

## Neuroleadership

One of the most important, yet difficult, roles of leader is to effect positive change. New developments over the past ten years in the area of neuroscience are providing insight into how we can be more effective leaders.

One conclusion of neuroscientist Dr. David Rock, author of *Quiet Leadership* and *Your Brain at Work*, is that behavior change is painful and harder than we think. New ideas, perceptions and cognitive thought related to new experiences are first stored in 'working memory' in the prefrontal cortex of our brains. The prefrontal cortex takes up a lot of energy and has limited space. It tires easily and unlike computer chips, it doesn't come with a dual-processor capable of effectively managing multiple tasks at one time.

Once a concept or process becomes more familiar, the memory and processing becomes hard-wired in the basil ganglia, which is kind of like a hard-drive near the center of the brain. The basil ganglion is our habit center. When I first learned how to drive a car, I veered into an intersection attempting to brake, steer and roll down the window at the same time. Now I find the task automatic. When first learning, all processing was happening in my prefrontal cortex, but after some practice it moved to a more automatic function in the basil ganglia. Changing information and processes once it is in the hard drive is possible, but not easy.

People often lead from a place that they know and are most comfortable. Leadership skills, such as building relationships, listening, giving feedback, coaching, decision making and influencing others are often learned from those we've followed in the past, and sometimes (oftentimes?) we've not always developed the best leadership habits. They are stored in our basil ganglia, just like driving. But leading people is not like driving a car to work – the environment, people, situation and emotions are always changing. Leadership is more like driving a new vehicle to a new destination every day. It requires focus, awareness and concentration. Changing how we lead requires us to relearn new habits, engaging our prefrontal cortex. It involves hard mental work and even some pain.

Consider one function of the orbital frontal cortex, which is closely connected to the amygdala. When human brains detect perceived differences between expectations and reality, the orbital frontal cortex lights up with activity, drawing energy away from our prefrontal cortex (the thinking, organizing part) and sends messages to the amygdala. The amygdala is one of the oldest parts of the brain. It manages our 'fight or flight' response. This area controls (or not) our emotions of fear and perceived threats. In times of stress, confusion or the subtle awareness that reality is not quite what your basil ganglia is familiar with, there is a shift from the cognitive thinking part of your brain to the emotional part. Neuroscientists call this "error detection". As David Rock says, "Error detection signals can thus push people to become emotional and to act more impulsively: animal instincts take over." 1

Neuroscientists are researching the concept of 'neuroplasticity', the ability of people to change the hardwiring of their brains by thinking differently. By changing our minds we can change our brains. So, what's a leader to do? How can we avoid animal instincts when leading? How can we use what scientists are learning about the brain to be more effective leaders? Without delving too deeply into the science, here are some suggestions:

### **Focus**

There are many studies on the brain that dispel the myth of effective multi-tasking unless the tasks are hard-wired into our basal ganglia, like driving to work. Most leadership tasks, such as active listening, information synthesis and decision making require singularity of thought. Distractions, such as constantly checking email on ones blackberry or juggling several projects at once, significantly reduce one's ability to effectively focus and solve leadership issues. One study suggested that checking one's mobile e-mail and texting can reduce IQ by an average of 10 points (15 points for men, 5 for women) which is roughly equivalent to the IQ reduction one experiences when stoned on marijuana.

Instead, identify those distractions that pull your full attention away from important tasks. Find blocks of time to deal with them later. Focus on one thing at a time. Focus of this sort is sometimes referred to as mindfulness or 'being there'. It brings issue to the front stage of the prefrontal cortex, giving the brain a chance to process what is happening and develop a solution that meets the situation, rather than relying on old patterns set into your basal ganglia.

### **Understand Your Expectations. Inspire Insight.**

As a teenager, I worked at a Boy Scout camp in the Adirondacks. My fellow staffers and I would say, "This would be a great place to work if it weren't for the campers." I think many marketers might feel the same way about lawyers, and some lawyers might feel that way about clients.

The expectations and preconceptions we bring to work effect how we lead people. Expectations frame how we see our clients and co-workers.

One way leaders communicate expectations is in their articulation of their vision for the organization. Leaders need to not only create and communicate a positive vision of the future and a pathway to get there; leaders also need to inspire followers to gain their own insights that will motivate them to creatively find their role in the process. This is the essence of getting buy-in.

Consider how this might apply to a client service improvement initiative. In Firm A, the managing partner calls a staff meeting and lays down the law, "The Management Committee has developed a list of client standards and we expect everyone to live by them. This will be part of your annual review. Any questions?"

Down the street at Firm B, the managing partner tells a moving story of how she received extraordinary client service from an airline, motivating her to change her long held loyalty to a new carrier, despite having 100,000 frequent flier miles with her former favorite flying company. She concludes, "We all agree that client service is important. Tell me, what is one thing you could do to improve our clients' experience? What can we do better as a firm? What can I do differently as a managing partner?" Which firm do you think will have a better chance at changing client service?

The managing partner in Firm B opens the door for followers to gain a new insight into how they can be part of the solution. Asking people to develop their own ideas that they are willing to commit to engages the prefrontal cortex and starts the process of learning anew. Behavior change is more likely to happen when people connect it to their own insights.

### **Focus on Solutions, Not Problems**

Brain research using MRI scans have shown that our brains (and corresponding behaviors) tend to get in a rut, literally. When faced with a challenge or fear, we tend to think and behave in a similar pattern because our brains have hard-wired a pathway based on previous experience. These pathways are difficult to change. In fact, even thinking about changing the pathways tends to make the ruts deeper. To focus on fixing the problem, we often make it worse.

Instead, focus on the solution. Think about what an optimal result would look like. What would it feel like to experience the solution? What would be the likely results and consequences if that were to occur? How would it affect your life? What could you do differently today as a first step? Do it. If these questions sound like they were asked by a coach or mentor, they might be. Changing how we think and behave is difficult to do alone. Involving a formal coach dramatically increases chances of success. In a 1997 study by Baruch College on mid-level managers, the researchers found that training alone increased productivity by 28 percent, but the additional follow-up coaching increased productivity by 88 percent.

The goal is to create a new pathway in your brain, complete with a new set of expectations, emotions, motivations, activities and results. By starting on an activity that leads to a solution, you deepen the new 'rut'. By repeatedly focusing on a new solution and activities, you gradually create a new primary pathway, letting the old 'rut' become less important and gradually fade away. Focusing on the old rut - how it made you feel, what rotten results you've received, and what other people might think - only reinforces it and takes energy away from creating a new primary pathway.

Changing how you think is real work. For professionals like lawyers and marketers, thinking is our primary service. Consider how you can increase your focus, understand expectations, inspire insights and focus on solutions to be a more effective leader.

1. The Neuroscience of Leadership, David Rock and Jeffrey Schwartz, Strategy + Business Magazine, issue 43.

[http://www.your-brain-at-work.com/files/Rock\\_&\\_Schwartz\\_s&b\\_43\\_06207.pdf](http://www.your-brain-at-work.com/files/Rock_&_Schwartz_s&b_43_06207.pdf)

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Mark Beese is President of Leadership for Lawyers, a consultancy that helps lawyers and other professionals become better business developers and leaders. [www.leadershipforlawyers](http://www.leadershipforlawyers.com)  
Email: [mark@leadershipforlawyers.com](mailto:mark@leadershipforlawyers.com)