

The brain and leadership

Understanding how the brain works can lead to successful change, says **Lisa Waller**

How can improvements in leadership capability bring about a positive impact on the success of change initiatives? Focusing on the development of key skills such as communicating the corporate vision, positive problem-solving and the promotion of employee engagement, within the 'home-grown' talent pool is critical. An understanding of the brain's potential for learning and its prerequisites for outstanding performance will help to shape leadership development initiatives, designed to reduce organisational dependence on outside talent and the creation of more effective organisational change.

Some of the most perceptive applications of neuroscience to business have been communicated by David Rock¹ in his 2009 book *Your Brain at Work*, which provides a fascinating insight into understanding how the brain reacts to change and the impact emotions have on its

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ability to focus and direct attention where it is needed.

To appreciate how we can improve leaders' abilities to drive and manage successful change, we first need to understand the three most important findings from neuroscience and their implications for leaders everywhere: insights into unlocking the brain's potential, the brain's threat response and the importance of neuroplasticity – the brain's ability to change its structure – for lifelong learning.

Unlocking the brain's potential

When time is limited and we are juggling many competing priorities, how can we ensure we don't take our eye off the ball? How can we help leaders make better use of their brains' resources to achieve more and make better decisions?

Processing information is tiring for the brain; improving its efficiency is simple. What do you tend to do when you first get into the office in the morning? Check emails, have meetings, spend time planning the day? Processing lots of information this way quickly depletes the brain's energy resources.

The best way to start the day is by prioritising – compiling a list of things that need to be completed, as well as a suitable time to complete them, helps improve focus and attention. In fact, just the process of writing things down helps to free up the brain's capacity for thinking, allowing you to focus on the things that need to be done. Using visual cues also helps, for example generating a picture in your mind rather than a jumble of words enables you to process so much more information.

The region of the brain responsible for processing information is the prefrontal cortex. It is responsible for setting goals, devising project

Reference

- 1 Rock D *Your Brain at Work* HarperCollins (2009)





plans, controlling impulses and solving problems. It is only a small proportion of the brain in terms of its volume and yet its energy requirements are huge.

Leaders new to a role will face many challenges in getting to grips with an amazing array of information and people. How can we help them speed up this process of information gathering? Once an activity becomes routine in the brain, it is no longer held in the prefrontal cortex and another brain region, the basal ganglia, takes over. You can then complete these habits without thinking, using up much less energy and preventing the prefrontal cortex becoming overloaded, which is when mistakes are made, important information is overlooked, time is lost and productivity reduced.

Recognising the importance of habits in working efficiently, by staggering change, will help these new leaders manage their brains' limited resources more effectively.

The brain's threat response

As a new leader, engaging others in change can appear a challenging task. Understanding how our brains react to change can help to drive the way new leaders approach change initiatives.

Our ultimate goal is to gain reward. Our brains have social needs for interaction, recognition and a sense of belonging; remove these and we experience a threat that may trigger a 'fight or flight' response. The brain reacts to this threat in the same way as it reacts to physical pain and suffering.

Examples of how this response may be triggered at work include:

- a lack of communication about changes at work leading to rumour amongst staff and uncertainty
- the threat of being passed over for promotion by someone more junior
- an 'unfair' appraisal
- being micro-managed by your boss with little ability to control your own flow of work.

Rock identified five key areas where these threats are often most evident within the workplace during periods of change: status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness. Situations synonymous with change programmes, such as a shift in responsibilities or altered control over your workload, can trigger this threat response.

Ideally, scenarios such as this would never happen but it is critical for successful change management that managers and leaders know how to deal effectively with change situations in

order to limit the negative impact on performance created by the brain's threat response.

In its extreme form, this response can trigger an "amygdala hijack". In his 1996 book *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*, Daniel Goleman² outlines the role of the part of the brain known as the amygdala, which is responsible for emotions such as fear and anger. When it is overwhelmed, it can impair the functioning of the prefrontal cortex. This can result in us retreating to old ways of doing things precisely at a time when a more creative approach to problem-solving may be required.

How can we limit the impact of emotions on our thinking? Training leaders to recognise the triggers can help them respond more effectively by controlling their emotional responses. The types of trigger may vary from person to person, but the response they generate universally impairs the individual's ability to think clearly. All too frequently, we come away from an important board meeting or a promotion interview having not been able to remember a critical piece of information or answer to a question, only to recall it later on the way home. This is where the emotional response to a stressful situation is overpowering our ability to think clearly.

Speaking about emotions and their triggers can be a powerful tool for leaders to adopt. It avoids suppressing those emotions and can help create and foster positive emotional states. Through the process of coaching, recognising a trigger and labelling the emotion can have a positive impact. Similarly, reframing – exploring situations from different perspectives – looking at things from someone else's point of view or identifying what opportunities can come from a situation will help shift the emotional reaction.

Helping employees reinterpret the situation reduces the activation of the amygdala and is much more effective at reducing their resistance to change. The change process is an uncertain one in which roles and responsibilities are being redefined. Acknowledging this uncertainty and taking steps to reduce it will help make the experience less painful. Communicating the change, discussing its likely impact, asking others for input and providing opportunities for developing new skills are all vital to success.

Many examples of leaders who do, or do not, manage their emotions intelligently can be provided by anyone working in a large organisation. Enhancing leadership success can be achieved by understanding and applying a number of techniques to regulate your response to stressful and challenging situations.

It is only when the brain is at its quietest that the most insightful thinking occurs

Understanding the situations that create these emotional responses is one important step to take; enabling leaders to modify an environment that may cause a disproportionate emotional response is another.

The importance of neuroplasticity for lifelong learning

Can we teach an old dog new tricks? Is it the fear of failure that stops employees engaging with change? The brain is 'plastic': it continues to change throughout life. Neuroplasticity is the ability to change the structure of the brain through attention and focus. It is possible to influence this change through the experiences we have and by focusing attention on the things we want to change, leading to the creation of new, habituated neural pathways. With each new experience the brain instinctively wants to match it to its existing knowledge, created through previous experience. Our perceptions of change at work, for example, are influenced by expectations that are ultimately derived from past experiences.

Old habits, expectations and assumptions can be replaced by a fresh approach. Providing employees with the opportunity and time to practise new skills will help them achieve this. Repetition is important if the new behaviours are going to become routine, which enables change to be embedded within an organisation. Becoming competent at new skills is vital for employees to gain a sense of satisfaction in a job well done.

How to develop a leadership brain

Developing a leadership brain is a two-stage process: developing a leader's self-awareness and identifying strategies for managing and leading others.

Learning how to maximise the brain's limited resources for thinking and minimise the negative impact of emotions is the first part of achieving this type of leadership brain. Facilitating groups

Reference

- 2** Goleman D *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ* Bloomsbury (1996)



in this self-discovery, along with individual coaching, is an excellent way to enhance a leader's awareness and skills.

Ten ways to enhance the leadership brain

Stage one – Maximising the brain's potential for leadership

1 Focusing attention on the right things at the right time Understanding the limits of the brain's working memory and the effect of distractions on productivity, for example the ability to multitask is dependent upon the habituation of working practices. Performance suffers when multitasking is attempted with activities that require the

prefrontal cortex to process information.

Examples of powerful techniques for freeing up the prefrontal cortex include visualisation and simply writing things down in order to record thoughts as they occur, rather than attempting to juggle myriad thoughts at any one time

2 Optimising the brain's productivity

Structuring the working day to maximise the brain's potential for energy-intensive tasks such as creative thinking and problem-solving necessitates an understanding of the differences between the various activities we complete during the day. Some activities allow the brain to run on autopilot while others require active thinking and decision-making. Effectively managing priorities



will maximise the brain's potential for achieving much more, for example by scheduling energy-intensive activities for a time of day when you are most alert

3 Building resilience to ensure the brain is poised to think clearly and work efficiently. This may mean recognising when the brain is overloaded and taking the time to reframe the situation and reduce the activation of the amygdale, thus maximising the potential to remain task-focused during times of change and uncertainty

4 Regulating emotional experience Recognising emotional triggers and limiting negative reactions through the use of mindfulness; reflecting on your thought processes rather than the content of your thoughts can help quieten the mind. Viewing situations in the present – ignoring the impact of previous experience – can allow more insightful decision-making. Often, it is only when the brain is at its quietest that the most insightful thinking occurs. It is not uncommon to wake up from a good night's sleep with all the answers to yesterday's problems at your fingertips

5 Increasing adaptability and the speed of new learning Applying strategies for reappraisal and using the brain's resources wisely makes it possible to improve leaders' flexibility in dealing with changing environments and enhance their brains' agility in order to adapt to these changes quickly.

Stage 2 – Applying the leadership brain effectively when leading others

1 Being part of the 'in-group' Fulfilling the brain's social needs at work through proactively supporting collaborative working; developing a group identity at both the organisation and local level by allowing teams some social time; encouraging employees to foster good working relationships

2 Minimising threat responses Understanding emotional triggers in others and recognising the importance of meeting the social needs of the brain will help maintain equilibrium in the workplace during stressful periods of change. Communication and inclusion, to prevent a feeling of alienation, and the use of positive feedback can reduce the likelihood of threat responses occurring in others. Remembering that feedback is often sought by employees but the appraisal process triggers a threat, showing appreciation for a job well done helps to reinforce best practice across the organisation

3 Developing engaging change strategies that make people feel good about themselves.

Training leaders to recognise the triggers can help them respond more effectively by controlling their emotional responses

Management should demonstrate empathy, understanding and involvement. Never forget the positive effect of emotional contagion as people mirror others' emotional states in the workplace

4 Embracing fairness and openness through equitable practices and effective communication. The perception of transparency and fairness amongst peers is a powerful motivator, just as unfairness can drive disengagement

5 Fostering ownership and embedding the change Leaders should clearly communicate the expectations and process of change while allowing employees the opportunity to control their change initiatives and develop their own route maps for change. It takes time for the brain to create new neural pathways and repetition is important in this process to ensure the new ways of working become routine and automated. Allow employees the opportunity to learn but also the opportunity to change by practising their learning.

During both stages of the process, understanding how to capture the brain's strengths and adaptability in learning will enable leaders to become more agile and flexible, and have more impact, within their businesses. Using the brain wisely will help leaders be more productive and manage relationships with others more effectively. Removing external distractions and maintaining a happy, stress-free brain will improve focus and provide the optimum conditions for applying new, fresh approaches to change.

Given the low success rate of current change programmes (international management consultancy McKinsey³ claims that only 30 per cent of change programmes succeed) the application of neuroscience to the workplace will go some way to improving the leadership brain of those engaged in change and improve the potential for gains in employee engagement in the future. **TJ**

Reference

3 McKinsey
The inconvenient truth about change management (2008)

View online at bit.ly/kZiulq

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