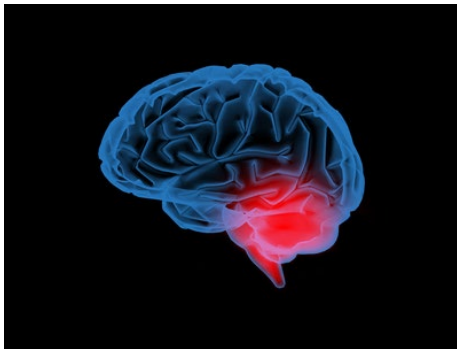


Leadership Barometer 146 The Power of RAS

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



The human brain is a remarkable organ. It has many fascinating properties that can give us insights into how to live a better and more effective life. One of these phenomena occurs at the base of the brain: the Reticular Activating System (RAS).

How RAS Works

RAS is an incredible filtering system. It allows human beings to pay attention to things that are important to us. Because of RAS, we can disregard the bombardment of other things that are not critical. It is the mechanism that allows us to focus attention on the vital few and ignore the trivial many.

I will leave how the RAS works to the brain experts, but the impact of it is a wonder to behold. In this article, I want to explore RAS along with some implications it can have in our professional and personal lives. The best way to appreciate the power of RAS is through examples.

Theater Example

Imagine you are in a theater during intermission. The crowded lobby is abuzz with the cacophony of voices. It is impossible to hear any conversation except the one closest to you. In the crowd, within earshot, someone mentions your name. All of a sudden you are able to laser focus on that conversation. You ignore all the rest, and actually hear what that person is saying about you. If the person had not uttered your name, there would be no way you would have heard what she was saying. That is RAS in action.

Truck Dealer Example

Let's look at another typical example. You just came out of a truck dealership after having ordered a red Ford truck. On the way home, you start to notice red Ford trucks

everywhere. Driving into the dealership, you paid no attention and did not notice any trucks at all.

How RAS Can Help You at Work

Once it is activated, RAS allows all kinds of miraculous things to happen. Let's explore how RAS can help you be more successful at work.

Marcus Buckingham wrote a famous book entitled *Now, Discover Your Strengths*. He believes we can make much faster progress at self-improvement if we focus energy on our areas of strength. Most of us try to improve our weaknesses. If you doubt that conclusion, pick up a copy of his book. It gives a mountain of data to support his conclusion. The book also contains a link to an online survey you can take to determine your own strength areas.

Personal Example

After doing the assessment, I found two dominant strengths I had that were not evident to me before. First, I am a "Maximizer" (one who tries to achieve excellence). I am also particularly strong in "WOO," (which stands for Winning Others Over).

Being a Maximizer allows me to accomplish more than some other people. WOO allows me to have significant influence when it is important. Let's explore how this knowledge, coupled with RAS, made the ideas useful to me.

I am a visual communicator and tend to think in terms of images. I have the image of walking around all day with imaginary "arrows of opportunity." They fly in the air, just over my head. The arrows represent a constant stream of opportunities to interface with people. They also help me be more effective.

I just need to pick the correct arrows and reach up and grab the right ones as they fly by. The difficult part used to be that there were too many arrows. How was I to select the ones that could help me the most? Enter RAS.

Knowing my two greatest strengths, when I view the arrows in my mind, a few of them are in color. These are the ones that represent a chance to use my skills at Maximizing and WOO. The rest of the arrows are black. Using this filtering technique, I am able to "see" the most important opportunities coming at me. I grab them to use the strengths within me much more frequently. Voila! My performance improves simply based on the application of my strongest traits.

Exercise for You

RAS is a very powerful tool. We need to be continuously aware of that power if we are to harness it for use in our lives. Try this little exercise. Try to identify 5-10 times in

each day where you use RAS to improve how you manage your life. For example, you might be sitting in a cafeteria with hundreds of people. In the distance, you spot an old friend you had been thinking about recently. You realize you have not spoken to him in over a year. You resolve to call him that afternoon. Immediately you recognize that RAS helped you find that person and renew the acquaintance. That counts as one of the 10 opportunities to use RAS.

That evening, while scanning the newspaper, out of the corner of your eye you catch a glimpse of an ad for a boat. You immediately remember that you had intended to buy a new fishing reel this week. RAS Made the association possible. That would be number two example. Try to find 5-10 examples a day.

Focus your energy on understanding how you can use RAS to filter your thinking. You will actually be doing a kind of "meta RAS." The technique is helping you identify opportunities to use its power for you daily. It sounds complex, but it is really pretty basic.

Do not overlook the power of RAS to improve your life. The more you practice identifying the phenomenon within you the more it will help you guide your life.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations.

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