

## **New Eyeballs**

**by Bob Whipple: MBA, CPLP**

The human brain is a remarkable organ. It has many fascinating properties that can give us insights on how to live a better and more effective life. One of these phenomena occurs at the base of the brain: the Reticular Activating System (RAS). RAS is an incredible filtering system that allows human beings to sort out and pay attention to things that are important to us while disregarding the bombardment of other things that are not critical. It is the mechanism that allows us to focus attention on the vital few and ignore the trivial many.

I will leave how the RAS works to the brain experts, but the impact of it is a wonder to behold. In this article, I want to explore RAS along with some implications it can have in our professional and personal lives. The best way to appreciate the power of RAS is through examples.

Imagine you are in a theater during intermission. The crowded lobby is abuzz with the cacophony of voices, and it is impossible to hear any conversation except the one closest to you. In the crowd, within earshot, someone mentions your name. All of a sudden you are able to laser focus on that conversation, ignoring all the rest, and actually hear what that person is saying about you. If the person had not uttered your name, there would be no way you would hear what she was saying. That is RAS in action.

Let's look at another typical example. You just came out of a car dealership after having ordered a red Ford truck. On the way home, you start to notice red Ford trucks everywhere. Driving into the dealership, you paid no attention and did not notice any trucks at all. Once the RAS is activated, it allows all kinds of miraculous things to happen. Let's explore how RAS can be useful in helping you be more successful at work.

Marcus Buckingham wrote a famous book entitled *Now, Discover Your Strengths*. His thesis was that we can make much faster progress at self improvement if we focus energy on our areas of strength rather than trying to improve our weaknesses. If you doubt that conclusion, pick up a copy of his book. It gives a mountain of data to support

the conclusion. The book also contains a link to an online survey you can take to determine your own strength areas.

After reading the book and doing the assessment, I found two dominant strengths I had that were not evident to me before. I found out that I am a "Maximizer" (one who tries to achieve excellence) and that I am particularly strong in "WOO," (which stands for Winning Others Over). Being a Maximizer allows me to accomplish more in one day than most other people, and WOO allows me to have significant influence when it is important. Let's now explore how this knowledge, coupled with RAS, has made the ideas useful to me.

I am a visual communicator, and I tend to think in terms of images. I have the image that I am walking around all day with imaginary "arrows of opportunity" flying in the air, just over my head. The arrows represent a constant stream of opportunities to interface with people or do things that help me be more effective. I just need to pick the right arrows and reach up and grab the right ones as they fly by. The difficult part used to be that there were so many arrows, how was I to select the ones that could help me the most? Enter RAS.

Now that I know my two greatest strengths, when I view the arrows in my mind, a few of them are in vibrant color. These are the ones that represent a chance to use my skills at Maximizing and WOO. The rest of the arrows are black. Using this filtering technique, I am able to "see" the most important opportunities coming at me and grab them to flex the strengths within me much more frequently. Voila! My performance improves simply based on the application of my strongest traits.

RAS is a very powerful tool, but we need to be continuously aware of that power if we are to harness it for use in our lives. Try this little exercise. Try to identify 5-10 times in each day where you are applying the understanding of RAS to improve how you manage your life. For example, you might be sitting in a cafeteria with hundreds of people. In the distance, you spot an old friend you had been thinking about recently and realize you have not spoken to him in over a year. You resolve to call him that afternoon. Immediately you recognize that RAS helped you find that person and renew the acquaintance. That counts as one of the 10 opportunities to use RAS.

That evening, while scanning the newspaper, out of the corner of your eye you catch a glimpse of an ad for a boat and immediately remember that you had intended to buy a new fishing reel this week. The association was made possible by RAS. That would be number two example. Try to find 5-10 examples a day.

By focusing your energy on understanding how you can use RAS to filter your thinking as opposed to following random thoughts, you will actually be doing a kind of "meta

RAS" where the technique is helping you identify opportunities to use its power for you daily. It sounds complex, but it is really pretty basic.

Do not overlook the power of RAS to improve your life. The more you practice identifying the phenomenon within you and using it, the more creative ways you will find of having it guide you to a better life.

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