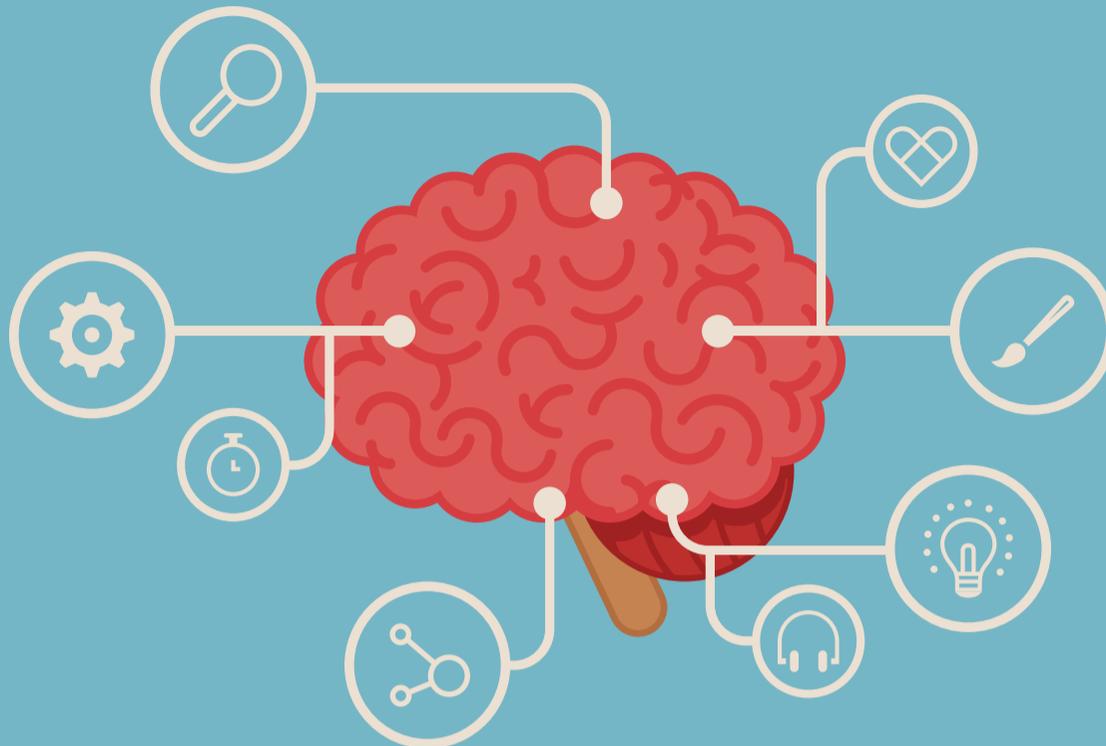


Leadership - What's the brain got to do with it?



By Linda Ray

Our knowledge of neuroscience and its application to practical business practices and leadership is fast evolving. Some would even suggest we are living in a neuro-revolution. The question becomes: So what? How can we tap into emerging insights about the brain and apply them to the everyday work environment? How can we use what we're learning to address the engagement and leadership crisis also regularly featured in the media?

We know, for example, that the brain is a social organ. We also have discovered that the key organizing principle of the brain is to minimise threat and maximise reward. However, for many, the practical application of such notions remains a mystery. It requires some rethinking of old, deeply embedded management and organisational practices.



Strange new world

This neuro-revolution opens us to a strange new world that takes

a bit of getting used to. Not only does it challenge many of our basic assumptions about people and the way we work, it even occasionally compels us to question the nature of reality. At times we need to act against our basic biology and recognise when the oldest part of our brains, in the quest to keep us 'safe', may be getting in the way of appropriate risk-taking or in supporting innovation.

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It can feel as if we've landed in the world of Alice's Wonderland, but in a world of science rather than fiction. It may help to recognise that we are in the midst of a paradigm shift, something that is usually felt to be disconcerting, particularly if it challenges old assumptions. As leaders, we've been taught to structure our organisations in particular ways. And now, the wisdom of these ways is not only being questioned but shown to be wrong.

But if we embrace this new lens (through what we call the 'neuro lens') to review and reinvent leadership and organisational practices and frameworks, we stand to be far more effective managers, leaders, CEOs, executives, and supervisors. The best organisations and the wisest leaders intuitively know how to create 'brain-friendly' environments, and they are reaping the rewards in productivity, staff retention, and engagement levels.

Srinivasan Pillay, the author of *The Brain and Business: The Neuroscience of Great Leaders*, argues that brain science has been proven to support organisations, employers, and managers find alternate explanations for behaviour, which has led, in turn, to the development of strategies for bringing about change that is different to what has been done in the past. Using brain science in business helps us look at the biology of all the things in business that go wrong between people and provides practical tools for changing them.

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Re-structuring old structures

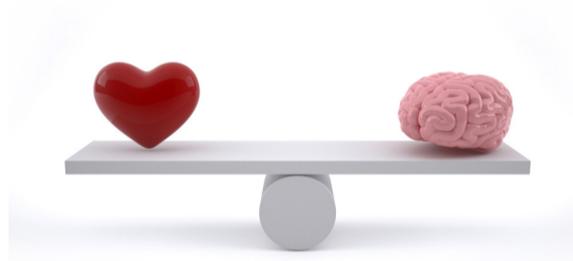
In the last fifteen years, there has been unremitting neuroscience research that reveals fundamental insights about how we humans function. This information is not arbitrary — it's factual. These studies impact everything to do with how we structure work. They show how brain functions affect perception, emotion, and conscious thought.

While the growing body of neuroscience must stand the scrutiny of further research, we are beginning to see increasing applications in the workplace. We are more fully understanding how the emotional part of the brain, the limbic system, influences our behaviour in the social world of work. When we understand how the brain functions, there are significant implications for how performance management should be approached, how we manage change, how we engage and motivate people, how we support innovation and insight to flourish, and how we maintain focus in a distraction-rich environment.

Organisationally, neuroscience has implications as well. We are now seeing emerging organisational structures that are put in place to support more collaborative, flattened structures and purposeful approaches to how a business performs. In reality, while the people

in the business need to be educated and supported to apply the principles of neuroscience, the organisation also needs to have a framework to support the development of a 'brain-friendly' environment.

Traditional hierarchical and paternalistic business structures provide limited availability for collaboration or free-flowing decision-making and problem solving. New methods for structuring organisations are critical in the wisdom age, where many workers are employed to think. We need to be reviewing our governance structures, how decisions are made (and how transparent they are), as well as how power is distributed to support organisations to be agile in a time of constant change. Holocracy is one approach being adopted by organizations in Australia and overseas, which provides a good example of this move to new, wiser restructuring.



Head + heart

We've learned in our studies that the brain is a flexible and fluid organ that can be retrained to do anything you need it to do. Only small actions are required: with focused attention, it's possible to prune undesirable neural pathways and thicken up the ones you want to maintain.

And it works the same way in organisations. Simply being aware of how the brain works can be enough to set these small changes in motion. Over time, this new way of doing things becomes embedded

in the practices of employers and employees alike.

It isn't just the brain that's involved. Social connections and emotional intelligence are two of the highest predictors of a successful — and wise — organisational leadership. Scientists have even discovered there are neurons in the heart. That proves we don't just process and respond to stimuli with our heads — something we should take to heart.

So just how do we apply new insights about our brain to the everyday work environment? The best way we've found is to proceed by instituting small incremental changes — what we call 'brain bites' — and, in this way, to slowly transform the way the organisation performs.

The term is useful for another reason. One of the strategies employed by the 'neuro-savvy' is the idea of chunking. Since it's easy for the brain to get overwhelmed, setting off a cascade of stress hormones and associated reactions that lower productivity, it's better to break tasks down to manageable chunks. That way, there's a greater likelihood of success and more opportunities to celebrate small wins along the way, both of which flood the brain's reward centres with dopamine (also known as the feel-good hormone).

Taken in small bites, with practice, new behaviours can become new habits. Once the ideas are embedded in the mind, little by little you'll know both what to do and what not to do. It takes discipline and practice, like any physical or mental exercise, but once you get the hang of it, you'll find it easy and you'll notice measurably improved results.

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Linda Ray is a thought leader, speaker, entrepreneur and scientist of her own experience. She is a co-founder and director of [neuresource group](#), a venture that is changing the way leaders lead and businesses operate in an era of the 'neuro-revolution'. She believes in challenging the disconnect between what business does and science shows. Linda is recognised internationally as a thought leader in the neuroleadership field with over 20-years in leadership development, business, people development, cultural development, and training design and delivery and has completed post-graduate studies in neuroscience of leadership.