

## **What neuroscience can teach leaders**

*John R. Ryan*

*From brain science comes optimism. Ignore its power, and you'll deprive yourself and your workers of greater skills.*

What's on the minds of business leaders these days? Judging from the explosion of books and articles on the subject in the past year or two, it's quite obvious: their own minds. The burgeoning field of neuroscience—the study of the nervous system and the brain—has gone mainstream. The race is on to translate its insights into practical applications at work.

Consultant David Rock takes up the topic in his thought-provoking book *Your Brain at Work: Strategies for Overcoming Distraction, Regaining Focus, and Working Smarter All Day Long*. Tony Schwartz does the same in *The Way We're Working Isn't Working: The Four Forgotten Needs That Energize Great Performance*. A recent piece in *Strategy + Business* entitled "That's The Way We (Used To) Do Things Around Here," by Jeffrey Schwartz, Pablo Gaito, and Doug Lennick, explores how knowledge of neuroscience can give companies an edge in creating lasting cultural change.

At my own firm, we are intrigued as well by neuroscience's potential for enhancing leadership effectiveness. Success as a leader, after all, often comes down to specific behavioral traits. The more we know about how to encourage positive behavior and change limiting behavior in ourselves and others, the better we will meet our challenges. Last spring we convened a special lecture series of neuroscience experts from around the U.S. to learn about their latest work.

Here's the bottom line: We are all creatures of habit. It takes real effort to alter the pathways those habits form in our brains, whether we're talking about eating, listening, or remembering to floss our teeth. But those pathways have far more plasticity than originally thought, meaning we can learn new and smarter ways of doing things at any age if we make the effort.

### **Getting Around the Buzz Saw**

We all overrate the importance of "inherent talent" while vastly underestimating our potential capabilities. This reality has major implications for leadership. At an individual level, we can take shortcomings—such as a tendency to withhold praise from direct reports or not to delegate work—and develop a deliberate, behaviorally driven approach for rectifying it. At the organizational level, we don't have to let the old refrain "we've never done it that way before" turn into an innovation-killing, energy-draining buzz saw.

We should, at the same time, greet the torrent of neuroscience-driven business and personal growth advice with some skepticism. When complicated scientific findings are popularized, they can end up oversimplified, overstated, and ultimately, underwhelming. Still, the body of evidence suggests neuroscience has the power to influence how we work and how long we can continue to be effective. So it is increasingly incumbent on us to lead with an informed view of the brain. Our experience in changing the behavior of leaders, combined with data from the some 400,000 leaders with whom we've worked, suggests several tactics we can employ right now to boost our own performance and model success for our colleagues.

First, be positive. This sounds like a dusty old cliché, but research underscores its validity. Psychologist Martin Seligman explored the power of "learned optimism" 20 years ago. Today, Jessica Payne, an assistant professor of psychology at Notre Dame, reports that a positive mood increases verbal fluency, improves creativity and problem solving, and helps us think less linearly, which are key to innovation.

Overall, the more positive we are, the more likely we are to have penetrating moments of insight. Our research indicates leaders must exude confidence, a can-do attitude, and passion for their work. On a day-to-day basis, this means walking the halls with a smile on our faces

(especially when we don't feel like it), praising our women and men for work we appreciate, and offering encouragement to colleagues facing challenges on the job or at home.

### **Avoiding the Flypaper**

Second, and very closely related to the first tip, we can foster change in our people by giving them detailed feedback on what they're doing well and how they can improve—but only if we frame it positively and deliver the feedback regularly.

Barbara Fredrickson, a professor at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who has pioneered the field of positive psychology, describes our minds as naturally acting like "flypaper for negative thoughts." So if we want employees to work more collaboratively, we make a mistake by telling them, "You're not a team player" or "You just don't work well with your colleagues." In framing the feedback that way, we actually reinforce the negative pathways in their brains that cause that behavior, because now they are thinking, "I have to be sure not to do this."

Plus, if employees feel defensive from the start of a conversation, they won't absorb the feedback well anyway. It's healthier and far more effective to set a specific, forward-looking behavioral goal, such as, "I'd like you to reach out to three different members of the product development team this week and get their input on the current design." Then have this conversation frequently with employees until they make reaching out to colleagues a normal part of their routine—because they have rewired their brains to support it.

### **Healthy Mind in a Healthy Body**

Third, stay in shape. We've known for a long time that our heart and muscles benefit enormously from regular exercise, a healthy diet, and sufficient sleep. More recently, through our own research on senior executives, we've found a strong correlation between effective leadership and regular exercise. Co-workers give higher leadership effectiveness ratings to executives who exercise.

In fact, exercisers score higher than non-exercisers in all leadership categories, including credibility, leading others, and authenticity. Our research shows that just 47 percent of executives we surveyed said they themselves are role models for diet, health, and fitness. When asked about other senior leaders in their organizations, just 33 percent said their colleagues are role models of healthfulness. We can all improve in this arena. And now, brain research offers additional motivation. It turns out that regular aerobic workouts stimulate our brains substantially, creating new neurons that could promote learning and memory.

Finally, we all like to complain about stress, but the truth is that we benefit from it enormously up to a certain point. As Jessica Payne told us during a recent lecture, excessive stress sustained over months or years—the kind faced most prominently by combat troops on extended tours but also by employees and families in difficult situations—can have serious and lasting effects on memory and cognition. Too little stress, meanwhile, makes us inert. Medium, or moderate, stress, however, is ideal for learning.

As leaders, we need to challenge our men and women in ways that build their skills and sense of ownership. You can find plenty of ways to do that: through job rotations, international assignments, cross-functional teams, and specific training programs, to name a few. To ensure that the experience doesn't cause undue stress, line up coaches and mentors who can help them along the way.

Talented people want a chance to prove themselves, and it's our responsibility to offer those opportunities. Neuroscience reminds us that failing to create a positive culture risks depriving everyone of chances at self-improvement.

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