

'SOMETIMES YOU WIN, SOMETIMES YOU LEARN'

Effective leadership requires work

Renata Schoeman

BY UNDERSTANDING the neuroscientific principles underlying leadership, interventions can be developed to optimise the performance of leaders, their teams, and organisations.

Volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity have become the "new normal" in business and it is profoundly changing not only how organisations do business, but also how managers lead.

We are wired to adapt and biologically endowed with the ability to dust our "foolish corners" and become wiser leaders. Gone are the days of defining an effective leader as the one who got results, boosted the bottom line, and generally forced productivity out of his or her employees.

In recent years, there has been a movement towards acknowledging the importance of understanding and applying the biology of the brain to leadership practices: from decision-making, emotional and social intelligence, and change management processes.

Within the key concepts of self-awareness, stress management, emotional and social intelligence, and neuroplasticity lie a couple of easy adaptations you can make in changing how you behave and think as a leader, and ultimately re-wire your brain.

Self-awareness: Having a clear understanding of your personality, including strengths, weaknesses, beliefs, motivation, and emotions – one of the aspects of emotional intelligence – is an important factor in achieving success as a leader.

Until you develop it and are able to reflect in the moment on your thoughts, emotions, words, and behaviour, you will have difficulty understanding other people and how they perceive you, and changing your attitude and responses to them.

What we do is a representation of who we are – our values, beliefs, preferences and experiences, the driving forces of our life. Every facet of leadership practice and organisational life is an extension of these forces.

If you are aware of something, you are able to take responsibility for it, and work on it!

Self-awareness is therefore the first step to changing the direction of your life and your leadership.

- The steps:
- Invest in personality

assessments.

- Build a culture of feedback.
- Read, read, read.
- Make reflection and journaling a daily practice.

Neuroplasticity: Neuroscience research has confirmed the concept of neuroplasticity – the brain's ability to rewire and remodel itself. This is especially active in the cognitive parts of our brain where thinking, planning, and decision-making occur, as well as consciousness.

Our brain is not merely a system of "hardware" (anatomical structures, neural pathways, neurotransmitters and electrical currents) and "software" (thoughts, beliefs, emotions and memories), but a complex interactive and plastic process.

Our emotions influence our thoughts and behaviour; but we can also learn to use these to change our emotional responses. Leaders engage in deliberate decision-making processes to solve problems, but also to shape their social and organisational environments.

More people than ever are being paid to think, instead of just doing routine tasks. Our brains are "wired" for different decision-making processes, they have biological limits, and as humans we are prone to "errors".

The steps:

- Practise daily "neurobics" – do your daily tasks slightly differently (brush your teeth with the opposite hand, dress with closed eyes, take an alternative road to work).

- Learn new hobbies, languages and skills.

● Be aware of your cognitive errors and distortions (over-generalisation, black-and-white thinking, catastrophising).

- Build cognitively diverse teams.

Emotional and social intelligence: Recognising and regulating the emotions of self and others. Research has shown the effectiveness of leaders is twice as dependent on social and emotional intelligence as on (classic) intelligence and skill (task expertise).

Understanding that humans are all hard-wired to either "approach" (what interests us, or makes us feel safe), or "withdraw" from threat (fight/flight) is crucial if we want to empower and optimise our teams.

Through our lives (see self-awareness), we all develop certain "hot spots" or "buttons", which cause us to react with a flight/fight response.



KEEP IT IN MIND: Lecturer Dr Renata Schoeman says more people than ever are being paid to think.

These "buttons" all have a neural representation in our brains. David Rock uses the acronym Scarf:

Status (a person's relative importance to others); Certainty (the ability to predict the future); Autonomy (a sense of control over events); Relatedness (the sense of connection and safety

with others); and Fairness (being treated justly).

We therefore, in our interaction with others, want to facilitate an "approach" (pro-collaborative) response.

For example a change programme without presenting sufficient information on the why, what,

when and how, will trigger a "certainty injury" (a "you are foe" response) – people will withdraw and resist.

A perceived increase in fairness (an open discussion of a company's compensation practices to assure all employees perceive their compensation is fair and equitable) will have

the exact opposite: "I am safe and you are a friend."

The steps:

- Help people feel that they belong.
- Make people feel valued and respected.

● Be aware of your own "buttons" and protect those of others.

● Use the magic question: "What would it take to...?" (this question acknowledges others as the experts and has them commit to the outcome).

Stress management: Even with the best intentions, change and leadership cannot occur without creating some uncertainty and even resentment about the things that are being creatively destroyed or changed.

Anxiety is a natural condition of life: without it, we will have no drive to create, perform or execute. Life without some anxiety is not life! It acts as a "push" factor: we cannot merely sit – we need to act.

Anxiety can become uncontrollable and even, if not managed, turn into pathological anxiety, which can cause emotional difficulties (an overwhelmed feeling, generalised anxiety disorder, burnout, irritability or even panic attacks or depression), cognitive difficulties ("analysis paralysis", ambivalence, and impaired concentration), social impairment (substance abuse and difficulties with interpersonal relationships), or physical difficulties (appetite dysregulation, sleeping problems, excessive tiredness and decreased immunity).

However, if we use our "nervous energy", it can be a very powerful motivating force to perform, to reach deadlines, and not to be complacent with the status quo.

Leaders who pay attention to and develop the "roots" of their personal health are resilient enough to handle the pressures of relentless change and uncertainty, without becoming arrogant, or developing burnout, or more serious mental and physical problems.

The steps:

- Regular sleeping patterns – necessary for physical and cognitive health.

- Regular exercise (five times a week for 30 minutes) – reduces stress levels and enhances neuroplasticity in the brain's hippocampus for learning and memory formation.

- Follow a healthy diet and limit alcohol and other substances.

- Socialise – nurture deep, meaningful relationships.

- Adapt a growth mindset – see mistakes as valuable opportunities to learn and to innovate. According to John X Maxwell, "sometimes you win, sometimes you learn".

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