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### Cognitive Fitness

Key ideas from the [Harvard Business Review](#) article By Roderick Gilkey, Clint Kilts

#### The Idea in Brief

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What do Alan Greenspan, Warren Buffett, and Sumner Redstone have in common? They're still at the peak of their intellectual powers despite their advanced ages, defying the widespread belief that our mental capacity inevitably deteriorates as we get older.

Leaders who are as sharp at 60 as they were at 25 constantly hone their **cognitive fitness**: their ability to reason, remember, learn, plan, and adapt. According to Gilkey and Kilts, such executives practice specific techniques to stimulate development of new brain cells and neural networks: They use indirect experiences such as observation or simulations to form new neural pathways, regularly engage in play, search for patterns in seemingly unrelated fields of endeavor, and seek novel experiences.

But the best leaders do more than just enhance their own cognitive fitness. They also promote "brain-positive" cultures in their organizations by encouraging colleagues and employees to apply these four practices as well.

#### The Idea in Practice

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Gilkey and Kilts recommend these practices for achieving cognitive fitness:

##### Use Experiences to Grow Your Brain

While direct experience is key to enhancing mental capacity, your brain also has specialized nerve cells that enable you to form new neural networks through indirect experiences such as observation, simulations, and case studies. These indirect experiences accelerate your learning and present you with fresh perspectives valuable for informed decision making. It's like watching a golf pro demonstrate the correct stance and swing: You learn from his experience by gaining a mental image of the correct actions to take.

##### Work Hard at Play

Play engages the prefrontal cortex, responsible for your highest-level cognitive functions--including self-knowledge, memory, mental imagery, and incentive and reward processing. To get the most out of play, participate in games and activities involving risk. Risk alerts the brain and activates your reason and imagination capacities. Activities like bridge, chess, sudoku, role-playing games, and challenging crossword puzzles all provide rigorous neural workouts. Encourage structured play

environments in your organization, such as the Zen dens, play spaces, and chat chambers at a host of various Silicon Valley companies.

## Search for Patterns

Pattern recognition is crucial for executives trying to make sense of a rapidly changing business environment. Through pattern recognition, you scan the environment, create meaning from large amounts of seemingly unrelated data, and rapidly assess situations so you can take quick, appropriate action.

To cultivate pattern recognition in your brain, challenge and expand your existing mind-set, experiencing new places (for example, visiting a museum and talking with locals during business trips), and listening to different viewpoints. Identify patterns in what you're seeing to generate innovative business ideas.

## Seek Novelty

Novel experiences stimulate your brain to generate the new knowledge needed for pattern recognition. To give your brain the novelty it needs, engage in challenging activities such as studying a new language, learning to paint, trying your hand at new technologies, or taking lessons on a musical instrument you've never played before.

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## Further Reading

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Article

### [How to Kill Creativity](#)

*Harvard Business Review*

September 1998

by Teresa M. Amabile

While the personal practices of cognitive fitness can boost your brain's capacity, organizational disciplines can help as well. This article focuses on how companies can nurture employees' creative capacity. The key is to enhance people's intrinsic motivation--their abiding interest in certain activities or deep love of particular challenges. To activate intrinsic motivation: 1) match people with assignments that stretch them--but not too thin; 2) give people freedom within company goals; for example, telling them what needs to get done but not how to do it; 3) allocate appropriate time and

resources to projects to avoid burnout; and 4) let employees know that what they do matters; you'll help them sustain their passion for the work.

## About the Authors

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