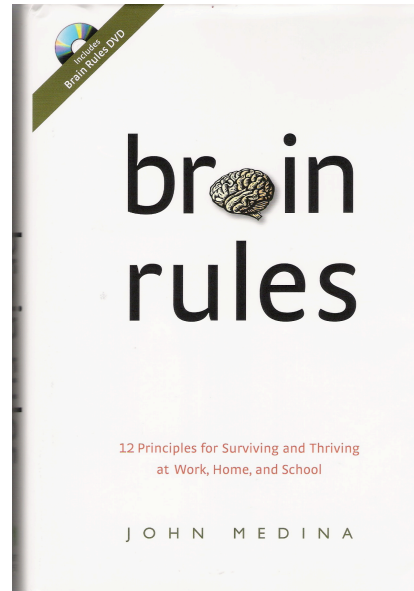

BOOK REVIEW

"Brain Rules: 12 Principles for Surviving and thriving at Work, Home, and School" **by Dr John Medina**

Peer Press: Seattle 2008
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[Paperback for around US\$10.20
on www.amazon.com for a new copy;
US\$7.20 for a used copy
Hardcover with DVD for \$28.89]

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Interesting title. Fascinating book. Written by a developmental molecular biologist and research consultant (who teaches at both Seattle Pacific University and Washington School of Medicine), you'd be forgiven for thinking that this might be an academic text filled with technical and scientific phrases and jargon. But you'd be wrong. It comes as no surprise that Dr Medina has won various teaching prizes at University because one suspects that he is a very effective communicator – his book is an example of his ability to communicate, and to communicate well to the rest of us who have no scientific backgrounds.

We tend to take our bodies for granted and yet they are simply amazing machines and operations. If we take our bodies for granted, we probably don't spare a thought for our brains (no pun intended). Yet, as Dr Medina shows, this brain of ours is a marvellous computer. *"Easily the most sophisticated information-transfer system on Earth, your brain is fully capable of taking the little black squiggles on this piece of bleached wood and deriving meaning from them. To accomplish this miracle, your brain sends jolts of electricity crackling through hundreds of miles of wires composed of brain cells so small that thousands of them could fit into the period at the end of this sentence."*

You accomplished all of this in less time than it takes you to blink. Indeed, you have just done it. What's equally incredible, given our intimate association with it, is this: Most of us have no idea how our brain works" (Page 1-2).

So what does Medina show us? He takes the scientific discoveries that are relevant to our brain and reveals what it all means in everyday life. And he uses sound scientific evidence to upon to which to base his conclusions and how it therefore impacts our brain and our lives.

There is something for everyone in this book. Chapter 1 is the evidence for the fitness instructor that our brains are not programmed to be sitting at a desk for 8 hours each day. Our brains developed in an evolutionary sense by walking 12 miles a day and we still need that sort of exercise. Exercise boosts brain power. Those who exercise out-perform "couch potatoes" in long-term memory, reasoning, attention, and problem solving tasks. "Physical activity is cognitive candy" (Page 22). The good news too is that the evidence shows that exercise prolongs life and that the mental and physical effects of an aerobic exercise program can be seen in 4 months.

Chapter 2 for the businessman shows that business success is more a function of the relationship between employee and boss than any other factor. In other words, our ability to learn and perform has deep roots in relationships. Our learning performance on the job (and in classes in school for example) is affected by the emotional environment in which the learning takes place.

If you're a teacher, lecturer or public speaker, Chapter 4 reports that you need to know that you've only got 30 seconds to grab someone's attention and only 10 minutes to keep their attention. At that 10 minute mark, the brain tunes out and you need to do something to regain the attention like tell a story or introduce some emotion.

In Chapter 7, there is that old chest-nut of sleep. Most of us have felt drowsy mid-afternoon and as we know, some cultures have their afternoon siesta. How come? Simply put, the brain wants to take a nap at that point. If you did crawl under the desk for a short nap, you would be more productive! In one study, a 26-minute nap improved NASA pilots' performance by 34%. The evidence is clear that your mental agility during the day is very dependent on whether you got sufficient rest the night before.

In Chapter 12, parents can take heart that during the "terrible twos," children are not setting out to be disobedient and wilful, it is just the brain's

powerful urge to explore. By nature, we are powerful explorers and this never leaves us despite us creating somewhat artificial environments around us.

The book itself is a demonstration of the various rules that Dr Medina describes to us. For example, there is an explanation of how the brain works, followed by a story or two to emotively engage us. There is a summary at the end of every chapter which helps us to understand concisely what we have just read and allows us to repeat the material over again.

This is an engaging book which will appeal to all people of all ages and across all sectors and occupations – afterall, it is about the brain and we can all relate to that.

[Dr Darryl Cross is a clinical and organisational psychologist as well as a credentialed executive and personal coach. He is also an author, international speaker and university lecturer. Dr Darryl assists people to find their strengths and reach their goals. Further information on Dr Darryl can be seen at www.DrDarryl.com]