

Rewiring your brain – new pathways to leadership



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There are five hundred people in the room next door. In ten minutes you are going to step on to the podium and address them. In your head you are playing the same tape over and over again: 'I can't do this, I am not good at public speaking, it'll be awful, I'm a failure, I can't do this...'

Then a switch happens: you tune the voice in your head to a Donald Duck sound and repeat the same negative mantra, which gradually loses its terrifying impact. Involuntarily your lips curl into a smile. You straighten up, step forward, and the audience is yours.

What happened in those few seconds gives us crucial insights into the nature and conditions of good leadership. It is about neural pathways and emotional switches, and how changing these can enable us to learn, grow and innovate.

The eight core emotions and the grooves in our minds



Negative:

- Fear
- Anger
- Shame
- Disgust
- Sadness

Eight Universal Emotions



Positive:

- Trust
- Excitement
- Joy

Most of us experience all of the eight core emotions at some point in our lives. These are universal emotions that equip us to survive in a mostly hostile environment – which explains why the balance is so heavily tipped towards the negative (only three of them are positive). For a long time in human evolution the best strategy for survival has been to avoid danger, scan the world for signs of it and quickly step out of the path of the sabre-toothed tiger.

What Seth Godin calls our 'lizard brain' often stands in the way of dealing with modern leadership challenges; our ancient 'fight-or-flight' reaction kicks in, finds no release and stays on high alert. As a result, our mind constantly scans for past and future threats and we quickly fly into anger, fear or frustration.

When we experience negative feelings our unconscious automatically roots through our memory to find related situations from our past. Thankfully, most of us don't live in dangerous places anymore; what was once meant to remind you of a good way to survive a tricky situation has now turned into an avalanche of unconnected negative emotions, all triggered by just one negative thought.

As Mark Williams and Danny Penman say in their book, *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World*:

'Gradually, the repeated triggering of negative thoughts and moods can begin wearing grooves in the mind; over time, these become deeper and deeper, making it easier to set off negative, self-critical thoughts and low or panicky moods...' (Williams & Penman, 2011: 25)

And rational, critical thinking – what we expect from good leaders – doesn't solve our dilemma. You try and work out the best way to turn your negative emotion into a positive one, switching into 'doing' mode (= solving problems and getting things done). This mode is very useful to arrange hectic work schedules and invent new technologies, but it doesn't help with our negative mindset or with annoying colleagues. Why? When you look at your current state of mind and focus on how you'd like to be instead, your mind starts asking critical questions, such as: Where did I go wrong? What's wrong with me? Why do I always feel bad when I have to talk to large audiences? Focusing on the gap between how you feel and how you want to feel highlights it. As Mark Williams puts it:

'The mind sees the gap as a problem to be solved. This approach is disastrous when it comes to your emotions because of the intricate interconnection between your thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations. They all feed into each other and, left unchecked, can drive your thinking in very distressing directions' (Williams & Penman, 2011: 29-30)

'...if we trip one emotional switch the others can follow behind'
(Williams & Penman, 2011: 29-30)

Making space – from doing to being

One of the things the Henley leadership programme asks you to do is to step back from 'doing' mode and into 'being' mode to create space – in your head, in your diary, in your life. We have seen above how difficult negative emotions can become for pragmatic doers who try and solve an emotional problem.

Human beings don't learn and thrive if they don't feel safe. When we are experiencing a negative universal emotion – fear, anger, shame, disgust or sadness – our brain cells harden and are not open to forming the new neural pathways that are the essence of developing new ways of being, doing and thinking.

However, when we experience one of the positive universal emotions – trust, joy or excitement – our brain cells soften and are open to creating new pathways. MRI scans have shown that at the most fundamental physiological level, human beings are wired to learn when the conditions for experiencing trust, followed potentially by joy or excitement, are present.

This has profound implications for leadership. So much of the task of leadership is about enabling and empowering others to move individuals, teams and organisations forward. One can quickly begin to see how important it is that leaders can evoke trust in others, so that the opportunity for learning and sustained new pathways, both in our brains and outside of them, truly exists.

Today's leaders often face flat organisations where power and authority are not so easy to enact – unless you are right at the top. Without clear hierarchies you need to be empathetic and convincing to motivate people to change their behaviour. As a Henley programme participant said: 'Leaders don't do tasks, they work with people'. So rather than thinking about good leadership as manipulating others (which rarely works long term), it should be about rewiring yourself.

Techniques like mindfulness can help you to create space between your emotions and what you or others are doing. You cannot control other people, but you can change your own behaviour. If you are going to be an impactful leader then people need to remember what you said – so paint the picture, create positive feelings and disconnect from your own emotions.

As with other disciplines like medicine, it makes a lot of sense to look at leadership in a holistic way. Our emotions influence our posture and our facial expressions, but the good news is that it also works the other way round. If you take a pencil and put it lengthwise between your teeth, your cheek muscles signal a grin – happiness – to your brain and dopamine is released. You start to feel more positive.

To set the scene for successful professional lives we need to get body and mind into the right state. So next time you are worried, angry or afraid, take the pencil between your teeth and tune the voice in your head. Then step on to the podium and have fun!

References

Williams, M & Penman, D (2011) *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World*. London: Piatkus.

About the Author

As well as running her own learning and development company, Suzanne is the Programme Director for the Henley Leadership Programme. She is now a visiting faculty member, having previously been a full time member of the Henley Leadership and OD faculty. Suzanne has a PhD in how individuals' experience change and is an ABNLP certified trainer of Neuro Linguistic Programming (an enabler of swift and physically embedded behavioural change). She is also a University of Reading certified: coach, coaching supervisor, facilitator and trainer of trainers. Suzanne is qualified to administer the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (Steps I and II), the Firo-B and the Strengths Deployment Inventory, as well as a range of 360 feedback and emotional intelligence tools.

Suzanne continues to develop her expertise in individual and leadership development, positive leadership, coaching, coaching supervision, therapy, facilitation, team development and organisational development. Suzanne has worked with small niche organisations through to the world's largest corporations, such as, Shell, Diaggio, IBM and Barclays Bank. She has delivered interventions in Africa, Asia, Europe, New Zealand, South America and the USA. Suzanne has been told that her ability to "hear" what is not said, her natural empathy combined with a directness that is filtered through an ability to laugh often (most especially at herself!) has been a key part of the success of the many projects she has worked on during her career.



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