Transforming business culture

How can we help get employees' brains into a better place where they can work at their best? Hilary Scarlett writes that to create a properly-performing organisation responsible leaders need to understand the brain

Any self-respecting executive would feel it is part of responsible management to know something about the products or services their organisation offers, how the company functions and at least a little about the balance sheet, but how many understand the most important components of what helps any organisation to succeed? The components that enable us to think clearly, make decisions, collaborate, communicate and innovate? The components in question are the brains of those who run and represent the business.

The brain: 1.5kg of tofu-like substance, containing around 100 billion neurons. At one level, the brain is incredibly complicated and there's still much we don't know about it. That said, there are a few basic facts that, if we understand them - every leader, every manager, every one of us – what a difference it makes. We all have good days and bad days at work: days when perhaps we are writing a document and the words are flowing, clear, concise and convincing. But we also all have days when we feel overwhelmed and frazzled and can't think straight; and we have those days where we have deadlines, but nothing too pressing and so we surf the internet, make another cup of coffee and then, at the end of the day wonder what, if anything, we have achieved.

What causes the difference between these days and how we respond to them? When we understand a little about the brain, we can help ourselves have more good hours at work, and we also can help those around us to do the same. Here are a few key things that all responsible leaders and managers need to know.

Our brains are not designed for the 21st century workplace

Our brains have not changed that much since our ancestors were out on the savannah, and we are using brains that in many ways are better at dealing with the savannah than the 21st century workplace. That's a challenge. The human body and brain are designed to deal with surges of stress, but that is all they are meant to be – just surges. For our ancestors in the wild, sudden bursts of cortisol were useful because the hormone helped them to fight or to run away from the threat. Once the predator had gone away, cortisol levels would drop.

Our brains are not designed for the 21st century workplace

The problem now is that we have created work environments where people are frequently under stress and cortisol is constantly in the system. Our brains and bodies respond in a similar way to an over-full inbox as they did to the sabre-tooth tiger. In the long term, cortisol is damaging physically and mentally. We know about the impact of long-term stress on our hearts, but cortisol also damages brain cells in a part of the brain involved in memory formation and storage, the hippocampus. So stress also damages memory. Constant, high levels of stress hormones damage us both physically and mentally.

In the 21st century, lots of things put the brain into this threat state. Before you even walk in the workplace door, personal concerns at home or the difficult journey to work can put your brain into a threat state - too many de-

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mands on you; having to work with colleagues who you don't particularly like; being micromanaged; thinking that your work is not recognised or is futile; feeling that you don't fit in; conflicting requests; a lack of clear goals; constantly being asked to do more with less; incessant change and uncertainty.

Some of these things we can influence, others we cannot. Lots of things put our brains into this conscious or, more probably, subconscious threat state. Beyond the health and wellbeing reasons, why should responsible leaders care?

Because when we are in this threat state we cannot think straight. It's as if we are looking at the world through a filter of threat – we start to see threats that do exist as being bigger than they really are and we start to see threats where they don't exist.

One group of leaders at a recent masterclass gave an example of this: an email had been sent to some of the group but not all of them. Those left off the list were annoyed and anxious as to why they were not copied in. It wasn't a particularly significant email but being excluded from it became all the more distressing because of the subconscious threat state their brains were already in. An example from another leader: a member of his team, who is usually a high performer, had become difficult, prickly and quick to take things the wrong way. Hearing about the threat response, he realised that the difficult divorce she was going through was leading her to see everything in a threatening way. See Figure 1.

The prefrontal cortex – the Goldilocks of the brain

As long ago as 1908, the psychologists Yerkes and Dodson, created the inverted U of performance (see Figure 2). That's a long time ago but it has stood the test of time. On the vertical axis is the brain's ability to stay focused and perform: at the bottom of this axis, the brain is disorganised and distracted, at the top of the axis the brain is or-

Figure 1. The impact of threat and reward states on our brains and on our ability to think and perform

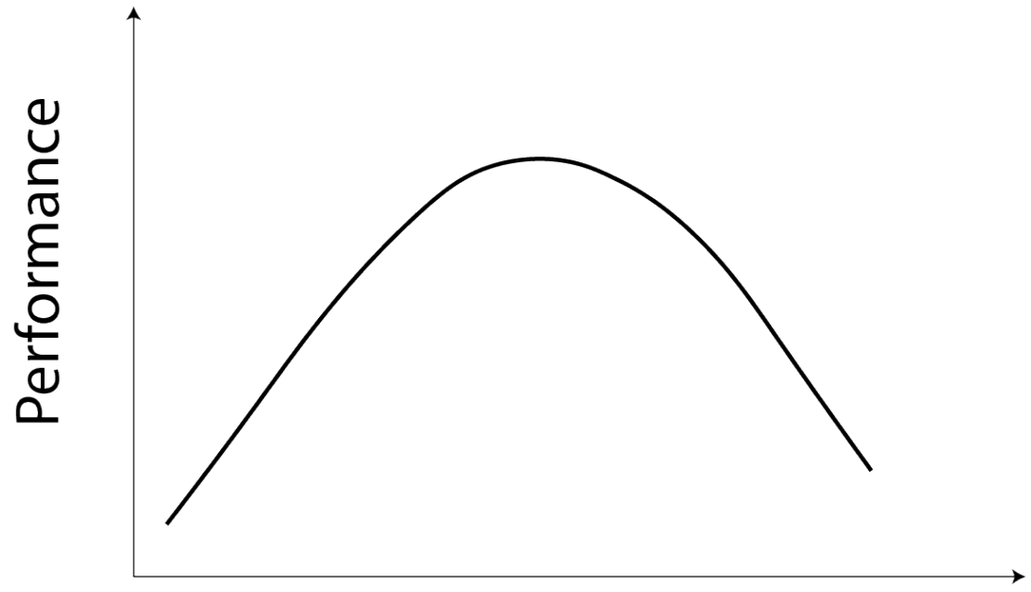
Energy used to protect ourselves

- 'Flight or fight'
- Distracted
- Anxious
- Think less clearly
- Less emotional control
- See threats where they don't exist
- See the workplace & colleagues as more hostile than they really are
- Narrower vision
- Reduced memory
- Poorer performance
- Cortisol/stress (destroys brain cells)

Energy flows outward, connects with others

- Positive
- Focussed
- Resilient
- Curious
- Willing to collaborate
- More able to learn - open to new ideas
- Innovative
- Creative
- Willing to get involced

Figure 2. Inverted U of performance - Yerkes-Dodson



ganised and focused. Running along the horizontal axis is the level of stress the brain is under. The top of the inverted U is where we want to be: this is when we are working at our best, we are in 'flow', as it is sometimes described.

The inverted U of performance shows that there is an optimal level of arousal: too much or too little reduces our ability to perform well. So, it is not that stress per se is bad. We need some pressure to get ourselves going. But we do need to find the right balance between the challenge and our ability and confidence to undertake the task.

Too much challenge and we are over on the right-hand side of that inverted U, too little and we are over on the left, not performing at our best in either place. Neuroscientists refer to the prefrontal cortex (PFC) - the part of the brain that is important in terms of decision-making and analytical thinking - as the Goldilocks of the brain: the chemical balance has to be just right for us to be able to work at our best.

To get the best out of people, every leader needs to keep in mind the inverted U of performance. There's a lot of talk in many organisations about 'getting more with less': the inverted U provides a warning. Push people too hard and the PFC will start to close down and people won't be able to think clearly or make good decisions.

So, what can responsible leaders do?

We have more influence over our brains than we probably realise. There are lots of small things we can do that help to get the brain 'back on track'. Here are a few to think about.

Encourage learning

Neuroplasticity is a big word but it betokens good news, especially for those of us who are over the age of 25. Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to change and make new and stronger connections between brain cells. We used to think that once we hit 25 the brain had peaked and from thereon it was past its best. That is true for some parts of the brain – for instance our hearing isn't going to get any better. The good news is that our brains can learn and change and restructure well into old age.

So the phrase 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks' is not true, so long as the 'old dog' wants to learn. Indeed neuroscientists say that learning is good for the brain. One of the reasons perhaps why our brains begin to slow down and atrophy, is because we don't push them as hard as we did when we were at school or college.

Neuroscientists recommend that we should stretch our brains by learning new things. If we are finding a new skill hard to acquire – good! That is challenging the brain. So, if we are finding it hard to master new skills or systems at work – keep going. Learning is good for the brain.

Set short-term, achievable goals

If people are struggling, help them to set short-term goals that they can achieve. Achieving a goal activates the reward centre in the brain and changes its internal chemistry. It helps to put us in the right-hand box in Figure 1. This in turn puts the brain in a better place to take on the next challenge.

Make time for people

We have hugely underestimated people's need for social connection. We recognise in our personal lives that relationships matter but for some reason expect employees to be less concerned about this at work. Neuroscience shows that this is a mistake.

Feeling that we are part of a team changes the chemicals in our brain. If we feel we belong, that someone at work is interested in us, our brains are on the right-hand side of Figure 1. Social rejection, feeling part of an 'outgroup' negatively affects our IQ, our memories, our staying power, and our ability to reason. Good relationships at work are not just nice to have, they boost our brain power.

This article touches on a few of the ways in which we can help get employees' brains into a better place where they can work at their best. To create an organisation that can really perform at its best, every responsible leader, and every one of us needs to understand the brain, and what it needs. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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