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# 24 KARAT SUCCESS



GOLDEN RULES FOR A  
FULFILLED AND SUCCESSFUL  
LIFE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

## Karat 2: You've been framed!

### How easily our brain is influenced

“I saw the angel in the marble. And carved until it emerged.” Marble has been one of the grandest materials for building and decorating since long before Michelangelo uttered these famous words. Therefore, you might expect 'the great' and deeply religious Maximilian 1, Duke of Bavaria, to have used the finest marble to decorate the chapel of his Munich residence in 1607.

Certainly, Maximilian chose the best artists of his time: Blasius Pfeiffer (also known as Fistulator) and his son Wilhelm. The high-profile pair knew how to promote themselves, but they didn't shout about their prestigious commission, because they had sworn to Maximilian that they would not share the secret of their work with anyone. The material they used was not the iconic Carrara marble – this wasn't good enough for Maximilian. He wanted something even more special. What he desired was the precious fake marble, called Scagliola. This is made from selenite, glue and natural pigments. It is applied to stucco, veined with colors, polished with flax oil and wax. Despite the laborious production process, this stucco marble was originally developed in Italy as a cheap alternative to the real thing. Marble for the poor, so to speak. But the time and effort that went into producing it made it much more expensive than genuine marble<sup>37</sup> and transformed it into a precious luxury product among powerful men like Maximilian. King Ludwig II of Bavaria, for example, used it to renovate an entire staircase in the royal palace Schloss Herrenchiemsee. The faces of his parsimonious relatives turned an angry shade of red (which could easily be included in the Scagliola colors).

What lent such high value to the 'manufactured' rather than 'natural' material? The fact that it showed the superiority of man – to the extent of being able to create even a sky-blue marble. In essence man could play God. What luxury indeed!

Our brains are wired to respond to 'luxury'. Well-known brands and luxury products activate those regions in the brain that are responsible for rewards.<sup>38</sup> A cola tastes 'better' if it is associated with a valuable

brand such as Pepsi or Coca-Cola.<sup>39</sup> The reward centers are more active when we drink the famous branded cola than they are when we drink, for example, an Aldi version. So, we don't just *think* the cola tastes better, it actually *is* better – at least as measured and verified by brain scans.

Strong brand messages that resonate with consumers can actually change their behavior. How do we research this? One experiment involves participants doing an addition task on the computer, and between each flashing number they are shown, for 13 milliseconds, either an Apple or an IBM logo. Once the subconscious has been fed 48 times, they are given a creative task. The participants who 'saw' the Apple logo are measurably more creative!<sup>40</sup> This demonstrates that the official Apple slogan 'Think different' with its underlying message 'Be Creative' has not only been internalized but is actually being lived by the participants.

How does this happen? The brand's 'goal orientation' gives the brain a new framework, so to speak, which allows us to think and act in ways that surpass our own expectations of ourselves. We are accustomed to what we usually do and think we are capable of. So, the typical person has unconsciously set themselves a narrow framework based on their previous experiences with themselves, and they 'select' experiences that reinforce this. "I think that and allow myself to think only that which seems **probable** to me with my – already well known – personal character and experience. And am ignoring anything which might be **possible** beyond that." In so doing they are ignoring any wider possibilities.

You can change this limiting frame yourself consciously, or have the environment do it unconsciously. The Apple logo can apparently flip the switch in the brain towards 'possible' even in people who judge themselves 'uncreative'.

There are many examples of this unconscious framing – or 'priming', as it is sometimes called. Here are a few.

- If women are told that men and women have historically performed differently in a mathematics test, with men doing far better than women, then – when they take the test themselves – they perform objectively worse than the men.<sup>41</sup> This 'frame' of historical female failure activates the subconscious stereotypical framework that

women are not as good as men at mathematics – which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy! Suddenly deciding that it can't do something that it used to be able to do seems surprisingly stupid of the brain. However, if the women are told that there were no previous differences in male and female performance in the test, they perform just as well as the men.

- You see similar unconscious framing among minority groups. For example, African-American men perform worse in tests that are presented to them as measures of intelligence, because this evokes the stereotype that they are less intelligent than white men – the frame is set. However, if the test is not associated with intelligence, African-American participants clearly perform every bit as well as white participants.<sup>42</sup>

Such examples demonstrate that we cannot expect any permanent, consistently good (or bad) performance from ourselves. To a large extent our performance is determined by the frames that we or others set in our brain. However, if we can recognize this frame for what it is, we can override some of these unconscious decisions in our brain that consciously we never would have made. Who would consciously decide they were going to get worse at mathematics? Or, to put it another way, as soon as you recognize the 'elephant in the room' and talk about it, it disappears. Problem detected, danger averted! Of course, you won't always get immediate results, but if you look at a problem rather than ignore it, it becomes much less severe.

Let's take a concrete example. You know of the prejudice that women don't negotiate as well as men? When this prejudice is not voiced openly, women *do* negotiate worse than men. But when women tackle this 'elephant', or at least think about it beforehand, (“As a woman I'm expected not to negotiate well, but, hell, I'm perfectly prepared and I'll show him”) they negotiate *better* than men.<sup>43</sup>

I'm a case in point. With a large amount of trepidation, I once took part in a big negotiation competition. To frame myself, and counter all the deep-seated prejudices, I reminded myself of all my personal knowledge and previous negotiation successes – and came out in the top ten.

The knowledge about the potential penalty ('malus') changes it to a potential reward ('bonus') – and the grey elephant, once named, becomes a kind of guardian angel.

Given that our brains are so erratic and prone to manipulation, we need to treat them carefully, and sometimes protect them from external influences – like, for example, fast (or 'junk') food. Fast food satisfies an immediate need, but it has wider effects. For example, research shows that people read faster after seeing lots of fast-food logos, despite being under no time pressure. That may be quite a useful effect. More worrying, though, is that viewing these logos also shifts people's 'temporal focus'. They are less willing to wait a week for a higher sum of money, preferring a much smaller sum right now. People who've not been exposed to the logos, on the other hand, are prepared to delay their gratification, realizing, of course, that \$15 next week is worth more than \$10 today. Fast food fosters not only cravings, but also a costly impatience.<sup>44</sup>

But let's return to luxury products like stucco marble. Luxury products not only stimulate the reward centers in our brain, they also promote self-centered decisions. People who have viewed luxury products tend to make decisions that serve their own wellbeing, regardless of the negative consequences for others.<sup>45</sup> The reason? Luxury focuses people upon themselves and makes them forget the world around them. It's a useful insight to bear in mind next time you're eyeing up a Porsche in a car showroom, a Cartier watch, or leafing through a luxury-villas brochure.

Of course, what constitutes a 'luxury' product changes with the passing of time. In 1622 the American Governor William Bradford apologized for being able to offer only lobster to the new settlers in his colony.<sup>46</sup> And black caviar was free for bar customers in the US in the 19th century because its saltiness created a thirst for beer.<sup>47</sup> Today, even the highly prized Scagliola would probably be trumped by a trendy projection of colors onto a wall, which changes according to the feelings in the room.

In any case, Maximilian 1, thanks to astute management and his monopoly over the lucrative wheat-beer market in Bavaria, could

afford the greatest luxury of his time – to honor God by becoming a creator himself with his own artificial marble. As frames for the brain go, that is a fairly spectacular one.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> golden rule

### Don't be tame: Set your frame!

Our brain is easily manipulated, through, among other things, exposure to luxury brands and associations with gender and food. Be aware of this.

Manipulate your brain to your own advantage. And be warned: If you think you are 'frame-free' that probably means you're simply unaware of the influence your surroundings have on you.



### Brief story to delve more deeply into golden rule number 2

In 1979 Ellen Langer, a professor of psychology at Harvard University, invited some elderly men (between 70 and 80 years old) from Boston

to spend a week out of town.<sup>48</sup> They usually lived either in care homes or with their families, and for the purpose of the experiment underwent several physical and mental examinations. During the week of the experiment, they were divided into two groups, each of which lived in its own big house.

Langer told one group that they should try to live as they had in 1959: they had to bring along old photos, were allowed only books, films and radio broadcasts from that period, and were instructed to talk only about events from the late 1950s – for example, Fidel Castro became Cuba's prime minister, 'Snow White' was released in cinemas, and the Russians and Americans were battling for supremacy in space.

After just one week, the men in both groups were fitter and performed better in cognitive tests. Langer attributed this partly to the unfamiliar environment, but largely to the fact that the men were having to take more responsibility for their lives.

The changes in the group that had been pretending to live in 1959 were even more pronounced. The men looked considerably younger than they had a week earlier, and played a spontaneous game of American football before leaving on the bus for home. Why? Their perceptions and evaluations of themselves had changed – along with their self-imposed frame: the week had forced them to remember what they were capable of 20 years earlier, which primed them into doing things more or less as they had done then, with the same enthusiasm, energy and ability, and without the self-limiting “I'm over 70 and can't do it any more.” As a consequence they could think more clearly and faster again, walk more steadily and tackle tasks more courageously.

This is a great example of how powerfully and quickly the frames in our brain can be influenced.

## **Lessons for you personally**

### *At work*

- You wonder how to set the right frame for a project. You have in mind a number of colleagues for your bold and exciting venture – who although really good, they are quite risk averse. How do you frame the project to encourage them to be more adventurous? The trick is quite simple: emphasize how many euros the company (or

department or team) will lose every day if the project is not implemented. Emphasizing losses is far more likely to foster risk-taking than promising profits.

This insight derives from the 'prospect theory', which was developed (in conjunction with Amos Tversky) by our friend Daniel Kahneman, the behavioral economist, and which earned him a Nobel prize for Economics. Prospect theory once again shows us humans as victims of our brains. When we use negative words such as 'lose' or 'die', people are more willing to take risks than when they hear 'win' or 'save'. Why? The brain senses losses more intensely than gains, and even processes them in different regions.<sup>49</sup> Gains are processed in the more neutral, detached frontal cortex, and losses in the emotional amygdala (we will discuss the brain in more detail later). Armed with this knowledge we can consciously set ourselves and others the appropriate frame. So, don't say: "Team, once we've implemented our project, we'll earn \$10,000 more a day," but instead: "Team, every day we don't execute our project, we are losing \$10,000." The latter creates a shock in the amygdala – 'Beware, loss – prepare for action!'.

- You are considering the best strategy to boost sales of a product. This will help. Research shows that for prices over \$100 a discount in absolute values attracts more buyers.<sup>50</sup> In other words, if you advertise a saving of \$135 on a recommended retail price of \$899 you will sell more sound systems than you would if you offered a 15 percent price reduction. Why? First, people would have to calculate 15 percent of \$899, which costs them effort, and second, the number 15 in comparison to \$899 seems small. For prices below \$100, however, where the differential between the price and the percentage discount is smaller, it is better to specify the discount as a percentage or to give a quantity discount (seven bottles for the price of six, for example).

### *At home*

- Your partner comes home in a bad mood, threatening the prospect of a harmonious evening. What can you do? Gently change the frame to allow your partner's brain to shift. For some people cheerful background music will do the trick; for others it might be funny



stories from your own day. It's relatively easy to frame the partner away from their gloomy state – unless the bad mood has a deeper underlying cause, of course.

- There's an ongoing dispute among your friends about euthanasia, which throws a pall over many dinner parties. You could influence the discussion by introducing different frames. You could, for example, point out that euthanasia is, ultimately, simply a matter of 'not prolonging life'. Using the word 'end' or 'die' emphasizes the loss, which triggers much stronger emotions.
- You would like to go out to a French restaurant with your family, but they are not in the slightest keen. To win them over use the following research.<sup>51</sup> When German music is played in supermarkets over the course of two weeks, it results in significantly increased sales of German wine over French wine. However, when French background jingles are played, it is the French wines that win. So cheer yourself up with a little experiment and regularly play French music for a few weeks. This should unconsciously pique the interest of your family, and soon you can enjoy your feast of snails and frogs' legs en famille.

### *For yourself*

- You are sometimes a bit too stern with others – some friends refer to you as 'a moral iceberg'. There is research that shows that if people expose themselves to 'clean' words like 'cleanly', 'washed', 'immaculate' and 'untouched', they tend to be less judgmental of, for example, people who keep money from a wallet they've found.<sup>52</sup> By contrast, people's moral outrage (over, for example, marriage and sex between cousins) is reinforced after sniffing a disgusting smell.<sup>53</sup> So feel free to set your own frame either with a disgusting smell or nice words.
- Are you struggling with your finances? If so, don't focus on the phrase "I can't afford that," because that will switch your brain into passive mode. Instead ask yourself: "*How* can I afford it?"<sup>54</sup> This immediately wakes up the brain into thinking of creative ways to find an answer.

## **Five questions for reflection**

1. Do you perceive how situations/atmosphere (noise, sad music, pleasant scent) or people (bad tempered, rude, cheerful) unconsciously influence your attitude and emotion?
2. How do you arm yourself against these influences?
3. What prejudices about yourself (age, character, abilities etc.) have you stored? Can you be aware of them? And then make them less limiting by consciously thinking differently?
4. Are there traps that you keep falling into, situations that always frighten you, tasks that you prefer to avoid? Have you ever tried to give your brain a different frame by imagining that now, today, everything that you've not been able to do so far is actually feasible?
5. Once the new frame has worked, what can you learn from this that you can apply to other areas of your life? If the new frame didn't work, are you prepared to try it at least five more times?