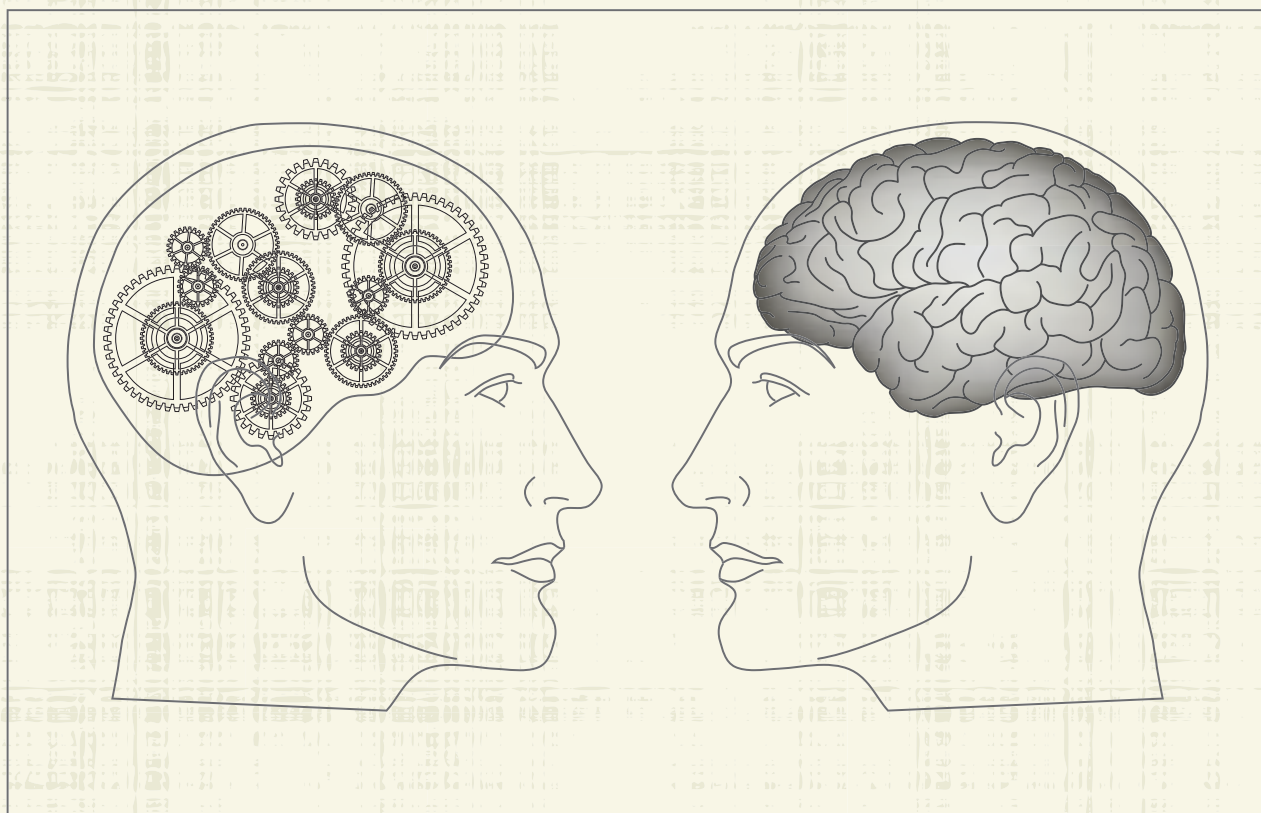


In a World of Smart Robots & Machines, Can You Compete?

To be successful, we must “dehumanize” ourselves to think better, learn better, and collaborate better.

By Edward D. Hess



More than half of all Americans are at risk of losing their jobs to smart robots or smart machines in the next few decades. To stay relevant, we'll have to “dehumanize” ourselves by overcoming qualities that hold us back from becoming the best thinkers and learners we can be.

Ironically, being human helps us *and* hurts us. We possess extraordinary abilities that machines can't replicate, including the abilities to ideate, to create, to engage emotionally, and to empathize. But (and here's the irony!) to tap into those abilities when the tech tsunami hits, we'll have to overcome our human nature.

Research in neuroscience, psychology, and behavioral economics has offered up an unflattering picture of the way we think and learn. Although we humans have the capacity to be highly efficient, fast, reflexive thinkers, our “autopilot” thinking isn't very critical or innovative. Instead, it's rather lazy and is hobbled by our egos, biases, and emotions. That is the humanness we must overcome to stay competitive.

Here are eight things you (and if you're a leader, your employees) need to do to “dehumanize” yourselves so you can think better, learn better, collaborate better, and emotionally engage better:

1. Put less stock in being right.

Effective learning requires us to uncouple our egos from our beliefs by admitting that as humans, we're wired to be suboptimal learners. To learn, we have to be willing to look closely at our mistakes and failures and to really listen to people who disagree with us. In other words, we have to be willing to be *wrong*!

2. Overcome lazy thinking.

Although the brain comprises only about 2.5% of our body weight, it generally uses 20% of the body's energy. As a result, the human learning machine prefers to operate in a low gear—on autopilot—as much as possible to conserve energy. That means that no matter how intelligent or experienced you are, you probably aren't doing your best thinking. Especially in situations with important consequences, you need to deliberately think about how you, well, think. Are you proceeding on the basis of your impressions, feelings, impulses, or desire to protect your ego? Or are you unpacking and questioning assumptions, weighing alternatives, and digging deeper?

To start “strengthening” your thinking, mentally rehearse each upcoming day by thinking about what instances, meetings, occurrences, decisions, and events may need higher-level thinking. In those situations, slow down and think. Ask yourself some questions: “Why do I believe that? What assumptions am I making? Do I have a good factual basis to believe that? What facts would prove me wrong? Have I looked for those facts? Then in the evening, take 15 minutes and replay the day with an eye toward identifying situations in which your lazy thinking may have gotten you in trouble. Over time, you'll be able to create a checklist of the types of issues, problems, or situations that require deliberate thinking. And forewarned really is forearmed.

We humans will have to start fixing things before they're broken in order to stay relevant.

3. Stop being so judgmental.

Our human drive to be right, combined with our predisposition toward lazy thinking, causes us to be judgmental of other people and situations. We do it in work and in life all the time: *That's a terrible idea. He's an idiot. She didn't try hard enough. I know better.* And so on. The problem is, such judgments set the stage for division, resentment, and roadblocks, not collaboration, dialogue, and progress.

Suspending judgment has always been a particular challenge for me. My mind always wants to formulate a response or counterattack instead of really listening to what the other person is saying. (Maybe yours is the same way!) I have to remind myself that interactions with others are not guerilla warfare, nor are they

tools to help me confirm what I already believe. They are stress tests to help me evaluate and—if necessary—change what I believe.

4. Become less rigid.

Throughout history, rigid processes and procedures were (usually) a good thing for humanity, providing comfort, shelter, sustenance, or some other desirable outcome. Do Action X and Action Y get Result Z? But in today's rapidly changing world, doing things the way they've always been done is a recipe for obsolescence. We humans will have to start fixing things *before* they're broken in order to stay relevant.

It's okay to have preferred methods and procedures, but it's equally important to realize that risk, creativity, and breaking new ground are all part of the learning process. To set yourself and your organization on the path to becoming more adaptable, I suggest following Intuit's example by consciously choosing to bury the “modern-day Caesar”—the kind of boss who dictates exactly how progress should and shouldn't unfold—and instead choosing to encourage creativity and self-efficacy.

In India, that policy allowed young Intuit innovators to conduct an experiment on helping farmers get the best price for their products—even though management wasn't initially interested in the idea. After conducting research, the innovators found that the farmers had no information on what price wholesalers would pay on any given day in any geographical market for their crops. So Intuit employees created an app for mobile phones that provided farmers with daily prices from various markets. The farmers could then choose to travel to the market that would pay them the highest price. Today, 1.6 million Indian farmers use the successful program those innovators developed.

5. Rein in your emotions.

Emotions are one of the defining qualities of being human, and they can certainly make life wonderful, worthwhile, and interesting. But when it comes to doing your best thinking and learning, emotions tend to hold you back. Even if you consider yourself to be a very rational person, your emotions affect your attitudes, communications, and behaviors, as well as your approaches to problems, new situations, and decisions.

For example, a real-time critique by a difficult or unfriendly manager can arouse highly negative emotions that adversely affect your listening to, processing, and interpreting what is being said. (In general, negative emotions restrict and narrow cognitive processes.) So instead of sifting through the manager's words to glean helpful criticism that you can use to improve your work, your anger might cause you to discard everything that the manager said. Alternatively, your self-esteem might take a huge hit, and your feelings of shame and fear might cause your performance to further deteriorate.

Learning to self-manage your emotions is a valuable skill to develop. Tactics as simple as taking deep breaths or taking a walk to reduce physiological stress can help you begin to “tame” your emotions. Although we can’t completely “turn off” our emotions, we can deliberately try to think rationally about the situation, causing the emotional reaction to “turn on” cognitive areas of the brain that can “tamp down” emotions. In many cases, that could help us make better decisions and be more open-minded.

6. Stop letting fear drive your decisions.

From an evolutionary standpoint, fear is a good thing. It alerted our ancestors to danger and held them back from making decisions that might threaten the species’ survival. But in the business world, playing it safe because you’re afraid of the consequences will likely have the opposite effect: A bolder colleague (or computer!) will step up to take your place. Abraham Maslow aptly stated that an individual would engage in learning only “to the extent he is not crippled by fear, [and] to the extent he feels safe enough to dare.”

Fear of failure, fear of looking bad, fear of embarrassment, fear of a loss of status, fear of not being liked, and fear of losing one’s job all inhibit the kind of learning that is essential for your long-term job security. To proceed more fearlessly into the future, you (and, ideally, your whole organization) need to adopt a different mind-set about mistakes.

Learning is *not* an efficient 99% defect-free process—far from it. So mistakes have to be valued as learning opportunities. In fact, as long as they don’t violate financial risk guidelines, and you aren’t making the same mistakes again and again, mistakes can be good. The key is making sure that you’re learning from them. And the faster and better you are at turning mistakes into learning opportunities, the less likely you are to be replaced by some machine. Acknowledging mistakes, confronting weaknesses, and testing assumptions are a reliable strategy for long-term success.

7. Make it (whatever “it” is) less about you.

Looking out for number one is engrained in human nature. We instinctively think about how situations and events will affect us and how we can use them to our advantage. Now, I’m not saying you should *stop* looking out for your own interests, but you should make more of an effort to empathetically consider how others are being affected, and how you can all work together to achieve desirable outcomes.

We humans have the best chance of surviving the coming technology tsunami when we band together. We’ll need to draw on our collective intelligence to innovate and adapt, and we’ll need to work in teams to confront and get past individual biases and egos. In my own

work life, I’ve experienced the power of making “it” less about me. When I started to really listen to my team, to suspend my judgments, to pay attention to others’ emotional cues, and to consider their views, my team began to perform at ever-higher and more successful levels.

Making it less about me—quieting my ego—became much easier when I realized I am not my ideas or my business beliefs, and, as a leader, I don’t have to be right all the time. But I do have to get to the best answer all the time, and in many cases, that involves others helping me think better. *Humility* will help you really hear what your customers and colleagues are saying, and humility will help you be open-minded and more willing to try new ways. Both make innovation and entrepreneurial activities more likely to be successful.

8. Stop time-traveling.

The human mind has a tireless ability to dissect past events and project what might happen in the future. That power can be very beneficial when used for good—but too often, we use it for “evil.” We obsess over past mistakes and beat ourselves up, instead of learning what we can and moving on. We stress about future “what ifs” over which we have little or no control—or we plan our responses to other people instead of actually listening to them talk. And in the meantime, we fail to use the present moment productively.

We must train our brains to “be” where we are right now, fully engaging with and responding to our current experience. That technique is especially important (and difficult) when we’re connecting with other people. Consider that while most people speak at a rate of 100–150 words per minute, we can cognitively process up to 600 words a minute! To fight cognitive boredom and to keep your attention from wandering, listen actively by summarizing what the other person said and asking questions for clarifications.

I want to assure you that I’m not at all antitechnology. Technology will continue to advance and we humans need to focus on developing to our highest levels the skills that are ours and ours alone—at least for the near future. As technology drives business change, not only will we have to rewire the way we operate as individuals, but entire organizations will need to be radically restructured in their cultures, leadership models, view of employees, innovation and collaboration processes, and more. In that new environment, will you be prepared to use the competitive advantage your humanity gives you?

Edward D. Hess is a professor of business administration and Batten Executive-in-Residence at the University of Virginia’s Darden School of Business and the author of *Learn or Die: Using Science to Build a Leading-Edge Learning Organization* (New York: Columbia Business School Publishing, 2014). Email: HessE@darden.virginia.edu. Copyright E. Hess.