

Wrap up on the Neuroscience of Leadership

To say that David Rock is a bundle of energy is an understatement...he is there on the stage, larger than life, pacing, thinking, searching for an outlet to channel this energy. David coined the phrase neuroleadership, to define the nexus of the science of the brain and business management and at a recent AIM Breakfast Briefing, he shared with the audience how these two are linked and how they interact in today's business practice.

So what is the field of neuroleadership? The science that covers moment to moment experiences of every day life that David sorts into five domains:-

1. making decisions and solving problems,
2. staying cool under pressure – managing our emotions so that we can operate at peak performance;
3. getting on with others, why we do with some and why not with others;
4. how do we drive change at an organisational/systemic level, in schools and how to create the environment for learning?
5. knowing yourself – being able to change yourself and others

These five domains make up an enormous body of knowledge that some people call 'soft skills', but which can be used to improve organisational behaviour and culture and therefore form an important part of leadership development.

People are paying a lot more attention to these ideas – taking them more seriously and that is because when you get into the science you discover that attention itself is what changes the brain, so if your objective is to get people to change behaviour, then the ability to increase the amount of attention being paid to your concepts in any leadership program is extremely relevant, it is central, probably one of the most important things.

What do we know from the brain in terms of **decision-making and problem solving**? One of the most important findings is the relationship between the conscious mind (working memory) and the unconscious (hard wiring) and the more effective use of both (information about the detailed workings of the brain, can be found on David's website).

For managers, the important aspect of this domain is the way we solve problems we don't have a solution for – and that is by facilitating insights.

We often wonder why in so many situations we come up against problems, we can't logically solve them and we reach an impasse. We know that the shower seems to be the place to solve problems – also going for a walk. Both of these activities work because they switch off the pre-frontal cortex and stop the brain from conscious thinking. In order to have insights we need to allow the mind to experience Alpha waves which can shut the mind down for a couple of seconds, creating very low level activity to solve the problem. For both logical problem solving, and chaotic decision making in a changing world, we need to get better at facilitating insight and we can use the science to increase both of those capacities in an organisation.

Second Domain: The ability to stay cool under pressure in a leadership context is vitally important.

The brain is tuned to survival and decides how to keep you alive and therefore the threat response has a much bigger impact on our brain because it gets our attention. However the attention our brain pays to a threat gives us a lot of stimulation which

impacts on our ability in an organisation to make logical, clear thinking and problem-solving. The ability therefore to function properly in an environment of ever increasing change and uncertainty is essential.

To deal with these emotional responses at work, we need to know how to regulate our emotions. We have three options:

1. **Expression:** express the emotion – this is ok for children but not in work situation;
2. **Suppression** – an attempt to not feel what you feel. In the lab they have studied what happens when you push down emotions. When we focus on suppressing an emotion we increase in the level of unhappiness. This can have the effect on people around you feeling uncomfortable as they are able to read your emotional state and therefore worry about what is going on and the uncertainty that it may create.
2. **Reappraisal** – the capacity to change the interpretation of a situation is what effective leaders do every day. For example if you are in an argument, it involves looking at the situation and saying, I know I feel upset and this is big for me, but I am going to look at this from their point of view. It shifts your brain state from one perspective to another and allows you to choose appropriate action. It takes a lot of cognitive power to see possible variations of the situation and inhibit the other things that are coming into mind. If you can label your emotional state you can increase your capacity to think clearly and to have insight.

Third domain is the whole issue of **getting on with others:**

Survival instincts such as food, water and temperature are primary rewards and threats – this same system is recycled by the brain for social situations involved in getting on with others.

1. Status is more of a reward or threat to the brain than money. Even a small increase in status generates more of a reaction in the brain than a windfall of a lot of money. If you feel you are better than another person, you get higher levels of Dopamine and you feel better.
Feedback can create fear of your status dropping. When you feel that you have social rejection, the same regions of the brain respond to that of physical pain, that's why telling someone to 'get over it' doesn't work
2. Certainty – when we have increasing certainty in the world, we feel better.
3. Autonomy is a sensation of being able to have a say, you are the one making decisions
4. Relatedness is about friend or foe, a resource or a threat
5. Fairness – self explanatory

If you dip into the social neuroscience research these five things come up over and over again.

What do new leaders do?

- They want people to do well so they show them what they can do better , by showing them what they are doing wrong the other person feels that their status is threatened;
- They don't provide certainty about the objectives because they want people to come up with solutions themselves;
- They micromanage – don't let people make decisions, which speaks to lack of autonomy;
- They don't trust people, they are worried about people being too friendly;
- They sometimes treat people unfairly – this all leads to a perfect storm of frustrations on the part of the people they are managing.

Now, if you meet someone who shows you what is great about you and actually has clear expectations with you and you with them, lets you make decisions and gives you the perception of autonomy and who is a friend not a foe and who treats you fairly – you marry them because you've hit the jackpot!

It's very rare to experience all of these in the positive – and David believes that many of our leadership development programs, communication skills, negotiation skills programs come back to these basic physiologies. As leaders it is very helpful to understand these mechanisms so that we can create a **toward** response and stop generating such a strong **away** response.

So how do we drive change if the brain is so stimulated and driven by the negative? David's article **The Neuroscience of Leadership** discusses how you create change and the central point in the article is that attention changes the brain and he explains the physics of how that happens, but if you only have 10 minutes to get people's attention and if you threaten them with a status threat or uncertainty or autonomy you aren't going to get their attention. You need to manage the attention so that people create the connections that we want them to make rather than what the brain immediately goes to. We need to help people focus on the new circuits rather than go back to old patterns.

This explains why coaching and change programs actually work – because we help people to focus their attention onto difficult things and dampen down the things that are automatic responses. As we do these things we are facilitating “self directed neuro plasticity” – which is really helping people rewire their own brains in ways that are more productive for them and for the organisation.

That is what neuroscience is all about... how ineffective conscious thinking can be and how we need to become more integrated in using both conscious and unconscious processes much more effectively.