

# Neuroscience of Leadership

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Executive Summary by Paul Batz

Breakthroughs in brain research explain how leaders make individual and organizational transformation succeed.

Changing behavior is hard for individuals; even harder for organizations. The integration of psychology (human behavior) and neuroscience (anatomy/physiology of the brain) has given us a more accurate view on how to create growth and transformation in individuals and organizations.

In short, our brains are hard-wired to resist change, and we reject leadership styles that tell us what to do. Our brains are addicted to creating our own insight—conclusions we draw on our own, through answering questions and discovering things on our own. The most efficient way to create transformational change is by coaching others and helping them to produce their own insight.

## Modern conclusions:

- Change = pain in the brain. When seemingly simple changes are met with significant resistance, it's because the change registers a physical discomfort in the brain.
- Behaviorism doesn't work. Change efforts based on incentive and threat rarely succeed.
- Humanism is overrated. The one on one notion of empathy and persuasion (relationship selling/influence) doesn't sufficiently engage the brain in ways that stick.
- Focus is power. The act of paying attention creates chemical and physical changes in the brain. Essentially, what we concentrate on grows.
- Expectation shapes reality. People's preconceptions shaped by previous change and transformation efforts have a significant impact on what they actually perceive.
- Attention density shapes identity. Repeated, purposeful and focused attention on positive, forward-looking things can lead to long-lasting personal growth.

Managers who understand the recent breakthroughs in cognitive science can lead and influence mindful change: organizational transformation that takes into account the physiological nature of the brain, and the ways in which it predisposes people to resist some forms of leadership and accept others.

## Implications:

The brain requires significantly more energy to learn new behaviors; subconscious habits require much less energy than new behaviors.

- Much of what managers do in the workplace (how they sell ideas, run meetings, manage others, and communicate) is so well routinized. Trying to change any hardwired habit requires a lot of effort, in the form of attention. This often leads to a feeling that many people find uncomfortable (and laborious). So they do what they can to avoid change.

Well-articulated criticism is required to create the strongest connection to change.

- When the brain is expecting something sweet and the tongue tastes something sour the brain emits strong signals that use a lot of energy, and shows up as bursts of light in brain scans. These are called error detections, which bring out our natural animal instincts (fight or flight).

Just trying to change the smallest, routine behavior can send out strong messages in the brain that something is not right. They can overpower rational thought.

- When the brain sends messages that something is wrong, the capacity for higher thought is decreased, making change even harder.

Helping people reach their potential through imaging a different future-state (self actualization) produces powerful chemical reactions in the brain. In short, we are addicted to creating our own insights.

- When leaders tell us what to do, we react like two-year olds and push back (or reject the coaching entirely).
- When people solve a problem themselves, the brain releases a rush of neuro-transmitters like adrenaline. The phenomenon provides a scientific basis for some of the practices of leadership coaching. Rather than lecturing and providing solutions, effective coaches ask pertinent questions and support their clients in working out solutions on their own.

Too many questions asked at the wrong times can cause adverse affects.

- The mental act of focusing attention stabilizes the associate brain circuits.
- It's important to direct attention to either "looking back" or "looking ahead" when coaching leaders for change and growth.
- An appropriate mix of "telling/sharing" specific observations will create context for growth—but too much "telling/sharing" can cause the brain to reject the coaching.

Focus really is power. People with different job functions develop different areas of the brain and process even simple requests for change differently.

- General managers who have several different functional leaders with different skill sets are required to carefully create context, including the natural bias of each perspective.
- People in different functions - finance, operations, legal, marketing, and so forth, literally think with different neurological connections.
- "People will experience a positive adrenaline-type rush only if they go through the process of making new discoveries/brain connections themselves." The effect is multiplied if they go through the experience with others. Shared experiences create deeper, more pleasurable bonds.

Leaders get the most positive results, when they gently remind others of the insight they created on their own – calling attention to the positive side of changing.

- Positivity rewards the brain by sending a signal to do more of something that already feels good.
- Catching people when they are straying from the own insights is important for keeping the focus on the right things. Well-articulated criticism is necessary for the highest benefit from the insights leaders have created for themselves.

**At the moment of insight, the brain emits pleasure chemicals similar to processing music, art, special and structural relations. Insight stretches our brain's ability to process change. Supporting people who are going through significant change – either by a coach, a friend or a supervisor – significantly decreases the trauma of change and the positive recall of new learning.**