THE COMFORT OF PREDICTABILITY: WE DON'T DO WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

We love the comfort zones of similarity (based on what we see) and of ease (based on how we think). Rounding out our list of Retro IQ comfort zones is the comfort of predictability (based on what we do). Human beings have a strong need for predictability, partly resulting from our ability to think abstractly, which allows us to contemplate the future (and anticipate and try to avoid adversity),[1] and partly from our deeply engrained belief that predictability leads to security.[2] If that is true, then unpredictability leads to uncertainty. Facing uncertainty leads to feelings of insecurity, or a "fear of the unknown," which we try to reduce by rejecting the thing or event causing the unpredictability.[3] Basically, we need to know what will happen if we do something before we actually do it. If there is a new behavior that we can execute, unless we have some certainty about the results, we will default to old behaviors regardless of how attractive the consequence of that new behavior is.

This chapter is about how we choose conscious behaviors based on the predictability of the outcomes. For the purposes of understanding conscious behavior in the context of predictability, a behavior is defined as any action that you choose including actions that you choose to not take. Whereas the two previous chapters focused on the more or less

unconscious comforts of similarity and cognitive ease, this chapter focuses on conscious actions, behaviors that we are far more capable of tuning into and changing than we are of changing our implicit associations, interpretations, or heuristics.

When we think about our behaviors—the actions that we choose to take—it is important to note that we can only choose to do something new once. After that, the choice we make is to "repeat" or "not repeat," not "do" or "don't do." It sounds merely semantic, but in regards to how we think about actions, the difference is quite significant. The first time we choose to do something, we make the decision based on an abstract notion of what *could happen*. Once we do something for the first time, we have a concrete memory of what *did happen*, and our future actions are based on what we think *will happen* based on what *did happen*.

Our memories of consequences from previous actions become the blueprints for our future actions, and when we follow the blueprints with enough frequency, we skip the blueprints and react from memory. When we react to the same stimuli with enough frequency, our actions bypass even our conscious memory and become automated. Actions (conscious behaviors of choice) slowly become reactions (conscious behaviors of habit), which eventually become reflexes (unconscious behaviors).

For example, try and remember the very first time you traveled to work whether you did so by car, train, bus, or foot. When the destination is new, the route has to be planned and executed very consciously and very deliberately. You pay attention to visual and audial cues, and you are conscious of each decision you make at each turn. Everything is a choice that you are making for the first time. The second time you traveled that route, your memory checked in to ask if you wanted to replay the memory you created the previous day. You probably answered in the affirmative, and you followed your steps from the previous day. The third time you travel that route, your memory may check in again, but by the fourth or fifth time, your memory stops checking in and assumes that given a particular set of stimuli—it's morning, it's a weekday, you have to go to work, and so on—you will take that route to work. (These are the times when you leave home and arrive at work with absolutely no conscious memory of how you got there!) Your conscious thought is no longer necessary and doesn't get reactivated unless there is a signifi-

cant disturbance to the memory—there is a major traffic jam, the train isn't working that day, and so on—causing you to plan a new route.

Once your memory reflex has been interrupted, you have a choice to create a new pattern or fall back into the previous pattern. The majority of us fall back into the previous pattern, and the memory reflex absorbs the disruption and becomes automated once more.

The "route to work" example is one that many of us can recognize even if it has been relegated to that of an unconscious reflex. Other actions that fall into this category are those actions that we execute by habit and reflex every day such as brushing our teeth, showering, getting dressed, and driving. It is relatively easy to see how these actions evolve from conscious actions to habits to unconscious reflexes, but there are other examples that are just as pervasive in our lives that we tend to overlook.

Some of the most powerful examples of this reflex in the workplace are the relationships that we create and maintain with colleagues. Many of our relationships follow the action-reaction-reflex trajectory without us being fully aware of what is occurring. As illustrated in the two previous chapters, our initial actions may be conscious, but they are informed and guided by many unconscious processes such as implicit associations, unconscious biases, interpretations of events, and heuristic shortcuts, so our initial actions toward building relationships are going to default to what feels the most similar and easy. Once we get these relationships activated, our penchant for predictability keeps us from straying too far from the relationships that have become reflexes because a lack of familiarity and a perception of complexity suggest a level of unpredictability that we will not risk unless there is a compelling reason to do so.

There is a necessary tension between appreciating the human need for predictability and pushing the business need for innovation. For instance, in 1995, *Harvard Business Review* published an article called "The Power of Predictability" in which Howard H. Stevenson and Mihnea C. Moldoveanu argued that "predictability [in organizations] built the trust that allowed people to synchronize their actions in mutually productive ways."[4] Twelve years later, in 2007, the *Gallup Management Journal* published an article entitled "The Four Drivers of Innovation," in which Gallup chairman and CEO Jim Clifton observes that "[i]n the

past, most businesses have focused on continuous improvement of their products and services to maintain a competitive edge. But in today's economy, that's not always enough . . . *Better* doesn't work anymore. *Different* does."[5]

In the Gallup study mentioned above, the researchers found that "[w]orkplace friendships play a significant role among engaged employees when it comes to setting the stage for [new] idea creation and refinement."[6] Across the various companies surveyed in this study, employees focused on the number and quality of relationships in their workplaces as sources of engagement and innovation. We may crave predictability, but we perform our best when we have many authentic relationships in the workplace. In other words, we have to step out of our comfort zones in order to step into our innovation zones.

Barry Conchie, a leadership consultant at Gallup, summarized Gallup's findings by stressing that innovation begins where relationships thrive: "An emotional commitment of one person to another makes a difference. But the control a manager has to enhance or limit [an employee's] contribution to innovation is the most powerful factor . . . It's important that [relationships are] cultivated from manager to manager and employee to employee. But we know that the [quality of the] relationship between a manager and an employee affects the ability to leverage that relationship. A bad relationship is a sure-fire way to kill innovation."[7]
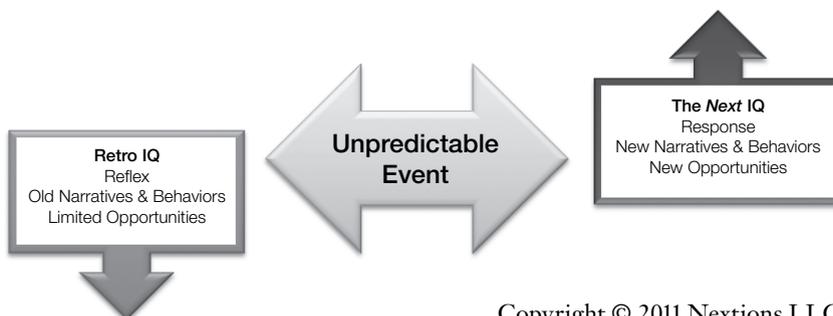
Vibram Five Fingers shoes look like meshed gloves for your feet. They challenge everything we think we know about what a shoe should look and feel like and their odd appearance has resulted in them being called the "Next Ugly Shoe"[8] and the "creepy running shoes that look like fluorescent feet."[9] According to Vibram's website, "[i]n 1936, Vitale Bramani, an academic of the Italian Alpine Club, returning from a tragic alpine climb, had the intuition to apply the technique Pirelli used on automobile tires on shoe soles. Applying rubber under his mountain boots, he created the first vulcanized rubber soles and revolutionized the practice of mountain climbing."[10] Approximately 70 years later, Bramani's grandson, Marco Bramani, worked with industrial designer Robert Fliri to create what he thought would be shoes that revolutionized how boaters and water sport enthusiasts thought about footwear. Vibram's reputation as a shoemaker for mountain climbers raised eyebrows—mountain shoe people shouldn't be making water shoes, should

they? The predictable thing to do would have been to make a better mountain shoe.

Within a year of release of the Five Fingers shoes, it wasn't just the skeptical market that was surprised. Vibram itself was shocked to discover that while sailors were mildly accepting of the oddly shaped shoes, runners were buying up the shoes so quickly that Vibram couldn't keep up with the demand. Between being celebrated in Christopher McDougall's bestseller *Born to Run* and being named as one of *Time* magazine's best health inventions in 2007, it is no surprise that in spite of not being that popular with sailors, Five Fingers went from $430,000 in sales in 2006 to about $11 million in 2009 and over $50 million in 2010.

Vibram's Five Fingers shoes are a case study in unpredictability for everyone involved, from the market that wondered who would ever buy the "ugly shoes" to runners who had no idea that the next best thing to happen in running would actually be intended for sailors and for Vibram, who quickly realized that business intelligence lies in getting your product to the people who want it regardless of who your initial target market was. Our default for what is predictable could have prevented us from seeing footwear that can help runners because it is in the aisle for sailors and it could have prevented Vibram from capitalizing on a tidal wave of demand for its shoes because the wave came from an unexpected direction.

As Michael Hammer and James Champy wrote in their groundbreaking book, *Reengineering the Corporation: A Manifesto for Business Revolution*, "The changes that will put a company out of business are those that happen outside the light of its current expectations."[11] We want predictability, but our success lies in what happens beyond our scope of expectations in the space outside of our comfort zones.

Retro IQ
Reflex
Old Narratives & Behaviors
Limited Opportunities

Unpredictable Event

The *Next* IQ
Response
New Narratives & Behaviors
New Opportunities

USING THE UNPREDICTABLE TO CREATE UNDERSTANDING

I was retained by the senior Human Resources executive in a large company to create "harmony in hell," as he phrased it, in his leadership team. The executive was a relatively new addition to the senior leadership team of this company, and he realized very quickly that not only was there no inclusion on behalf of the directors who reported up to him, but in many instances, there was active and explicit exclusion. The directors on his team (and by proxy the managers and employees below the directors) valued turf over trust, control over collaboration, and insolence over inclusion. In one meeting, I noticed that when any one director stood up to present on his or her department, many of the other directors would quickly start typing away on their Blackberries. In a strategic planning session, the director who volunteered to advance the slides for the presentations kept advancing the slides faster than the other directors wanted so that the presentations were unnaturally and rudely accelerated.

When the executive and I sat down to plan an inclusion strategy for his leadership team, I commented on how comfortable everyone on the team had grown with the high level of detachment and rudeness. I also noted that it was difficult to ascertain if the behaviors I had observed were truly personality/character traits of the leaders or if these communication patterns had cemented over time as reflexive behaviors of this team. The executive planned a full-day off-site retreat for his team to either "pull it together" or "break it apart for good."

The first exercise we did at the retreat (held at a modern art museum to kick-start the unpredictability) was to brainstorm everything that was predictable about the team from where individuals sat in meetings to who interrupted whom to agenda items to who argued with whom to who debriefed together after meetings to when and where meetings took place. This session lasted almost 2 hours, and we came up with a list of over 150 things that the team could easily predict about each other. There were some hurt feelings, some anger, and some frustration as people initially pointed out the predictable patterns of others, but there was also laughter and agreement as the list grew to include everyone in the room.

After a short break, I challenged them to go through each predictable item on the list and identify one way to actively break up the predictability. This session also lasted about 2 hours, and the team identified "predictability breakers" such as rotating seating assign-

ments, a "mute" button that could be passed to an individual to silence him or her in a moment when the person was most likely to argue, a "speak" button that could be passed to an individual to encourage him or her to enter a conversation that the person normally would not enter, rotating the responsibility for creating the agenda and running the meeting, a list of venues to shake up where they held their meetings, and so on.

The last session of the day was a business session, but the executive ran the session with a few of the "predictability breakers" in place. The session looked and felt very different from their previous meetings. As the executive said to me at the end of the day: "It wasn't yet harmony, but at least it wasn't hell."

Our intrinsic need for predictability keeps us chained to unproductive behaviors that eventually morph into reflexes that prevent us from crafting deliberate and intelligent responses to information, events, and people. This is the Retro IQ model where we see our capabilities and intelligences as inherent immutable characteristics instead of competencies that can be enhanced or reduced by our thoughts and actions. Even the most intelligent person per an IQ test can get derailed by the stickiness of unexamined biases, unproductive cognitive patterns, and entrenched behaviors.

A Deeper Dive into Predictability

We crave predictability even if change carries great promise. We will work twice as hard to maintain a predictable environment that makes us miserable than we will work to create change that has the potential to make us happy. The amount of misery and pain that we will endure before deciding to give up predictability for change is truly remarkable, and it is truly a cornerstone of the Retro IQ. The *Next* IQ prioritizes change over predictability because all aspects of the world are already changing, so shifting our vision,

> Without change there is no innovation, creativity, or incentive for improvement. Those who initiate change will have a better opportunity to manage the change that is inevitable.
>
> William Pollard (physicist and Episcopal priest, 1911–1989)

our thinking, and our behaviors to meet the needs of the changing world is a necessity, not a choice. That said, the RETRO IQ is very effective at hanging on until the necessity becomes a severe emergency. The following chart gives an overview of three common biases that implicitly veer us toward predictability to our detriment. See if you can come up with some examples from your personal and/or professional lives where you have explicitly or implicitly made decisions along these biases. Then see if you can come up with organizational examples that you have observed in your workplace or other organization with which you are intimately familiar.

COMMON COGNITIVE BIASES CONNECTED TO THE COMFORT OF PREDICTABILITY		
Bias	**Description**	**Examples**
Status Quo Bias[12]	We have the proclivity to favor perspectives, decisions, and actions that will keep things relatively the same. We prefer existing relationships and realities over any potential change in spite of evidence that change may be personally beneficial.	
System Justification Bias[13]	We tend to justify the existing system (in organizations, politics, families, etc.) because systems provide certainty, stability, and safety; individuals who enjoy higher levels of social roles/ categories adopt a belief that the system is fair and works well because it enhances their self-esteem (wealthy people who attribute their wealth to their own competency who then support the system as meritocratic); individuals who suffer the lower levels of social roles/categories adopt an even higher attachment to the system because they believe the system is the only way to transcend their limited roles/categories (poor people tend to believe in the meritocratic fairness of systems because they see the system as their only hope to make their lives better).	

Bias	Description	Examples
Loss Aversion Bias[14]	We have a propensity to see our losses as greater than our gains of the same amount, which causes us to work harder to avoid losses than we would to acquire gains of the same amount (we will put twice as much money to recoup money that we have lost on a particular stock than we would to buy different stock that can make us twice as much money); losses are often two times as powerful as gains of the same amount in regards to meaning for individuals; there is a greater likelihood that we will take risks to minimize losses than we would to maximize gains (we would spend more time and energy trying to recover $100 that we lost than using that same amount of time and energy to gain $200).	

In bullfighting there is a term called *querencia*. The *querencia* is the spot in the ring to which the bull returns. Each bull has a different *querencia*, but as the bullfight continues, and the animal becomes more threatened, it returns more and more often to his spot. As he returns to his *querencia*, he becomes more **predictable**. And so, in the end, the matador is able to kill the bull because instead of trying something new, the bull returns to what is familiar. His comfort zone.

Carly Fiorina (former CEO of Hewlett-Packard)

The *Next* IQ Bias Breakers©

The gravity pull of predictability draws us into doing the same things over and over because we prioritize the predictability of the consequences instead of the success of the consequences.

Predictability leads to failure.

T. Boone Pickens (Texas oil and gas tycoon)

Breaking our addiction to probability can be achieved by using one or more of the tools presented in the previous two chapters, and this chapter provides a couple of extra tools to hone in order to break the addiction to predictability.

Predictability, by definition, means the ability to foretell the future based on reasonable information related to the past. We label weather, stock markets, human behavior, and political trends as unpredictable because we are comparing them to a very specific pattern in the past with which the current reality is not aligned. So, if the comfort of predictability is anchored to past experiences, breaking the addiction to predictability is connected to severing the present and the future from the past in a constructive way.

1. *Forecast the Possible.*
   In order to usher in the unpredictable, you have to focus on what is possible, not predictable. Possibility draws on the imagination while predictability draws on history. Create goals for yourself, your team, and your organization around what is possible, not predictable. In some organizations (and perhaps some individuals), this requires a dramatic shift in how you think about the future and its relationship to the present.

   I worked with a mid-size company where the average age of the senior leadership team exceeded 40 but the average age of the frequent consumer was below 35. The leaders were not operating on the same past as the company's consumers. Without the diverse perspectives of the younger generations on decision-making teams, the desire for predictability among the leaders was setting the stage for failure. It was not enough to try importing the perspectives of the younger generation via focus group reports or anecdotal examples. As we worked through what the leaders wanted in regard to predictability, they realized that their addiction to predictability was impairing their organization from being prepared for the 21st century. Knowing that they would not shift their perspectives overnight, they implemented a simple solution: they focused more on what the company *should* look like in 10 years than on what they thought the company *could* look like in 10 years. Their shift in how they made decisions is equiva-

lent to being in a car going 30 miles per hour and asking "how fast do we need to go to get to where we want to be in 2 hours" versus "if we keep going this fast, where will we most likely end up in 2 hours."

Forecast the possible, not the predictable, and see how your perspective shifts.

2. *Create Micro Unpredictability.*
   While unpredictability at the macro level can cause destructive disruptions, unpredictability at the micro level can catalyze creativity and critical thinking. Of course, the more diverse perspectives you have in any context, the greater the levels of micro unpredictability will be, but any individual, team, or organization can actively create micro unpredictability to get beyond the comfortable.

   Micro unpredictability is the collective effort of small changes that you can make that keep things new and prevent people from operating purely by habit. Small and unexpected changes in routine, agendas, venues, meeting leaders, communication patterns, expectations, and so on can collectively amount to substantive shifts in how people think, learn, and lead.

THE *NEXT* IQ INSIGHTS: CHAPTER 11

- Our desire for predictable consequences to our actions works with our need for comfort for similarity and ease to keep the RETRO IQ in place even when we need to and want to transition to THE *NEXT* IQ.
- Our behaviors are a complex pattern of choice (the first time we do something) to reaction (we try and replicate or avoid the consequences from our initial choice) to habit (we do something without thinking). The more conscious we are that the majority of our actions are actually reactions and habits, the more we can consciously act in ways that are beneficial to us.
- Some of the biases that most affect our behaviors are the status quo bias, the system justification bias, and the loss aversion bias.

The *Next* IQ Actions: Chapter 11

- Act, don't react. The *Next* IQ relies on our abilities to act anew in critical situations. When we default to our reactive and habitual behaviors, we replicate past consequences instead of creating new solutions. We must learn to (1) forecast the possible and (2) create micro unpredictability.
- Identify one thing that you do the same way every day at work. Now, change it. What changed because of your change?