Confabulation

How to manage phony memories?

By Ted Byrne

Actually, I’m not going to write this essay. Uh-uh. What I’m doing here is poking an idea into your mind that’s going to let you imagine your own story. Think of this as a blank piece of paper that I’m covering with words that you’ll peel away to reveal. Okay, getting ahead of myself.

First, let’s define something I came across a few months ago. And like a melody that won’t drop out of my mind, it’s kept me humming. Have you ever heard of confabulation? Have you ever heard anyone say that “until we have a name for something, it doesn’t exist”? Take, for example, the internet, financial derivatives, nanotech, lip gloss, plaque, emotional intelligence, leading from behind, or Anthony Weiner.

Psychologists noticed that there are people with false memories. They continually discovered that a great number of us tend to confuse memory with imagination. It doesn’t come from faking. Nope. Instead, what happens is that sometimes folks want what they think should or could have happened to actually have happened. Careful here. While this is something that can happen to anyone, wild and routine instances of confusing fiction with reality are not all that normal. As a matter of fact, the word delusional springs to mind to describe those who wander around in thick fogs of imaginary realities. Okay, some say that maybe a disproportionate percentage of delusional victims might be political commentators or sports analysts (two groups with a lot in common), but that’s another essay for a different kind of magazine.

The point is that delusion and even outright lying are chronic psychological or social problems, but for the bulk of people who confuse memory with imagination, psychologists invented the word confabulation. When a confabulator is confronted with facts that contradict an imaginary memory, he will instantly create a workaround to explain away the contradiction but not the corrupted memory. In fact, he’ll protect that imaginary memory against a fact attack. The process of confabulating a defense will be as automatic as breathing, which brings me to automatic as opposed to controlled processing.

See, our brains handle a bag-load of automatic stuff simultaneously. We digest, blink, sweat, breathe, walk, fidget, heart beat, drive, and on … all in the background. Many of those lower-order processes can happen whether or not the conscious mind’s asleep. Ahhh … but our top level mind is focused. And apparently it’s capable of doing very little simultaneously. Research indicates that the overwhelming majority of us can only do one controlled process at a time, which means multitasking is the domain only of the lower-order processes.

Confabulation appears to happen in the crack between the lower and higher levels. And increasingly, it looks as if all of us are, to some degree, confabulators, particularly when it comes to our most cherished beliefs. Think of it like this: You are the sum of your ideas. Meaning that what makes you you isn’t your hair color, height, or waist size. If you got a body transplant tomorrow, you would then be living inside of that body. So when it comes to self-defense, just as we instinctively spring to ward off a swinging fist, so too do we automatically defend our unique set of ideas and feelings.
Our first instinct is to find data, facts, or ideas that will repair damage to whatever cuts into our beliefs. We confabulate. We arrange the world to protect the conclusions that are we. Yep, we are a little more than a bunch of conclusions built up over our lives that work to allow us to survive and prosper. Threaten one of those conclusions and … WHUMP! We confabulate.

Now let’s refocus on this essay. As managers, how do we deal with confabulation? How can we recognize it in ourselves and then in others? Remember, confabulation’s neither bad nor good—but its effects can be one or the other. And as we look beyond ourselves, how do we recognize the automatic level of defense a company brings to bear to protect its mission and strategic plan? And here is where you begin to write the essay. How often do you discover that presentations, pitches, explanations, and plans are built upon what appears to be a seemingly crystal-fragile logic? But how often do you discover that confabulators will heal any wounds almost reflexively?

Remember, confabulation is neither dishonesty nor obsession. It can be the automatic defensive mechanism of good people who are protecting their understanding of themselves with imagined realities. So now that you know there’s a name for it, peel the words off of this page write the essay: How to Manage Confabulation.