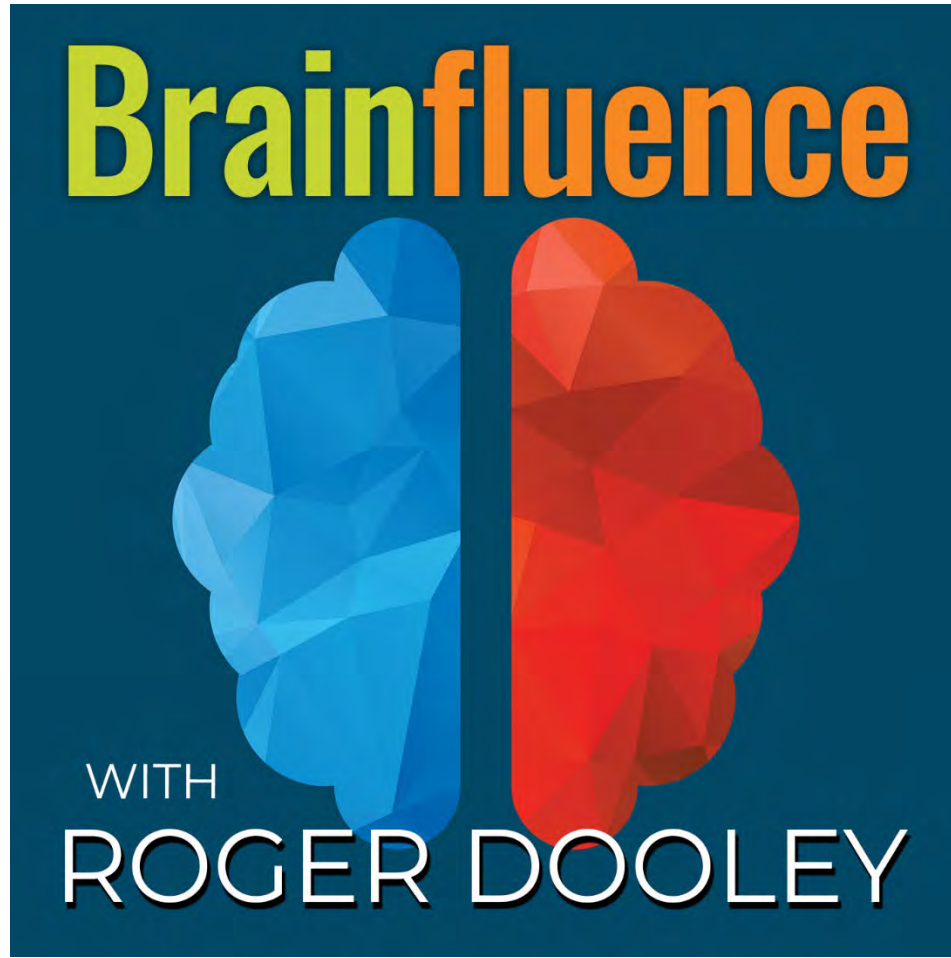


# The Power of Inaction with Jinny Uppal Brainfluence

Resources: <https://www.rogerdooley.com/jinny-uppal-inaction/>



**Full Episode Transcript**

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## SPEAKERS

Intro, Roger Dooley, Jinny Uppal, Outro

**Intro:** [00:00:00]

Welcome to Brainfluence, where author and international keynote speaker Roger Dooley shares powerful but practical ideas from world-class experts, and sometimes a few of his own. To learn more about Roger's books, Brain Fluent and Friction, and to find links to his latest articles and videos, the best place to start is [rogerdooley.com](http://rogerdooley.com). Roger's keynotes will keep your audience entertained and engaged. At the same time, he will change the way they think about customer and employee experience. To check availability for an in-person or virtual keynote or workshop, visit [rogerdooley.com](http://rogerdooley.com).

**Roger Dooley:** [00:00:37]

Welcome to Brainfluence, I'm Roger Dooley. Today's guest has a fascinating background. Jinny Uppal started her career with degrees in math and computer science, but transitioned into retail technology, and ultimately strategy. She's held senior roles at brands like Macy's and Kohls. Most recently, she was VP for next-generation stores at Bed, Bath, and Beyond. Jinny is now a consultant at CK Advisory. Her new book, is *In/Action: Rethinking the Path to Results*. Sometimes, perhaps frequently, the best thing to do is to do nothing. Welcome to the show, Jinny.

**Jinny Uppal:** [00:01:10]

Thank you so much for having me here, Roger.

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**Roger Dooley:** [00:01:12]

Jinny, one of my past guests on the show who was a real honor to have him on a couple of times was Tom Peters. He invented the business book category that we both participate in today, and his best-seller, *In Search of Excellence*, featured what very successful companies did, at least in his and his co-author's analysis. And the very first characteristic that they all had in common was a bias for action. And of course, in your book, you're saying that sometimes inaction is good and you talk about an action bias as something that perhaps we need to overcome. So, explain how these two ideas exist in the same universe.

**Jinny Uppal:** [00:01:51]

That's a great point, and I fully acknowledge that the topic of my book and the thesis is a bit counterintuitive and it doesn't make sense, especially in our culture. Buyers for action is one of the core values of Amazon. And I have a 20-plus year corporate career, as you pointed out, and I've had my share of success. And until about a year or two ago, every time I thought about my life, what drove success in my personal life or business, I also could point out those specific actions I took. So, I'm a technologist, I took risks, I didn't think, I didn't go into analysis paralysis. I believed in that theory. And I actually do see value in action because, yes, action drives progress. What my book points out is we underestimate the power of thoughtful pauses where inspired ideas come forth. So, if you really dig deep into the stories of successful people, as much as it's easy to point to things they did, it's harder to talk about it, but it is when I took thoughtful pauses, breaks. And it could be a few minutes in a conversation or a few hours, but the ideas that come

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up when you give yourself a break, that's what really drives massive progress as opposed to incremental progress that comes from incremental action. And that's the distinction that I'm making in the book.

**Roger Dooley:** [00:03:12]

Yeah, I got that message. I think a few of the examples are true in action where you cite the example of how the Russians defeated Napoleon by basically not engaging with them as most military leaders would, but just waiting it out, letting the weather and the distance and everything else due to work for them. And there are a few other examples like that where sometimes just doing nothing is best, it ends up leading to a better outcome than taking any action. But I think other examples show the value of, I guess, what you might call a strategic pause. One of them was a medical equipment company who was faced with suddenly learning that one of their machines was present or was perhaps even the cause of a death of a child in a hospital. And they had an action plan for this. But why don't you tell that story?

**Jinny Uppal:** [00:04:05]

Yeah, that's an interesting one you bring up. So, I introduced language called strategic inaction or thoughtful pauses to distinguish from inaction that comes from fear or paralysis. Strategic inaction is when you know either that this is not the right action to take or this is not the right time to take that action. So, that is the definition of thoughtful pause or strategic inaction. Now, crisis management is one area in life where we inevitably associate it with action. The moment there is a crisis, the one thing you've got to do as a leader is swing into action. That is not

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the time to step back. That is the time to be front and center. And the pandemic kind of taught us, right? The best leaders, they sprung into action, they knew what is to be done. The story the book presents the alternative view of why strategic inaction can actually be more powerful. So, the CEO of this medical imaging company was informed about the death of a child in equipment or machine made by his company. And in health care like any other business, there is a crisis playbook when something like this happens. You lawyer up, you call an emergency staff meeting, you issue a gag order, you tell the board. These are things that every CEO knows. You've got to just fire off on all cylinders. This CEO, Singh, I've known him for about 15 years, he decided instead to go for a walk. Completely counter-intuitive. Normally, you would think he's running away from the problem, but he was being strategic in his choice that I know I'm going to be bombarded with advice from my lawyers on what to do, but I need to become in his language. He said, "I need to become conversant with this situation. This is a big thing. A child died." On the walk, he decided that he's not going to lawyer up, he's not going to play defense, he's actually going to operate from his principles and fly to the scene of the incident and get to know the family and support them. There's more detail in the book. But what happened? A bunch of events happened which he could not have predicted or controlled, but at the end of it he developed a relationship and enough of a credibility with the single mother of the child, where he asked her to come speak to her employees. In the meantime, he had been absolved of any wrongdoing. So, the company, they were off the hook, it was not their fault. The mother comes back, speaks to his employees, 1000 people in a town hall. These are people who work and operate with machines all day long. They heard the human side of the work they do for the first time and

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they were so inspired that they initiated a bunch of quality programs, improvement programs. And as Singh told me, "If I had to improve quality to that extent, I would be spending a lot of money." So, the story was an illustration of he started with a walk, he took inaction, but what followed was a linear set of events, and he got much better returns without throwing money at the problem of quality improvement. What I took away from this is if you're taking a thoughtful pause, some creative idea will come forward, which is not going to be your standard playbook. But then if you follow through that inspired or creative idea, the results you get are then non-linearly much bigger than had you just followed the playbook. So, sometimes strategic inaction is not doing the standard default thing that you would normally do.

**Roger Dooley:** [00:07:28]

I guess those are sort of the two extremes of inaction, Jinny, where you have a brief pause on one hand versus adopting an action as a strategy. Do you think that times have changed for senior leaders in business since Tom Peters wrote his book? Because it occurs to me that then there were a lot of corporate leaders who were sort of entrenched, sleepy management, but didn't have great incentives to do very much. They sat back, kept things more or less in order, reasonably profitable. And of course, the world has changed now, not necessarily completely for the better. Now, you've got CEOs who are making fabulous salaries and bonuses, actually, not so much even on the salaries, but the bonuses related to the stock performance, so they're very motivated to pump up the stock and that has its own issues. But I think, again, you've got the two extremes. Do you think that that's part of the change, where now leaders are simply motivated to

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act, and if the stock price has been level for a period of time say, well, we've got to do something?

**Jinny Uppal:** [00:08:38]

I feel in the last ten or so years, CEOs are having to deal with more than just the nitty-gritty of the business they are operating. They have become kind of the PR face of the company, whether they want to or not. They are under more pressure on the appearance of things. And that's actually true of all leaders. It's not just what you do, but the appearance of you being action. And that is very unfortunate because our lives and all our actions, especially for publicly traded companies, are being played out, even privately held companies. Consumers have a voice. Everything you do is now on display. That creates additional pressure for you to be seen as doing something whether that something is truly beneficial or not. So, yes, in some ways it is becoming more difficult the job of a leader because you are on display all the time. On the other hand, I feel there is a little more awareness that the action you take, which is irrational, will also get scrutinized. Like if you in a hurry take the wrong action, you will pay the price faster than ten years ago where you would find out a little bit later. So, both things are happening, it's creating more pressure. Which is why I feel like my book and what I'm presenting ... and I wrote the book as much for self-coaching as to help others, is to recognize that there is power in taking thoughtful pauses. It takes a little bit of courage, like in the story of a CEO. It must have taken some confidence for him to leave. And I asked him, weren't you nervous that somebody, a journalist, will call or your team will feel like you took off? And he had a relationship. He had built a level of trust with his team and his leadership to

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know that if something happens, they'll step up. So, I feel like we all need to develop that side, that strategy, that tool where it's okay for us in a moment of crisis or under pressure to take a break, because that's where the best ideas will come from.

**Roger Dooley:** [00:10:39]

So, Jinny, you may have the answer to one trivia question, which is what do CEOs and soccer, or for our international listeners and viewers, football goalies have in common?

**Jinny Uppal:** [00:10:53]

It is the action bias. I'm guessing, Roger, you read my book. I actually quote a research study that was done on goalies, international soccer across multiple countries. I am not a sports enthusiast, Roger, so as I tell the story, I might give myself away. I might not have the right lingo. But it was a fascinating study for me. So, in soccer, they studied penalty kicks. And as you probably know, penalty kicks score usually like 70 to 80% of the time. Before I came across the study, whenever I thought of penalty kicks, I was like, of course, they are so close to the goal, of course, they're going to make it. Turns out there is a behavioral quality that helps in the penalty kicks being scored, which can be corrected. And it's the action bias. It's a fairly well studied bias, which means it's a behavioral tendency. It's not a problem, it's just the way we behave. Turns out that what this group did, they plotted the distribution curve of the direction the ball tends to go in and the direction that the goalies jump in. And they found, goalies, inevitably jump, which means they take action in anticipation of where the ball is going with the goal of catching it, which is exactly what the goal is supposed to do, you're supposed to

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catch the ball. But they always missed it. So, the ball went in this direction, the goalie went in that direction. So, they asked the goalie, why do you jump? Clearly, your act of jumping is causing you to miss the ball. Had you stayed in the center, the chances are higher you would catch the ball, so why do you jump? And they spoke to coaches as well. And what came out, the psychology of the goalie and the coach is it is the norm of the goalie to jump. That's just their design. Their purpose of being in the arena is to jump and catch the ball. If they jumped and missed the ball, they can kind of give themselves a hall pass. Like I did my best. I did what I had to do. If, on the other hand, they didn't jump and they missed the ball, they experience something called regret, which is a very powerful force, and it makes them feel like it was their fault. They associate failure with lack of action. And at the end of the day, if you look at statistically the outcome, they inevitably fail because they take action. So, it's totally counterintuitive. And that is what ... even though this is a sports example, it's what we do in our lives. There are certain scenarios where the norm is to take action, and if I don't take action and if I fail, I'll regret it, so I better take action. I better do something about it. And you find this over and over again in policy-making, in CEO decisions where actions are taken because you've got to, you feel compelled to, even if you're not going to get the right result.

**Roger Dooley:** [00:13:48]

I think that's a great metaphor for human behavior in general, but I can certainly see why that behavior would exist. And I'm more of an American football fan than soccer, but nevertheless, I see my share of soccer games. Do you want to be the goalie who stands there and watches your opponent drill it into the corner and

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make a feeble attempt to get it, or do you want to be the guy that went flying through the air, you just happen to choose the wrong direction to fly? And I think that it's really a great metaphor for everything else. I'm wondering if sometimes boredom is a cause for action. I don't know that you treat it as much in the book, but I was in the IT space for a while too, and what I would see is IT executives, managers, and even down to network manager types and sort of lower-level functional people, who would, when things were running fine, decide to implement something new simply because they were bored. Everything's running smoothly and so let's do this latest network operating system upgrade because I want to learn that anyway.

**Jinny Uppal:** [00:14:58]

Right, right.

**Roger Dooley:** [00:14:59]

Do you see that sometimes boredom is a cause for unnecessary action?

**Jinny Uppal:** [00:15:05]

That's interesting. What I've come across in my interviews, and I interviewed about 30 people and I looked into the research, the root causes of action bias, in most cases, I'm finding people take action because they do have a goal and they feel compelled to take action. Another experience that I've had as a technologist is the tendency, and there was a phrase that came about in usage is to chase every shiny object. You feel like you want to be in the game, you want you don't want to be left behind, and there are a gazillion new technologies, and you start

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chasing every shiny object, even if you don't need it. And that became my job very often, to be very rational and say no to more things than saying yes to. It is a very hard decision for a leader to say we're going to do fewer projects, especially as a tech leader, which I have been, because the thought process is I should go get more budget so that I can drive more progress because I can buy more technology. And that is just the formula. So, it is very counterintuitive to say we are going to do fewer things, and maybe we will not do this productivity enhancement project that this one small team of people have been clamoring for because that's not moving the needle on the business. We will do this other thing. Very difficult. As a tech leader, I fully acknowledge the compulsive desire to play with new technologies and to demonstrate that I made a difference to the bottom line because I deploy technology that worked in. Tech especially, a lot of projects don't actually give you the returns that you think that they will. Very often they fall short. So, so many factors why that situation that you described got created and all the more being thoughtful and being very deliberate in making priority calls. Difficult job to do, but I feel like that's what tech leaders need to do more than anything else.

**Roger Dooley:** [00:16:50]

Jinny, does that mean you're not working on an inaction NFT?

**Jinny Uppal:** [00:16:55]

That is such an interesting question because I have been thinking about it, like a book NFT. And I've been researching. And you're right, writing This book has challenged my own bias for action. Because as you probably know, as a first-time

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author, there are a gazillion things a person can do to make the book a success. And I also wrote that from the time I made the decision to write the book to publishing, it was 11 and a half months, which is all things considered, very short. And in many ways, it is a recipe for burnout to write a book in that short period of time, and build an audience and make a success out of it. So, I had to drink the Kool-Aid on my book while I was writing it, and it wasn't that intuitive for me. But I've been applying the book's learnings to everything I do, whether it is marketing, promoting, signing up with a publicist, NFT for example. But by now that has become my lens. Like what is? I've started measuring success, not just in terms of the upside, but the ROI. How much time and effort? And by effort, I mean emotional effort. How much fatigue is this going to generate? Life is a long game. Like I wrote, this is not the hill I want to die on. So, those are judgment calls I keep making and I'll make that judgment call with the NFT once I've finished my research.

**Roger Dooley:** [00:18:20]

I sympathize with exactly what you're saying, Jinny, because I know I made a decision a few months ago to not do a weekly podcast drop. I've been doing that for about 370 some odd weeks in a row. And I saw, I guess, the value of inaction there, or at least reduced action because it was turning into a job that was not necessarily a fun job because you were constantly pushing up against deadlines, you were sometimes trying to push content out. I think that just about everybody I've had on the show has had some very interesting points, but clearly some more so than others. And I think to maintain the quality and to maintain my sanity, that was a necessary move. One area that you cover at some length in the book is

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## Brainfluence

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hiring and firing. And I know when I look back at my career when I was managing other people, either as an entrepreneur and leading a company or as part of a larger organization, that my flaw was sometimes inaction when it came to terminating an employee who really wasn't great. It seems like I always find it very easy to find an excuse like, well, yeah, she's not the right person for this job, he's not going to be able to grow, but we're in the middle of our rush period and it would really be an inconvenience to do something now so we'll just postpone it. And inevitably, when I've let a situation drag on for a period of time ... and the other factor is, of course, I think, is that it's never pleasant. I know very few managers or leaders enjoy terminating people, especially those that seem to be trying to do a good job. The really bad ones are easy, but the ones that are trying but just not succeeding are a different story. But when I look back, I say, gee I should have acted more quickly because inevitably something goes wrong that might have been prevented had we made a change and got a different person in that role. And so, that's what's one of those pieces of advice that I offer to entrepreneurs when they're struggling with questions like that is if the person is not right, you know, do what you can certainly to coach them, to get them in the right position, but if that's not going to work, don't hesitate, don't do things for temporary convenience because it's going to come back and bite you later. But you make the point that in a couple of ways sometimes inaction can be a good thing in that same scenario.

**Jinny Uppal:** [00:20:54]

Right. So, I want to maybe define the word, the context of the word inaction a little bit. Usually, when I say inaction, the immediate call that comes up in your

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mind most likely is going to be inertia or paralyzing fear, which kind of freezes you. And the example you shared was you had some fear, whatever the fear might be, and that stopped you from taking action, which is why inaction is usually a bad thing. What I'm saying is the quality that drives inaction, which is fear, can also drive excessive and unnecessary action. I'm going to share with you a story from my early career days where a decision had been made to terminate an employee's role before I took on that team. So, I was inheriting two people and I was to build a team, and I had a vision for the kind of talent I wanted. In most companies, when whenever there is an organizational change, it's easier to terminate the role as opposed to having a person go through a performance plan. As I got to know this person that I inherited, they were new to me but within a week or two, I realized this is not ... there is a performance problem and it's an old performance problem, so my dilemma became, what reason do I give? Do I subscribe to the reason that has already been given to me by my new manager and HR? They had already decided this is going to be a role termination because of [unintelligible 00:22:19] change, or do I bring up the fact that this is a performance problem? Because if it is a performance problem, this person can be given the opportunity. It's a humanitarian way of terminating a person's role. Whereas [unintelligible 00;22:31] changes, you didn't even tell them there was something wrong. This was early days. I was a new manager and I succumbed to the pressure of my management and my HR partner and said, "Fine, I'm going to go ... In fact, I've got to do this because I have to build a team. I have so many things to do." I executed on that role termination and needless to say, at an emotional level, it didn't go very well. That person really did not ... There was some behavior that came out. It created some strife in the company. And I shared

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the story in the book. My lesson learned was it is not ... The tendency to follow a default formula is the problem. The problem is not whether I terminate or do not terminate, it is being authentic in my reasons for terminating. And if I take a pause ... and enough I was to be given another opportunity where I made a wrong hire and I realized this person is not the right fit, and this time I wasn't going to default into a quick termination. I took a pause and I spoke to the person. It just so happened because I authentically spoke to the second new hire, which was a bad hire, she opted to quit. Things went much faster and it was we ended on a good note. In fact, she recommended somebody else to join my team. So, there was credibility, there was goodwill. So, very often when I say inaction, people associate that with loss of speed, a slowdown, a missed opportunity. And the point I make through all these stories is you'd be surprised how much faster things will go if you pause to reflect and operate from your principles rather than a playbook. Don't underestimate how powerful your principles are if only you were to act from them. All sorts of unexpected things will come. You'll get results faster than you could have ever imagined.

**Roger Dooley:** [00:24:28]

In my first book, Brainfluence, Jinny, I mentioned briefly in one chapter. Jim Cramer from CNBC, the pundit, who is on just about every business day with recommendations of what you should buy, what you should sell, or maybe what you should hang on to. And literally every day, he has actions that he is suggesting might be appropriate on that day. And my point in the book was that even though many of his calls end up being wrong [unintelligible 00:24:55] six months later, he is interesting and persuasive because he's confident and he is always 100%

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## Brainfluence

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confident that what he's saying is correct. So, that's a good thing for him and he's built a great personal brand around that. But you cite Warren Buffett, who probably most people would prefer to take investment advice from as really kind of a poster child for inaction. Explain that.

**Jinny Uppal:** [00:25:21]

Right. So, Warren Buffett is known for his philosophy of long-term investing. So, he's very thoughtful about the investment he makes, and he has criteria. He and Charlie Munger have a mental model. They look at customer service, the quality of the talent, as well as the business financials. And once they make an investment, they stay, they stick around, which is completely opposite from the day trader mentality. So, in the stock market, it's almost like two ends of the spectrum. One is buy and hold, the other is buy-sell every day. In terms of measures of success, I personally could argue both sides seem to be successful depending on the timeline over which you measure them. The reason why Buffett is practically worshipped as he's been successful continuously for decades. So, you can argue that, hey, his formula is sustainable. What I want to invite you is to for a moment, let's assume Jim Cramer and Warren Buffett are equally likely to be successful with their stock picks and decisions to buy or sell. What I find interesting is the amount of agitation and mental expense you go through when you make buy-sell decisions. I decided to take over my own portfolio about two years ago and I went through the stress of buying and selling. It's not just the final results in terms of your ROI on your portfolio. It's the emotional price you pay when you're doing all that buying and selling, all that actioning taking action is an expense. It's an emotional expense. It's a time expense. Sometimes it's a money

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Resources: <https://www.rogerdooley.com/jinny-uppal-inaction/>

expense. So, what I found ... Which is why I talked about ROI, it's not just the top side return, it is the fatigue, the emotional exhaustion that I incur to get those results. And is this where you want to burn yourself out? So, the whole point, my own discovery is if I could get to great results without paying the price, wouldn't I want that?

**Roger Dooley:** [00:27:27]

Jinny, think our cognitive resources are scarce, and preserving them in that way makes a whole lot of sense, and to preserve the cognitive resources of our audience, that's probably pretty complex to wrap up. How can people find you and your ideas online?

**Jinny Uppal:** [00:27:42]

Well, I am personally easy to find. My first name, last name is pretty unique, J-I-N-N-Y U-P-P-A-L. And so, they can go to my website [jinnyuppal.com](http://jinnyuppal.com). Or they can go online wherever they buy books to look up ... The name of my book is *In/Action: Rethinking the Path to Results*. But if they were to search by my name, they'll get a hit pretty easily. I love listening from listeners and readers, so on my website, there is a way to contact me or they can DM me on Twitter, LinkedIn, as well as Instagram.

**Roger Dooley:** [00:28:12]

Great. We will link to all of those places on the show notes page at [rogerdooley.com/podcast](http://rogerdooley.com/podcast), where we will have audio, video, and text versions of this conversation. Jinny, thanks so much for being on the show.

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**Jinny Uppal:** [00:28:25]

Thank you so much for having me, Roger. This was fun.

**Outro:** [00:28:28]

Thank you for tuning in to Brainfluence to find more episodes like this one and to access all of Roger's books, articles, videos, and resources, the best starting point is rogerdooley.com. To check availability for a game-changing keynote or workshop in person or virtual, visit rogerdooley.com.