

Fearless Leadership: Can we overcome our brain's hardwiring?

Amidst financial crises, tsunamis and earthquakes, fear prevails and plays havoc with our daily lives. Those leaders in the workplace who can recognise fear for what it is - **False Evidence Appearing Real** - are able to transform the negative energy of fear into courage and make choices in their decisions that concentrate on moving forward despite the obstacles. Those who cannot accept and convert their fear into courage will instead resort to hunkering down, conserving cash, and disposing of assets - and these assets are often some of the organisation's best talent or resources.

But is it possible to challenge and change our natural predisposition for fear? On the one hand, we do know that the brain's hard wiring will naturally translate major negative events as life-or-death situations to which cannot be rationally or courageously responded. On the other hand, we have found that the brain is malleable and that we can build new pathways and choose to respond differently, *especially* if we have awareness around the way our hardwiring works. Understanding both "hands" is essential in choosing the path less travelled by—i.e. the conscious choice of leadership.

On the one-hand, our brains are hardwired to react in a certain way

Research tells us that our brains have not fundamentally changed over the last 10,000 years. Being aware of the parts of our behaviour that are apparently hardwired in response to stress becomes even more important in these challenging economic times. Nigel Nicholson, evolutionary psychologist from the London Business School, writes about these hardwired behaviours that we all have in response to "FEAR" in the workplace¹:

1. Emotion before reason: The fear in the environment means that our people will use emotions first to screen information. They will hear the bad news first and loudest, and the bad news will stick to them the longest. Leaders must constantly be aware of this and ensure that emotional reactions are being attended to very carefully.

2. Avoiding loss when threatened: In a "survival" environment, human beings focus their strategy on avoiding loss. A cost-cutting environment is classic to creating fear conditions. When there are impending layoffs, people tend to put their heads down, do their job, but certainly do not take any risk. When specific layoffs are identified, some of the affected people then convert this conservatism to panic and aggression as their body is signalling to them that this is a 'life or death' situation. A leader understanding this will know how to respond to the tendency to loss aversion, creating a culture that rewards well-managed risk and prudent optimism.

3. Confidence before realism: The reason we exist today is because our ancestors were simply self-confident. Similarly, the leaders who will succeed in this recession environment outwardly radiate confidence to their people, comprehensively plan their

¹ Nicholson, N. (1998). How hardwired is human behavior? *Harvard Business Review*, 76, 134-147.

contingencies, and push forward with their gut instinct, thus taking the path less travelled by.

4. Classification before calculus: We learned 10,000 years ago to make snap decisions about who was friend and who was foe to ensure we would have food from friends and would not be swindled by foes. Sitting around and doing social calculus was not a recipe for a long and lasting life. We have inherited this notion to create our self-defined groups, which can lead us to miss our most innovative thinker, who simply does not look or act like us. Therefore, leaders must constantly look for the potential in employees and catch them doing things that are right and prudently innovative.

5. Contest before collaboration: Status in tribes was usually given to men and won through competitions ending in the successor proudly displaying his status with elaborate public rituals. We see this in our culture as inordinate amounts of time and energy being spent in one-upmanship for status, regardless whether we are male or female. When we are unconscious, the contests and victory displays may consume precious resources from the necessary collaboration the organisation needs in response to the crisis.

On the other hand, we also have the power to override these hardwired circuits

The very awareness of the hardwired circuits that we have inherited from our ancestors allows us to choose the creation of new ones with conscious intention. Research now tells us that we have the ability to use the more rational and most recently evolved parts of our brain to use reason in order to intervene and thereby carefully and optimistically take the road less travelled by. A simple four step model can be applied to achieve this:

1. Know what triggers you

Become aware of the hardwiring our brain has inherited from our ancestors, which is reflected in our tendency to see **False Evidence Appearing Real** when we are exposed to a perceived reduction of five key human needs including **Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness**². Constantly be vigilant against these conditions for fear in the workplace.

2. Know how you respond when you get stressed from the triggers

Educate yourself about how you and the people you lead specifically respond to various stresses, catching yourselves in the act of fighting, fleeing, or freezing.

3. Know how to respond rationally before “FEAR” is triggered

Practice reappraising situations and find ways to develop optimism. This can definitely be learned and wired into your brain’s circuits. Your people will take your cue; optimism is contagious. You can also help them to reappraise situations, instead

² Rock, D. (2008). SCARF: a brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others *NeuroLeadership Journal*, 1, 44-52.

of simply ignoring stress, suppressing fear and keeping their head down. This is the last thing you need for your organisation and the last thing your employees need for their own physical health.

4. Keep your brain fit

Keep your mind and body fit through practising various versions of ‘mindfulness’. There are hundreds of ways to develop mindfulness – from meditation to sport to gardening to simply being quiet and watching your thoughts as you ride the bus into town. Develop methods for your employees to find quiet or calm time in their day so that they can be inspired by intuition and insight. Encourage their senses of humour, which will support the optimism and actually inspire the insight even further.

Conclusion: Effective leadership is a conscious act of choice in each moment

At the end of the day, leadership is truly synonymous with conscious intent. The art of being aware of your brain’s machinations and how you can control these machinations is quintessential in the art of leadership. “It is the brain that puts out the call, but it is the mind that decides what to listen to. We have no control over the messages the brain sends you - we only have veto power about what we act on.”³

[In the next 4 articles, we will elaborate on each step of the model for overriding the circuits]



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Katharine began her career as a strategy consultant with Booz Allen & Hamilton in Sydney and an MBA with top class honours from Stanford and a BS from Duke University, where she focused on psychoneuroendocrinology. Transforming strategy into execution became her next passion when she led the four years of operational planning and execution for the 40 competition venues of the Sydney Olympic Games between 1996 and 2000. Since 2000, Katharine has run several leadership development practices in Australia, where she has been passionate about the neurosciences of leadership, the art of dialogue, the practice of slowing our minds to create innovation and the power of leadership development in situ— meaning development on the job, in real time, with everyday consciousness. She has just left the Commonwealth Bank of Australia where she headed up Talent to return to leadership development with the executive leadership advisory practice of Johnson in Sydney.

³ Schwartz, J. (2008), presented at the first Asia Pacific NeuroLeadership Summit, Sydney, Australia.