

Book Review

By Tracy Robinson

The Eureka Factor: Aha Moments, Creative Insight, and the Brain

Authors: John Kounios and Mark Beeman (2015)

New York: Random House.

One of the most gratifying experiences we have as coaches is to witness a moment of sudden insight in one of our clients. Noticing the startle and look of surprise prompts us to ask, “what’s happening now?” Responses include phrases like “the penny dropped”, and “I just realised”, or “it’s all clear to me now”. Sudden clarity of thought and reframing of the topic are some of the classic traits of insight, but should coaches be concerned with what is actually going on in the brain? In the new book, *The Eureka Factor: Aha Moments, Creative Insight, and the Brain*, authors John Kounios and Mark Beeman explore the topic of insight in depth. Thanks to research in the area of insight by neuroscientists, we now have a much better understanding of what is occurring in the brain when someone says *Aha!*

The Eureka Factor is organized into sections that explain step-by-step how insight occurs in the brain. There is now clear scientific evidence that settles the debate of whether insight is distinct from logic based problem-solving. Brain-imaging technology illustrates that insight takes place consistently in the right hemisphere of the brain. As the authors explain, “insights are quantum leaps of thought, creative breakthroughs that power our lives and our history” (Kounios & Beeman, p.5). The conscious stages of insight include: immersion, impasse, and diversion. Subconsciously, the right side of the brain continues to process remote solutions during incubation and the “correct” solution is returned to conscious thought as a sudden insight. The concept of incubation during insight shows how insight problem-solving goes subconscious and then resurfaces. This results in both the experience of surprise and the certainty that the solution is correct. Kounios and Beeman also explain the difference between a sudden insight and a pseudo-insight, which is more gradual and accumulative.

A key revelation of the book is that analytical thinking is valuable when a situation is familiar, and about which the problem-solver has learned experience. In these cases, analytical thinking works like an efficient processor. However, when a problem is complex, ambiguous, or where the problem-solver is stuck, insight has a resounding advantage. There are also other conditions that enhance the ability to have an insight including the role of positive thinking and being aware of our thinking (i.e., mindfulness). Giving practical examples of how to employ rest, distraction, sensory deprivation and novel experiences, Kounios and Beeman bring the learning off the page and into everyday living.

As somewhat of a surprise, the authors go on to explore what can happen when someone is *overly* insightful. Again, relying on scientific evidence gleaned from stroke and schizophrenia research, the caution is to recognize a balance between insight and logic. As coaches, we can probably appreciate the dance with clients who understand a topic and still need help moving that understanding into a change in behavior.

What sets the book apart for me is that it marries cogent scientific evidence with illustrative anecdotes. The writing is personal and accessible and more of a self help book than an academic treatise. As Kounios and Beeman note in the preface, “We set out to write [a book] that was both lively and readable. Just as important, we wanted to ensure its scientific accuracy” (Kounios & Beeman, p. ix).

Although imperceptibly woven with stories about insight, the book is a summation of decades of research evidence on the topic. By the later chapters, the authors endeavour to extend the theory of insight based on their shared understanding. Theory can point to new directions in research and can be used to develop policy or even practice.

Kounios and Beeman have made the next leap in the theory with ideas about how we measure IQ, the double-edge of intuition, the role of experience and environment, the impact of types of motivation on creative thinking, the need for quiet introspection, and the promise of neuro-feedback conditioning. This makes the book relevant to scholars since theories represent the best ideas researchers have about a complex topic before anyone is actually able to prove it. Since sudden insight can represent a quantum leap in understanding, coaches stand to benefit from knowing more about the phenomena of insight. More importantly, the authors offer ways that we can foster more of these little nuggets of knowledge in ourselves and with others. Reading this book can neuroscientifically inform the practice of coaching.

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