Your Brain and the Path of Learning

Like the roads you follow every day to school, information follows a distinct path through your brain according to brain research. Whether that path will be smooth traveling or fraught with obstacles can be influenced by you. Know your brain basics and the tools you learned at SuperCamp and you can strengthen the path of learning.

Information enters the brain through our senses—visual (seeing), auditory (hearing), and kinesthetic (moving, doing, and touching). It travels to a relay station called the thalamus that instantly sends it in two directions. These two pathways are called the “high road” and the “low road” by neuroscientists.

The low road leads directly to the amygdala where the information is checked to see if a fear, stress, anxiety or threat response is necessary for your protection. The high road leads to the cerebral cortex where higher order thinking occurs and where long-term memory is stored. The low road is quick and automatic, but the high road is where you can use your knowledge and skills to help with the memory process.

The Low Road
What happens if the information is determined to be a threat to safety? You feel stress, anxiety, even fear, which interferes with the learning process. You find it difficult to concentrate on the material in front of you because your brain is preoccupied with stress. This anxiety could be triggered by a test you weren’t prepared for or a subject you dislike, but often, it can be something completely unrelated to the subject material in front of you. A recent breakup, a fight with a friend, or trouble at home can preoccupy your mind, causing the amygdala to set off alarm signals and set up roadblocks to learning.

The High Road
Luckily, you do have control over the high road where your working memory functions. If you stay “in the zone”—calm, but alert—you can create a clear path for learning, enhancing your ability to encode memory. You can do this by taking responsibility for managing your state of mind and using a few SuperCamp techniques. Sit up, take a deep breath, and practice a “This Is It” attitude. Focus on the present—leave your troubles at the door. This high road thinking will cause the low road response from the amygdala to normalize.

When you are “in the zone,” you are strengthening your high road response and creating an effective path for learning, allowing the information to go to short-term memory (the hippocampus) where it remains for up to 72 hours. Long-term memory (cerebral cortex) is the final destination—or goal—for information you’re learning. This is where you incorporate what you learn into what you do. Things like writing a paper, discussions with friends, and making connections between old and new information are a few ways you use the information stored in long-term memory. Once the information arrives there, you’ve “got it”!

You can use your SuperCamp skills to get information moving along the path of learning to long-term memory. The key is to help the brain recognize that the information is worth remembering. Finding the WIIFM (What’s in it for me?) is a good way to give the information meaning and importance. Repetition also helps, but go beyond boring rote memorization. Use V-A-K reviews, 10-24-7-10 reviews, and Mind Maps to keep it interesting.

When you’re on the high road to learning, you’re in a focused, relaxed state. Learning is easier and takes less time since your brain is working at making connections instead of dealing with stress. Choose the high road—it’s all about focusing on the present moment.

You can do a lot to strengthen the path of learning in your brain! The following tips will help you to get information moving from working memory to short-term memory and then to your goal of long-term memory where the information “sticks”—you’ve “got it” and you can access it whenever you need it.
• Try to let go of “distractions” or anything that might cause stress and block the path of learning.
• Sit up, take a deep breath and practice a “This Is It” attitude—focus on the present moment.
• Stay “in the zone,” that physical, mental, and emotional place where you hardly notice that you’re working, but you’re learning effectively.
• Find the WIIFM (What’s in it for me?) to help your brain recognize that the information is worth remembering.
• Use V-A-K reviews. Remember that information comes into your brain through your senses, and use all three—visual, auditory, and kinesthetic.
• Practice 10-24-7-10. Review information after 10 minutes, 24 hours, 7 days, and every night for 10 minutes just before sleep.
• Use mind maps. Review your notes and add to your mind maps every day.
• Connect new learning to what you already know.