Brain Based Coaching

By David Rock

David Rock is the CEO of Results Coaching Systems, a leading global coaching organization helping Fortune 500 clients build coaching cultures. He is the author of *Quiet Leadership* and is currently completing his fourth book. David is a guest lecturer at several business schools including Oxford University. He is also on the faculty at CIMBA, an international business school based in Italy, where he teaches MBA students about the brain.

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In a paper entitled 'A brain based approach to coaching' (*International Journal of Coaching in Organizations*, 2006, 4(2), pp. 32-43) I outlined a new way of explaining how and why coaching works by understanding brain functioning. This paper explored why change is hard; how attention changes the brain; and the anatomical basis of insight.

A brain-based approach to coaching can be utilized within an organization in three main ways. First, it can provide a theory base to underpin existing coaching models. Second, it points to ways of improving the impact and efficiency of everyday coaching conversations, and third, it can be used to improve the design of coach training programs.

In this article I will outline these approaches, concluding with a case study involving this approach with thousands of leaders across a global IT firm.

Underpin Existing Coaching Models

From a high vantage point, good coaching models seem to be based on the same foundational principles. Common themes are that coachees come to their own conclusions, and conversations focus on solutions rather than problems. The coach's job is to increase the coachee's self awareness, help them have insights and encourage tangible action.

Organizational leaders can be difficult to convince about the merits of coaching without a rationale their analytical mind can connect with. Tying coaching to the brain can mitigate this challenge. An advantage of adding a brain-basis to existing coaching frameworks is that many people want to better understand their brains, thus increasing participation levels.

It's important not to overwhelm information-saturated leaders. It helps to keep the science simple, and provide resources for those who want to dive in further. The fields to draw on include research on the social brain, the study of memory, perception and cognition, awareness, attention, insight and problem solving.

Improve Everyday Coaching Conversations

By linking coaching to brain function we are closer to understanding the 'active ingredient' in coaching. A Vitamin C tablet has fillers and sweeteners, but without the active ingredient, ascorbic acid, it tastes nice but does nothing to increase our Vitamin C levels. In coaching, the active ingredient is self-directed neuroplasticity, in other words, the brain changing it's internal structure. Without real change in brain circuits, coaching might feel nice but change nothing.

The ARIA model of awareness, reflection, insight, action, is a common way in which brain change occurs in coaching. Whatever coaching model you use, change occurs when we stop and focus on a particular circuit (awareness), shift our perspective (reflection), see the situation in another way (insight), then take action to embed the new connections. Here are some things we can do to improve our efficiency as coaches, based on this new understanding:

Awareness: The brain has significant limitations when processing new ideas. Our 'working memory' overloads easily. It's useful to simplify complex challenges to central issues, chunk big issues into smaller ones, and tap into the extra processing power of visuals.

Reflection: Insight research is showing that prior to an insight the brain is in an alpha state. Alpha states are quiet, representing minimal effortful activity or electrical noise. This state is easily pushed aside by anxiety, uncertainty, even ambiguity. To make a new connection, we need to ask questions that make people quietly reflect on the solution to the challenge they face, not give more attention to the problem. Thus the question 'What's stopping you?' may not be the most useful way to focus attention when trying to facilitate insight. Instead, try asking 'What solutions can you sense just beneath the surface?'

When coaching conversations don't work it is often because a coachee feels defensive. Recent studies show the part of the brain needed for clear thinking becomes less active when we feel threatened. Despite good intentions, coaching often becomes a subtle debate, with the coachee fending off the coaches' ideas. The brain research points to the importance of rapport, trust and clarity as essential components of good coaching, though these are not enough to drive change on their own.

Insight: Insights have a life of their own, but they can be overlooked if the coach is focused on their own agenda. When a coachee has an insight, we want to pay attention, to strengthen it. To do so, simply ask a coachee about what they saw in their minds' eye when they seem to have made a new connection.

Action: People are significantly more willing to commit to an action 1 minute after an insight than 5 minutes later. The energy released by an insight is short lived.

In summary, by understanding the phases that the brain moves through as we try on a new idea and then take action, we can improve our capacity to drive change, working with another persons' energy rather than against it.

Improving The Design of Coach Training Programs

The part of the brain needed for learning gets tired easily. An hour of exercise is plenty, after which the brain needs time to cement, prune and rest. We can not learn to drive from 8 straight hours at the wheel, it's better to practice an hour at a time, a few days apart. Coaching, like driving, is difficult at first, and is best learned through doing.

Getting disparate staff together is inefficient for short bursts, so most training programs deliver training over several concurrent days. An alternative is to deliver learning in small bites, by teleconference, over greater time.

There is universal resistance to the idea of training this way, and certainly it's true that some qualities are lost when not in person. However humans are consistently bad at complex calculations (partly due to our small working memory.) Done well, the rewards from this style of delivery outweigh the qualities lost.

Advantages include:

- Stretching people for short bursts, working within very busy people's capacities for learning
- Chunking learning into small bites

- Getting people to do assignments every week (that they actually do.)
- Spreading out a focus on new skills over a long time, like 4-8 weeks

All of this increases the quality and quantity of attention ('attention density') that is paid to specific new ideas across a period of time.

We've become accustomed to being in the same room as a trainer to learn. Yet learning happens when our brain changes. This requires paying attention, reflecting, making new connections, and then taking action. This can occur through many mediums. Attention is key, so to make this type of training effective we must keep people paying attention: for example by calling on participants regularly, having them draw specific diagrams or make specific notes, or not having anyone on speakerphone.

Another factor is cost, putting people though learning this way costs dramatically less than in person. While cost is often a significant matter, I believe it's the ability to deliver wide scale deep learning to many people that is more important here.

Case Study: Applying The Brain-Based Approach to Coach-Training

EDS is a large technology firm with over 120,000 employees across the globe. A few years ago, several senior Global Learning and Development executives wanted to build a coaching culture. The impetus came from aligning with the thoughts of Zenger, whose January 2005 paper 'The promise of phase 3' showed how at least 50% of the value of training was a function of the follow up. With over 10,000 leaders and lots of change, EDS was doing a lot of training. Their goal was to give all leaders good coaching skills, so that any kind of learning would be followed by coaching, on many levels.

Like in many companies today, EDS employees were mostly analytical, rational beings, not automatically open to something as 'soft' as the idea of coaching. For EDS engineers, technical experts, and generally smart people, it helped significantly to have a coaching model that was explained by neuroscience.

In a tailored training program, mid- to senior-level managers were taught a series of insights about the brain, and then given very specific opportunities to practice new coaching skills based on these insights. The program ran over four weeks, with a follow up a month after, in groups of maximum 24 participants. Learning was broken up into 6 bites of no more than one and a half hours, delivered by teleconference. On each call people would become aware of an idea, reflect, have an insight and then take specific, focused actions between the calls. Over 1,000 mid to senior managers in year one went through the training, with 3,000 expected by the end of year two. No one went through any 'in person' training. The trainers were 35 EDS staff, trained to deliver the program over a series of teleconference calls themselves.

A survey of 150 participants out of 30 groups over Europe, UK and North America was done in 2006. 83% reported good/high value from the program in their role, which is a high number for any kind of training. A telling statistic was that only 9.3% disagreed that teleconference capability was suitable for this training. In other words, 9 out of 10 people thought this format worked for delivering learning. As Colette Dempster, head of coaching for EDS said, 'I so look forward to the follow up sessions. The program is a transformational experience for most of the participants and they are excited to share their stories with me'.

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Linkage
Burlington, MA
781.402.5555
info@linkageinc.com