, as a mortal creature. And here [is] the most immediately useful thoughts you will dip into. First, that things cannot touch the mind: they are external and inert; anxieties can only come from your internal judgement.’

So how does this wisdom dating back to circa 180-170 AD apply to the modern professional woman?

Marcus reminds us that we have sovereignty over our own minds. No matter what is happening outside of our mind – whether it’s a demanding client, a colleague eating crisps too loudly when you need to concentrate, an impossible deadline or a dark and rainy day – we can choose our response. I appreciate that when faced with a particularly distressing external factor, emotions get triggered and it might not feel like you have a choice. But Marcus reminds us that we always do – and that we can use the power of our mind to maintain equilibrium. (That said, I am not suggesting we adopt a Panglossian view of the world or deny reality – nor am I negating the importance of processing emotions and receiving professional support during and following a distressing external event.)

So the next time you are faced with an uncomfortable situation, it’s a good idea to raise awareness to your own thoughts. Yes, think about thinking. Ask yourself: are my thoughts helping me or harming me? Are

## Science now tells us that meditation can modify the structure of the brain

they keeping me balanced or throwing me off kilter? Only through self-awareness can we self-correct.

Beyond thinking about thinking, what actions can be taken to maximise the power of the mind at work?

Andy Gibson, author of *A Mind for Business* and our second mind authority, reminds us of the importance of taking care of our mental health. He suggests this should be more intuitive and important to us than our dental health (losing your mind is a bigger deal than losing your teeth, so the logic goes). We all want to experience increased focus and clarity at work – and there are many simple steps you can take to achieve those states. Everything from eating right, exercising, drinking plenty of water, taking breaks, getting enough sleep, hanging out with the right people (or, for some, the right puppies), going for a walk in the woods, and taking your devices out of the bedroom, sharpen the mind. Beyond the basics, mindfulness (the art of paying attention to your surroundings and fully embracing your senses) is increasingly recognised as an effective tool for stress management and to enhance business performance. For example, *Search Inside Yourself*, a programme originating at Google, reminds us that ‘effective leadership isn’t just about checking off more tasks. It is defined by how well we use our minds and interact with others.’ Meditation is a related resource to clear the mind and attain inner peace. And ask any top athlete whether visualisation produces results and you will get a resounding yes. That said, mindfulness and meditation may not be for everyone. But when practiced regularly (ideally



with an authentic teacher who resonates with the student) the benefits can be awesome. The latest research demonstrates that meditation increases positive emotion, helps us focus and boosts creativity – and science now tells us that meditation can modify the structure of the brain. The technical term for this is ‘neuroplasticity’. This is beyond the scope of my normal vocabulary, but I use it here to demonstrate the heartening truth that even from a scientific point of view, our minds have the capacity to change for the better.

The third and final mind I will draw on to illuminate the power of the mind is that of David Brooks, New York Times Columnist and author. In *The Social Animal*, Brooks postulates (based on research by geneticists, neuroscientists, psychologists, economists and sociologists) that we are in the midst of a revolution in consciousness in which the conscious mind takes a back seat to the unconscious mind. Brooks explains that the key to human flourishing is to train the conscious mind to send the right signals to the unconscious mind – which is where most of our thinking takes place. In fact, almost all is as unconscious thinking makes it so. He describes the unconscious mind not as a Freudian wilderness, but as an enchanted place where emotion, relatedness and intuition reside. What’s interesting here is that the qualities ascribed to the unconscious realm tend to be associated with women – and can often be the qualities devalued by corporate culture. So a call to action to all women in business law: don’t be afraid to unleash the power of your unconscious mind at work as it may just be your secret to true success.

And if you need a little help in tapping into that power, you can contact me at [stephanie@haladner.com](mailto:stephanie@haladner.com) – or alternatively, you can just samba!

*By Stephanie Haladner, whose namesake consultancy provides workshops and training to law and accountancy firms in London*

With thanks to IFLR’s Women in Business Law Group’s gold sponsors

ARTHUR COX



Linklaters

MACFARLANES

SHEARMAN & STERLING

SIDLEY AUSTIN LLP  
SIDLEY

Simmons & Simmons

WHITE & CASE