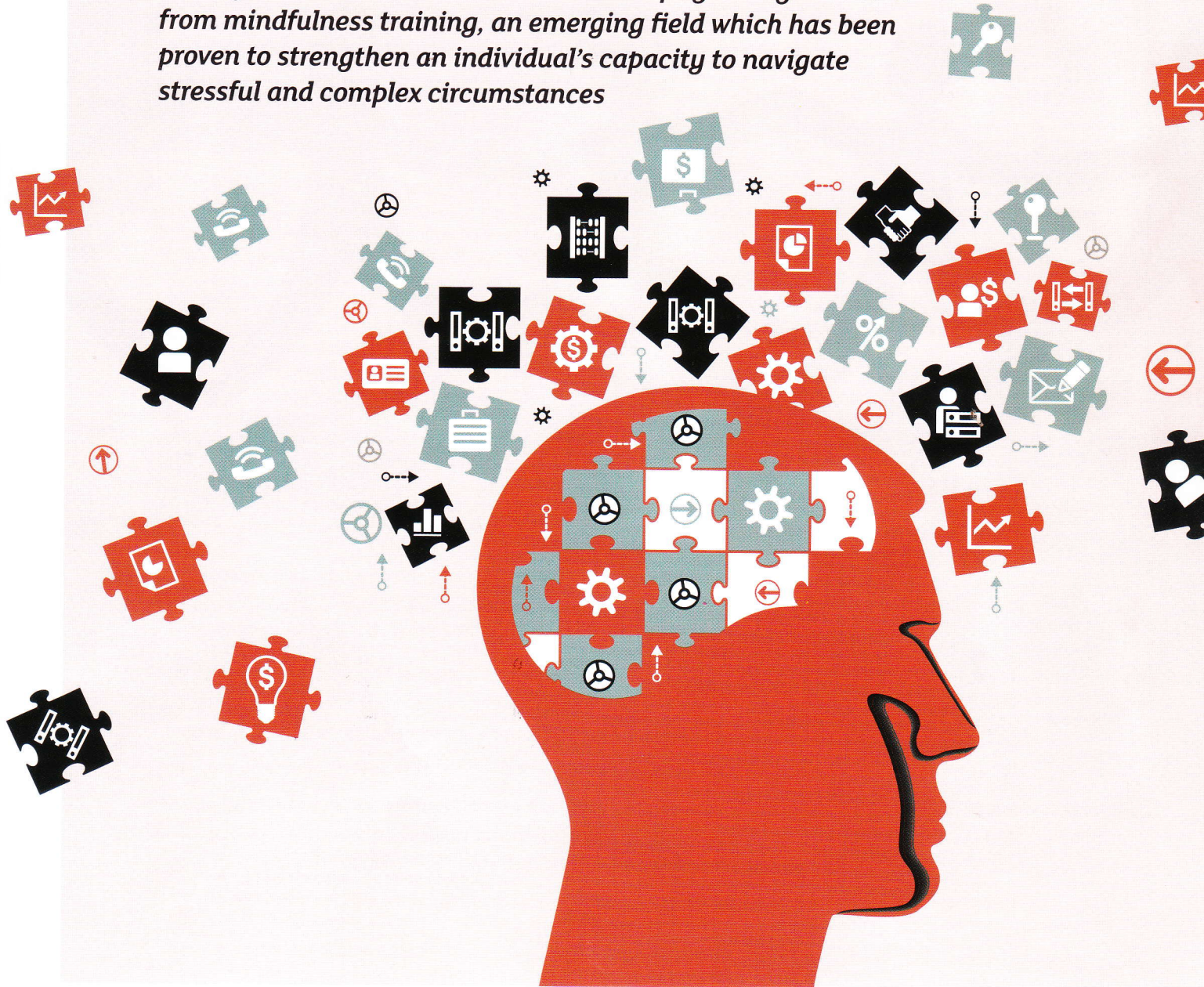
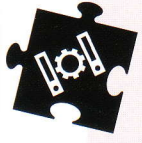


resilience and mindfulness

# Gym for the executive mind

*Feeling stressed and overwhelmed? Perhaps you might benefit from mindfulness training, an emerging field which has been proven to strengthen an individual's capacity to navigate stressful and complex circumstances*





**EXECUTIVES IN OUR MODERN CORPORATE WORLD** face a bewildering array of demands, and encounter enormous difficulty in achieving and sustaining an appropriate mental perspective and level of energy necessary to get everything done – and in a well considered and focused way.

Observations of this highly stressful and complex arena and their direct experiences in working closely with executives operating in it, have led leadership development consultancy Executive Mandala to undertake a research project during 2012 in collaboration with a group of senior executives from across a number of large organisations. The project was investigating the view that to achieve real and sustainable change, executives require a deep appreciation of the factors driving both their ineffective and their effective responses to stress and complexity. The use of even well-established behaviourally-based assessments is not sufficient to ensure that executives achieve lasting beneficial change in their life and work practices. It is this insight that enables them to build the individual development strategies necessary for achieving long-lasting, highly effective leadership behaviour. And this, in turn, supports their ongoing business success.

We can call this deep level of appreciation mindful self-understanding or psychological insight. Helping executives to develop this as a core mind strength capability is the key to expanded development and success – and sustainability.

The six-month research project formed part of a broader research platform designed to meet several questions relating to the primary objectives of an overall leadership development study, namely:

1. Optimise performance in complex corporate environments
2. Build resilience/adaptability/protection against the stressors of everyday corporate life.

The research question framing this six-month project asked whether the explicit training and practice of mindful self-management would enhance executive performance and productivity especially during stressful periods and when dealing with complexity.

During the initial part of the project, executives were asked what problems they faced during such times, and what success would look and feel like for them as leaders. They were also asked how that success would affect their business outcomes. The responses to these questions were used as qualitative benchmark measures at the project mid-point, at the end, and then six months after its completion.

The PANAS (Positive and Negative Affect Scale) was also used to provide a quantitative measure throughout the project and on completion. The PANAS is a 20-item self-report measure of positive and negative affect developed by Watson, Clark, and Tellegen (1988), and

was chosen mainly for its brevity and focus on emotion and feeling. At each monitor point, an aggregate of PANAS scores for the executive group was also developed, presented and discussed with the executives.

These discussions were further enhanced with the inclusion of presentations on how awareness of our ongoing experience can create resonance, and that this in turn, can mobilise specific social and emotional circuits in the brain. By practising mindful self-management, these specific circuits are stimulated to grow – which ultimately transforms mindful awareness into longer-term resilience. (Daniel J. Siegel, 2007).

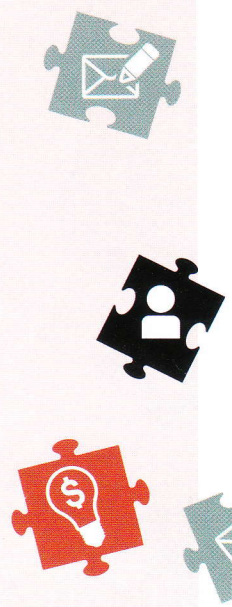
Results to date have shown that the majority of executives who took part in the research project have continued to use the mindful self-management methodology adapting it to suit their ongoing needs with good success and, most notably, have observed a significant increase in their ability to face stress and complexity with calmness, composure and competence. This has enabled them to more easily achieve success in relation to key result areas of their business.

## LEARNING HOW TO USE OUR MINDS

Being mindful – or fully conscious – of our emotional and cognitive reaction to specific stimulus is an essential front-end skill for developing more effective and lasting changes to the ways we respond to what we perceive to be stressful and overly-complex events or circumstances. Executive Mandala sees it as a critical feature for helping clients gain the perspicacity which is the foundation upon which deep and sustainable change can begin to occur. It also helps clients to reduce any ineffective coping approaches, and build and strengthen more positively adaptive ways.

Executive Mandala has introduced a psycho-educational element into their overall approach to leadership development (including coaching) with clients, and sees this as fundamental to the building of resilience and adaptability. Having this psychological self-knowledge ultimately enables them to speed up the rate of change, as they are able to see more readily, and often immediately, exactly what thoughts they are thinking, and what feelings they are experiencing. As a consequence, they are able to see how a certain way of thinking and responding to pressure drives those less effective responses and outcomes. Learning to regulate those cognitive and emotional responses also forms part of the process.

Many of Executive Mandala's executive clients are strong advocates of "going to the gym". This enables them to manage their physical bodies and keep themselves fit for the rigorous schedules they are required to keep. Executive Mandala likens the practice of strengthening the mind through specifically chosen activities to "gym for the mind". This is a comparison

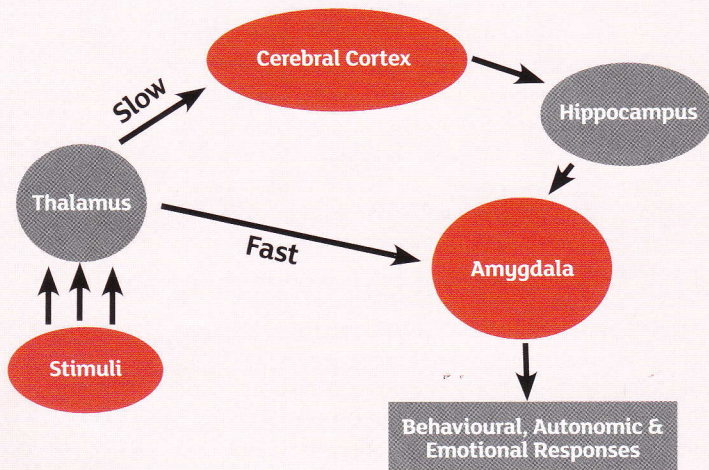




# resilience and mindfulness

## Fast and slow fear circuitry

Diagram 1



executives can relate to, and it can provide the motivation to take time out – even if momentarily throughout their working day – to attend to some mind-strengthening exercises.

### WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE BRAIN THEN?

The integration of sustainable human change and neuroscience has for some few years now, begun to gain traction in scientific and business publications, as well as with some distinguished conference speakers.

One focus of discussion in these arenas has related to instances when certain stimuli, eg, pressure and complexity, generates mal-adaptive and ineffective responses, fear and/or anxiety is at the base.

World-renowned Professor of Psychology and clinical psychologist, Louis Cozolino, has stated, “anxiety and fear are the conscious emotional aspects of the body’s ongoing appraisal of what is dangerous and life threatening. They tell the body that it should be prepared to take action. Anxiety can be triggered by countless conscious or unconscious cues and has the power to shape our behaviours, thoughts, and feelings. At its most adaptive, anxiety encourages us to step back from the edge of a cliff, cross the street when unsavoury characters are coming our way, and double check to see if we signed our tax forms before we seal the envelope. At its least adaptive, it unconsciously steers us away from actions like taking important appropriate risks, pushing ourselves to reach personal goals, or engaging in new and potentially beneficial behaviours”.

Joseph LeDoux (1994) demonstrated through his research that there are two interrelated yet separable fear circuits in laboratory animals. Cozolino (2002)

refers to LeDoux’s theory as being clinically useful for those who are experiencing stress, as it helps them to understand the neurobiological mechanisms of what they are experiencing.

He describes the fast system as reflexive and with immediate action (as shown in diagram 1). This rapid appraisal and response (fight or flight reactions) mechanism is designed for use in survival situations.


The slow system, however, sends sensory information from the receptor (thalamus) to higher circuits for further evaluation. This system is slower because it contains more synaptic connections and involves conscious processing. These circuits of memory and high level processing examine the information more carefully, compare it to memories of other similar situations and make voluntary decisions concerning how to proceed.

The elements of this theory – which are shown in diagram 1 – are proving valuable in helping executive clients to more fully appreciate, from a scientific perspective, what is happening to them in those moments when they react in non-effective ways to stressful and complex circumstances.

Executive Mandala continues to conduct research on how mindfulness training might serve to strengthen the slow system within the neurological architecture, thus heightening capacity to view stressful and complex circumstances in a less reactive way.

Feedback from one surprised and delighted CEO who had commissioned Executive Mandala to work with his senior staff included, “this particular individual is more confident and more effective in the leadership team – and just as importantly, more effective in life due to the confidence they have in themselves as a result of this approach”.

With results of this kind to build on, we continue to develop our unique psychological framework for use in individual coaching and leadership team workshops. The hallmark of this work, as indicated above, is the front-end development of deep psychological insight, enabling executives to regulate their emotions, develop and strengthen their mental capacity, and make long-lasting changes to how they operate in today’s high pressure and complex world.

One pleasing consequence of this research project is an increase in the number of requests by executives to run “executive mind strength” programs, which are starting during the first quarter of 2013. These will be conducted through Executive Mandala’s ‘Executive Mind Centre’. 

#### Further information

Contact: Barbara Jones, managing director of Executive Mandala on 0411 517 186 or email [barbara.jones@executivemandala.com.au](mailto:barbara.jones@executivemandala.com.au) or Simon Mundy, senior associate of Executive Mandala on 0427 405 832 or email [simon.mundy@executivemandala.com.au](mailto:simon.mundy@executivemandala.com.au)

