



Rewire

Change Your Brain to: Break Habits, Overcome Addictions, Conquer Self-destructive Behavior

by **Richard O'Connor, PhD**

In contrast to past ABC's, I would like to begin with a short overview of a book we are likely to review in the future. My intent is to use its core premise as the rationale for why this month's book, *Rewire*, is so relevant and important. That book is Geoff Colvin's *Humans Are Underrated: What High Achievers Know That Brilliant Machines Never Will*. Those of you familiar with CIMBA's core philosophy know that it is based on an individual's combined abilities in three core areas we see as being crucial to effectiveness: Knowledge, Process, and Behavior. CIMBA has long placed emphasis on developing critical thinking (Process) and behavioral skills. While we clearly recognize the importance of axioms, theorems, formulas, and principles — we certainly appreciate the importance of technical competence — we have been arguing for more than 20 years that our educational system has all but ignored the importance and relevance of developing critical thinking and behavior skills and attributes. Colvin's basic premise is simple and straightforward: In the workplace of the future, knowledge — axioms, theorems, formulas, and principles will largely be the responsibility of machines, robots if you will. The abilities that will prove most crucial to effectiveness will no longer be those technical, knowledge-based skills; rather, we will need high-level decision-makers with significant interpersonal skills — “empathy, creativity, social sensitivity, storytelling, humor, building relationships, and expressing ourselves with greater power than the machine mind can ever achieve.” So, given our current emphasis on knowledge-based personal development, how will we go about developing those “high-level decision-makers with significant interpersonal skills”? Dr. Richard O'Connor's book, *Rewire*, provides us with some very interesting insights.

To begin, Dr. O'Connor is a practicing psychotherapist. At CIMBA, we are very sensitive to the line that separates personal development coaching and therapy. As such, an important criterion in deciding whether to invest in a book is the contribution it is likely to make to our various coaches, trainers, and facilitators. In this regard, I was particularly pleased to see that Dr. Jeffrey Schwartz was among those supporting this book. Important aspects of our development model are based on his work. Still, the book sat on my desk for more than a year as I considered whether

it was a good candidate for review. Those of you familiar with CIMBA's approach to personal development know that we rely on our internally-developed 6-Columns Personal Development Accelerator (To download a copy, [click here](#)). Based on neuroscience, the 6-Columns has proved to be effective in assisting individuals in understanding their personal development needs and in assisting them in developing more productive, constructive, and healthy habits. I was pleased to find that Rewire offers very interesting and provocative insights into why it is effective, and how our coaches can better guide coachees through their personal development journeys.

For those unfamiliar with our 6-Columns tool, let me quickly review it here:

Column 1: The process begins in Column 1 with the development of a goal. Depending upon the coachee, information to assist in the development of that goal can come from a performance review, personal observation, or from some combination of our 360°, Wellness/Vitality, and LIFE Bio Reports. To simplify, this Column 1 goal typically takes the format "I want to [action verb] my [behavior] in [specific situation]." Because this goal requires conscious thought and reflection, we refer to it as the Coachee's System 2 Goal (where "System 2" refers to your brain's slow thinking circuitry as defined by Kahneman and others — See Kahneman's book *Thinking Fast and Slow*). Again, with concerns for oversimplification, a Column 1 goal might be: I want to improve my ability to delegate so that I can be more effective in leading my teams.

Column 2: In Column 2, we are going to ask you to identify what behaviors or actions you are currently undertaking that are inconsistent with that Column 1 goal. That is, what you are doing instead of the preferred behavior or action set out as your Column 1 goal?

Column 3: In Column 3, we will ask you to reflect upon why you are undertaking the actions or behaviors listed in Column 2. What worries, concerns, anxieties, or fears are you sensing that are causing you to avoid your preferred course of action set forth as your Column 1 goal? We will show you that those Column 3 "fears" are largely driven by your brain's System 1 circuits (where "System 1" refers to your brain's fast thinking circuitry as defined by Kahneman and others). In essence, avoiding your Column 3 fears is our brain's System 1 goal. Your System 1 circuits operate automatically, below the level of consciousness, and cannot be turned off. In other words, it is your brain's System 1 goal that is making it difficult for you to achieve your Column 1 goal — all while operating below your level of unconsciousness.

Column 4: In Column 4 we explore the assumptions underlying your brain's System 1 circuits, by considering your worldview, looking at your life experiences, beliefs, and values. To simplify, those assumptions typically take the form: If I undertake this action or behavior, then negative consequences will follow.

Column 5: In Column 5, we turn a Column 4 assumption into a hypothesis, create a safe experiment, and test it using Quantified-Self technology and/or observation to gather the relevant data. In the vast majority of cases, the assumption turns out to be false.

Column 6: With the Column 5 finding in hand, your coach then works with you to build a program for development in Column 6 with the intent to develop a more productive, constructive, or healthy response (In essence, to assist you in rewiring your brain). Importantly, Column 5 essentially identifies the underlying issue preventing you from achieving your Column 1 goal. In the interest of maintaining consistency with the example Column 1 goal I provided above, the coachee might find that the issue is lack of trust or lack of confidence in the work of others. As an integral part of every development program, the coach begins by building a foundation of Social Awareness, Self-Awareness, and Self-Regulation through the use of support technology, brain exercises, and, perhaps most importantly, a consistent mindfulness practice.

For those without an in-depth understanding of our development system, let's take a moment and align the language between Rewire and our 6-Columns:

(1) We prefer the designations "System 1" and "System 2" in referring to the brain's fast and slow thinking circuits respectively, while citing Kahneman Dr. O'Connor prefers "unconscious self" and "conscious self;"

(2) We prefer "unproductive, unconstructive, or unhealthy habit" while Dr. O'Connor prefers "Self-Destructive Behavior;"

(3) We prefer to use the phrase "Self-Regulation," while in referring to the same research Dr. O'Connor prefers "Self-Control" or "Willpower."

In addition, because of the nature of his profession and the clients he serves, he begins essentially at our Column 5. "Goal" as we would prefer to it does not appear until page 247. In other words, if we follow our example from above, he would more likely work to uncover the "trust" issue first and then identify "delegation" as being a behavior likely to be difficult for the individual. In coaching our clientele, we would work in the opposite direction.

Approach aside, there are remarkable similarities between our structured approach and the approach suggested by Dr. O'Connor. He provides powerful insights into why our development system is effective, and points to the relevant research supporting it. One of his most important contributions comes in the construction of behavioral "paradigms," allowing coaches to more

clearly understand the questions to be asked of the coachee and the development direction most likely to be successful. Let me summarize some of the “chunks of gold” this interesting work provides:

(1) I will quote him directly: “The brain does not tell us what to do; it is part of a system in which our life experience teaches our brain what to do.” Importantly, it is those life experiences that develop our Column 4 assumptions about ourselves and how the world works. He asserts that while we need to form those Column 4 assumptions in order to predict the future, to identify patterns in making decisions, our experiences can lead us to faulty assumptions (something we refer to as mindless, or data-less, assumptions). Those faulty assumptions then serve to form our unproductive habits and drive our System 1 fears. We would go one step further and argue that many of those assumptions become “faulty” as we transition from one social group to another. In other words, it may have functioned suitably in the prior social group but is unproductive in the new one.

(2) He makes a convincing argument that our Column 4 assumptions also contain our automatic defense mechanisms that serve to support our habits and often drive us further away from seeing what is actually going on. “Denial, rationalization, disassociation, and projection make our assumptive world more rigid and less open to new experience.”

(3) Although we were skeptical initially to mindfulness, it has become an integral and indispensable part of our development system. In Column 6, coaches use mindfulness as a vehicle for enhancing self-regulation, to assist in slowing down the brain in being more in the present and thus able to recognize more readily System 1 emotional cues and signals. Dr. O’Connor is clearly in agreement: “Regular mindfulness meditation practice is the best way to train your brain to be calm and objective, to bring more of your experience under the control of your [System 2 thinking circuits].” Mindfulness is woven in throughout the work.

(4) In Column 6, coaches encourage coachees to identify those situations, events, or people that trigger an emotion of concern in them that often activates an unproductive, unconstructive or unhealthy habitual reaction. Dr. O’Connor proposes a similar approach, but interestingly offers it also as an alternative to those who may find mindfulness to be difficult. Obviously, the strength comes from using them both together.

(5) The structure of Column 5 is largely based on our realization that without objective data to the contrary many of our coachees did not sense a need for change in their behavior. It became clear that the same issue was the primary reason why courses on leadership and leadership development were ineffective vehicles for bringing about behavioral change. In asking our

participants a series of questions, we found that the vast majority viewed themselves as being well above average relative to their peers on a variety of critical thinking and behavioral traits and attributes. When we discussed the behavioral traits necessary to be successful in any particular leadership role and the work required to develop them, it was quite surprising to see the number of people who felt they had little or no need to undertake such work. Dr. O'Connor provides a very interesting summary of this observation: "The fact is that most happy, confident people are slightly delusional. Happiness ... depends on certain optimistic or self-serving biases. According to each of us, we are all above average. We are more honest, more ethical, and more impartial, and our motivations are more pure than most people's. ... Collectively, these beliefs are referred to as the self-serving bias." Data serves to align the bias with reality.

(6) The 6-Columns is based on neuroscience and places considerable emphasis on the unproductive struggles between the brain's System 1 and System 2 circuits. Dr. O'Connor provides several insights that will assist coaches in making this point with coachees: "[System 1] is not wired to listen to the voice of reason, to [System 2], as [System 2] changes its perceptions and learns new things." He provides several provocative examples throughout the work.

(7) He also offers up some very interesting advice for the skeptics, drawing on the work of Alcoholics Anonymous. "If you really just do not believe you can do better, simply go through the motions. AA says: "Fake it till you make it"" Citing Prof. Tim Wilson, he argues that the act of doing something will change the brain and make it easier to do it next time.

(8) Sadly, he too sees the world as becoming less connected. "[We] are now less likely to trust our neighbors, government, doctors, hospital, school, and church than we ever used to be. Scientists have been asking the exact same question about the degree of personal happiness over the past 50 years, and every single year the percentage who say they are very happy has declined. It is very difficult to deny that social change is the cause." We go one step further and focus on the impacts of technology in making us increasingly socially isolated from one another.

Give our systems approach to personal development we are mindful of the research and the scientists who are making a difference. As it relates to the mind's internal world, Dr. O'Connor cites the most relevant scientists, Prof. Tim Wilson (interesting research on the effect of journaling; see his book *Redirect*); Prof. Roy Baumeister (leading research on self-regulation; see his book *Willpower*); and Prof. Richard Davidson (leading research on mindfulness; see his book *The Emotional Life of Your Brain*) among many others.

There are a few assertions where we are bit more guarded than he. For example, he offers up an argument for the concept of "ego depletion," which asserts that repeated use of brain resources

for self-control will eventually deplete them making resistance more difficult, has not held up well to research scrutiny. He makes it clear that he is focusing on the mind's internal world. Still, he sees the value in social connections for mental health and happiness: "People who feel connected to others live longer, happier, more productive lives, with fewer health problems, than those who are isolated. People who care about others are happier than those who are more self-centered." To this end, he discusses research on mirror neurons. I would suggest reading the more careful discussion of this topic in Prof. Matt Lieberman's book *Social*. On several occasions, he makes the argument that a solution to some forms of self-destructive behavior can be had in making an effort to develop social connections. For a more in depth discussion of this topic, I would suggest Prof. Kelly McGonigal's book *The Upside of Stress*.

This is an important addition to the several books that serve to define our development system. In that sense, we perfectly agree with Dr. O'Connor's close: "[We] absolutely can develop greater control over our most self-destructive patterns, and in the process become wiser and start to feel like the conscious and thoughtful part of ourselves is in charge of our lives."