

Why Should Business Care About Neuroscience?

By David Rock



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Changing our own behaviour is hard. Changing another person's behaviour is even harder. But changing a whole organizations' behaviour is the most complex of all. Whether that organization is a small school, a government department, a major bank or the UN, many organizations are struggling under the weight of more change than ever before, with little hard science to explain how change really works.

Recently a new science is introducing fresh insights into the challenges of change, and how we can make it easier. This new science is from an unexpected quarter: the study of the human mind and brain, or neuroscience.

Neuroscience is a complex field that might seem impenetrable to outsiders. It's also an enormous field: the 'Society for Neuroscience' has over 25,000 members worldwide. Tens of thousands of studies are being done every year. While a lot of research is not relevant to everyday experience, many scientists are working on issues that are central to the world of change, such as expectations, perception, insight, learning, habits, problem solving and decision-making.

Several scientists and authors have begun to 'translate' and link together emerging research, making scientific findings more accessible. A new field is emerging, termed 'NeuroLeadership' which links neuroscience with organisational performance and change. The first NeuroLeadership summit was held in Europe in May 2007, and *Business Week* wrote an article about the field in July 2007. Two more summits were held in the Asia Pacific region and New York in 2008. The first NeuroLeadership Journal was released late in 2008, and a NeuroLeadership Institute has been set up. Clearly there is growing interest in this area, but the question still remains, why should business care about neuroscience? Isn't it just another 'model' to add to the hundreds of other frameworks being pitched by consultants?

One of the more exciting opportunities of this field is it may provide an underpinning science that explains and links together many successful models for leadership and change. There is a reason so many existing models seem to have common themes: there is an underlying physiology that drives human behavior. By studying the brain directly, we get to connect directly with the 'source' of human performance, rather than interacting through models developed through empirical observation alone. Another way to think about this is that to study human change without understanding the brain would be like studying human health without exploring diet and nutrition: we'd be missing a central factor in the equation, the underlying biology.

This biology of leadership is being studied in four specific areas of interest:

- ◆ Making decisions and solving problems
- ◆ Staying cool under pressure
- ◆ Collaborating with and influencing others
- ◆ Facilitating change

Each of these areas of interest represents a wide range of research being done about the brain that can be applied to specific leadership challenges. We are beginning to see a possible theoretical foundation for leadership develop that can sit underneath all approaches and models, explaining how and why things work (and don't).

As well as providing the possibility of theoretical integration, there are several specific ways that organizations can benefit from leveraging the findings from this emerging field. Let's explore three of these in a little detail.

1. Getting busy leaders' attention

Many studies show that the human skills of senior leaders leave much to be desired. However it's getting harder all the time to convince busy executives to undertake any kind of learning initiative. To make matters worse, somehow in the last few decades human skills were termed 'soft skills'. The message to executives was clear: focus on results, not on people.

Using neuroscience as the frame can help leaders focus more of their attention on their human skills, for two reasons. Firstly, neuroscience is based on hard research. Executives, mostly business-school trained, have been taught to trust fields with solid research underpinnings. Neuroscience appeals to their analytical and rational nature. Secondly, there is the curiosity factor. Most people struggle to understand their own brain; it's a complex and mysterious beast. Executives like the idea of 'looking inside the magic box' and knowing the secrets of what drives us.

2. Improving our understanding of the active ingredients in change

Neuroscience has shown that attention itself – the act of holding a concept in mind intensely – has an impact on brain circuitry. The research for this emerged from the study of neuroplasticity, or how the brain changes over time. When we activate a particular circuit in the brain intensely and often enough we can change that circuit. It doesn't matter if that circuit is involved in how you lift your arm, shine your shoes or deliver a sales presentation: the act of paying attention over time embeds and creates new circuits.

A term called 'attention density', coined by Dr Jeffrey Schwartz, defines the quality and quantity of attention paid to a particular set of circuits. With enough attention density, the mind can and does change the brain. We also know that we perceive the world according to our own mental circuitry. Therefore if we want to drive change, we need to get people to pay intense and regular attention to the issues involved in a change. Sounds simple. However we also now know that attention has real limitations. We can only focus on one difficult concept at a time. It's also remarkably easy to focus other people's attention on fear when we try to bring about change, instead of focusing on the change.

Knowing that quality attention creates change but is truly limited, helps us rethink many activities, for example how we deliver change programmes. We need to find ways for people to feel safe, and then pay intense attention, regularly, for short bursts, over time. For example you might establish small groups to meet regularly to focus on a change. Even meeting virtually can drive attention.

3. Helping executives be more effective day to day

If you are like most modern workers, you spend most of your day thinking and trying to influence other people's thinking. If you chopped wood for a living, you might want to learn

how to best hold an axe, how often to sharpen it, and when to throw it away and bring out a chain saw. Neuroscience is presenting insights that enable anyone to be more effective at their job, by explaining the machinations of the brain. Some of these insights include:

- ◆ Attention is your most important but also most limited resource that must be carefully guarded.
- ◆ The mind can change the brain, through focused attention over time
- ◆ Our non-conscious brain is very important in problem solving, with far more processing power than our conscious mind.
- ◆ The brain works best when the mind is quiet, so that you can focus on multiple levels.
- ◆ Stress above a basic level tends to impair our quality of attention, by making the mind too noisy.
- ◆ There are many issues which generate significant noise in the brain. A sense of threat, a perceived lack of fairness, or a threat to status are some examples.

While these kinds of findings are not new, having the science to support them makes the difference. The science provides the evidence that focuses more attention on these aspects of experience. This attention can change the brain. The science is also providing more detail about how everyday experiences work. As we build a richer language for experiences like decision-making, problem solving and insight, we are able to interact in richer ways with ourselves and others. We move from knowing which side of the axe to use, to knowing the names of a dozen types of axes. Much research supports the fact that when we make implicit skills explicit, we significantly improve our performance in that domain. Neuroscience is enabling us to get more explicit about everyday experience, which is providing a whole new set of language for how we interact with ourselves and others.

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