Amrop
Leadership
Series

Leadership and the Brain

A User's Guide to Empathy

By
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Leaders For What's Next

Leadership and the Brain

A User's Guide to Empathy

In this article, Amrop guest writer Dr. Tara Swart takes a look at the neuroscience of business. How can its insights explain our interactions with stakeholders and help us optimize these?

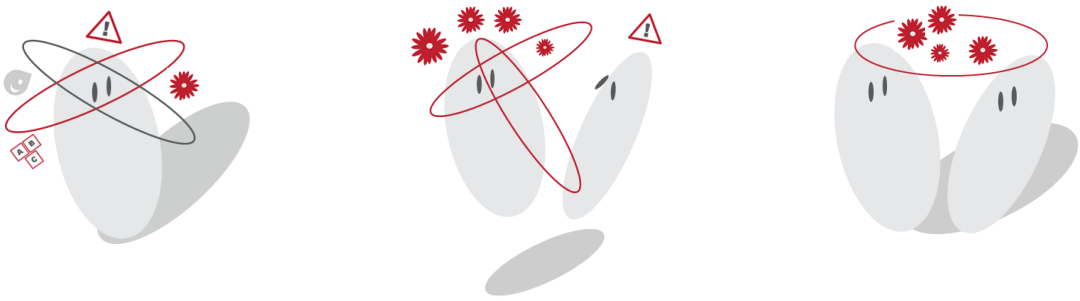
Some core questions:

- As the case for diversity and collaboration strengthens, how can we better connect with 'difference?'
- As leaders dealing with fast-paced change, how can we sharpen our signal-picking and improve our relationship management?
- As an organization, why should we focus on integrating attachment emotions such as excitement, joy and trust into our existing corporate culture, and embed new ways of being and working together?

Insights into leadership in the fast-evolving business environment can be found in the history of our own evolution. Over the last few million years, the human brain has changed faster than that of any other living species. We have developed such a large cortex (modern brain) in comparison to its deeper, older regions of the brain that we are less in touch with our instinct and with non-verbal signals. Not only is the cortex the most modern part of our brain, it is also the most considered, reflective and forward-thinking. Most of this brain growth is connected to the evolution of language and interpersonal capabilities such as empathy, co-operation and strategizing as a group.

As cave dwellers, co-operation improved the chance of our survival as a species, so the instinctive tendency for co-operation is deeply embedded in our brains. If this is the case, then why is co-operation sometimes so difficult to establish?

"For humans, there is no pure thought – every thought involves some change in your body."
John Coates, the Hour Between Dog and Wolf



How Did We Get Here?

Three fundamental brain strategies have evolved to help us pass on our genes:

1. Creating boundaries
2. Creating stabilizing systems
3. Approaching opportunities whilst avoiding threats.

When systems become destabilized, we produce threat states and transmit signals that reveal these, to some extent. This is one reason why leaders are so influential in setting the tone of a business culture. It explains how a manager transmits a positive or negative atmosphere to his or her team - and why team members often appear to go to such lengths to avoid hearing bad news. And purely from a brain point of view, people respond differently to a 'threat' that they perceive as distant (an end of year appraisal) than one that seems closer (being called into your office at short notice without knowing why). Furthermore, and despite the fact that we inhabit an instant gratification society, our brains are still more acutely geared towards loss-avoidance than reward-seeking – and this is worth bearing in mind when preparing to give people feedback or lead change. For example, reward-based envisioning: 'Let's consider the potential benefits of merging' is an inspiring way of drawing people towards a possible future. Effective, too, are quantified goals: 'this merger will yield an 15% increase in turnover in the Asia Pacific.' And yet, just as important is the question: 'what could be the risks of *not* merging?'

Despite the fact that we inhabit an instant gratification society, our brains are still more acutely geared towards loss-avoidance than towards reward-seeking

We create our own reality

Language has transformed all kinds of systems, including that of the brain and the world. There is such an exquisite tension between the individual and the environment, such a complexity of inter-connections, that our evolving brains have shaped the world, just as the world, over millennia, has shaped our brains. That world, as we have perceived it from birth to adulthood, has been woven by complex interactions between memories, smells, emotions, responses and learning, creating the unique individual that we are today. So when we think that we are making a completely rational decision in our professional environment (even if we admit that we may be somewhat less than rational with our children, or in the sporting arena) we are not. We are making a decision based on the accumulation of our life experiences, relationships and expectations. This phenomenon applies not only to individuals but to collectives - a family, a team, a Board – a business as a whole.

Empathy is the neurological basis of personal and professional development as a manager or a leader.

Empathy – Soft Skill, Hard Results

Empathy is the neurological basis of personal and professional development as a manager or a leader. It makes us more aware of threats as perceived by other people, particularly those who report to us, and helps us go some way to assuaging them. As such, empathy can have an 'unfreezing effect' - transforming the 'frozen state' of threat-avoidance into creativity and trust-building behaviors - such as knowledge-sharing or the spontaneous admission of mistakes. Empathic attitudes and behaviors can therefore stimulate the very collaboration that is so vital not only for organizational vitality, but for organizational *survival*. They can yield unprecedented results in terms of one-to-one relationships and stimulate high performance in individuals, teams and organizations. If we consider trust as one output of empathy, data compiled by the Great Place to Work® Institute builds a good case – associating trust with better recruitment, retention, innovation, productivity, customer loyalty and profits.(Please see Page 6 for some examples).

The Neuroscience of Engagement and Empathy

What actually happens when there is an interaction between two or more people who are feeling engaged – connected and mutually empathic? We could begin by hypothesizing that feeling engaged and being engaging are probably mutual – that is, to be *engaging* we are *engaged*. This is similar to the concept from the social neurosciences: that to encourage trust in a relationship – (any interaction between people, at work, at home, or socially) – we must be open to trusting, rather than being in a stress or fear state, which others could become aware of on a primal level.

This can be explained to some extent by the existence of mirror neurons in the hippocampus area of the limbic (emotional) system of the brain. The limbic system is an important element of the body's response to stress and is highly connected to our nerve and hormone systems. It is also responsible for processing our feelings around smells ("that perfume reminds me of the time that…"). Such a thought might be the trigger that first hooks our interest, as smell is the most emotive of the five senses. The hippocampus is the structure in the brain most closely aligned to memory formation; storage of long-term memories; and transition to enduring permanent memories. It also plays an important part in spatial navigation. In London taxi drivers who have 'done the knowledge' (essentially learning the map of the city by heart) - the hippocampus has been found to be enlarged, demonstrating the fascinating plasticity of the brain.

Looking out for, and playing back, language such as 'I feel' versus 'I think' or using visuals and metaphors depending on what we pick up from the person with whom we are interacting can be anything from emotionally intelligent to manipulative.

Imaging studies have shown that the brain regions thought to contain mirror neurons are active not only when a person carries out an action but also when he or she observes *another* person carrying out the action. Mirror neurons may also be similarly involved in empathy, in that they ensure that the moment someone sees an emotion expressed on our face, they will sense that same feeling within themselves. At an unconscious level, we are in constant dialogue and attunement with everyone with whom we interact, therefore gaining some understanding of how they feel. This loops backs to the 'hypothesis of reciprocity' in terms of 'being engaging'. On a deep, primitive level of instinct, within the emotional centers of the brain, we can sense if another person is interested in *us* and this is more likely to make us interested in *them*.

A more obvious version of this notion is the idea that if someone begins to mirror our body language, an atmosphere of rapport and interest is developing. Unfortunately, this can been misused to try and induce a state of rapport by purposely imitating another person's body language and spoken language preferences. Therefore, looking out for, and playing back, language such as 'I feel' versus 'I think' or using visuals and metaphors depending on what we pick up from our interlocutor, can be anything from emotionally intelligent to manipulative. As explained, as the modern, logical cortex of our brain has developed, we have tended to lose sight of the information we receive from our gut instinct and motivation centers. Yet, those centers are still within us, and deep down we know if someone is authentic or not. Whether we choose to acknowledge this is another story, but superficial attempts at being engaging in a business environment are short-lived and are not compelling.

To come across as genuinely interested, a socially-appropriate level of eye contact, and a style and level of listening that is about attempting to understand the other person, rather than interjecting with a smart question or even an anecdote of our own on the topic, are the key foundations. When two people interact in this way, an 'emotional resonance loop' develops between two brains on several levels:

Neuro-chemically, our brain starts to release dopamine in its reward areas – dopamine is associated with getting something we *want*; opioids, with getting something we *like*. Meanwhile, serotonin release is associated with being in a *good mood* and oxytocin is in the air when *trust* is growing and when we are falling in *love*. A hormone secreted by the hypothalamus that induces a calm, warm mood, oxytocin increases tender feelings and *attachment*, and may lead us to lower our guard. Oxytocin is perhaps the hormone most fundamental to being interesting/empathic. Noradrenaline intensifies the effects of all of the above and is involved in attention and concentration, whilst levels of cortisol (stress) should be low in this scenario.

Feelings are combinations of eight basic sets of human emotions (fear, anger, disgust, shame, sadness, surprise/startle, joy/excitement, love/trust). Evidence from research into inter-personal neurobiology suggests that being interested is to feel curiosity about, a desire to know, and is a manifestation of the surprise/startle emotion combined with excitement and trust.

Thus, the brain is all about inter-connectedness – our genetic make-up combined with all our life experiences. From the womb, parenting styles, learning preferences, talent choices, social milieu, gender, culture, relationships and many more factors create a unique blue-print of who we are, what we find interesting and who and what we attract into our lives. These factors continue to shape us into the future. In a phrase, how to be engaging would be *to be aware of and able to regulate the impact of our brain on that of another*. It is about providing enough, but not too much, novelty, challenge and choice to engage and motivate.

Neuroplasticity – the brain's ability to learn, unlearn and relearn means that we can develop these skills even if they are not already a strong part of our toolkit. We can learn explicitly through reading as well as implicitly through life lessons or brain-based coaching, a discipline engaging executives through both explicit and implicit brain learning areas, through logic and emotion centers, to change and sustain Leadership behavior that motivates and inspires others into high performance.

Institutionalized Empathy

Google and Marriott are both ranked in the top 25 of the Great Place to Work Institute® 2015 list of the World's best Multinational Workplaces. These brands not only *understand* the role of empathic attitudes and behaviors in building unique and privileged bonds with employees, they have *institutionalized* these and nurture them on a conscious and ongoing basis. Google: "We strive to maintain the open culture often associated with startups, in which everyone is a hands-on contributor and feels comfortable sharing ideas and opinions. Our offices and cafes are designed to encourage interactions between Googlers within and across teams, and to spark conversation about work as well as play."

Marriott emphasize a "collegial atmosphere," as "part of the job, every day…" Their workplace also emphasizes individual consideration and confidence-building: "People welcome you as you are. And applaud you for where you're going."

Meanwhile, EY stress: "the bonds that you form with your colleagues… the way you contribute to our ongoing discussions within the organization…we encourage you to express opinions. It's only by bringing together different viewpoints that we can enhance our insights and succeed in building a better working world."

The link between internal and external stakeholders is clearly made in these organizations: "Take care of your employees and they'll take care of the guests," was the philosophy of Marriott's founder, still broadcast today. According to Ernst & Young: "Everyone's opinion is valued. After all, diversity of thought and ideas enables us to provide better services to our clients." Meanwhile, at Google: "As new ideas emerge in a café line, at a team meeting or at the gym, they are traded, tested and put into practice with dizzying speed – and they may be the launch pad for a new project destined for worldwide use."

Empathy helps people fulfill their potential, passion and purpose...

Management Messages - Where Do We Go From here?

From technical exemplarity to motivational inspiration

If you are a technically-strong executive, how can you also develop your ability to motivate and inspire? Ultimately, an understanding of empathy – whether towards ourselves, others, or organization - serves to help people fulfill their potential, passion and purpose. It takes us through the interrogations: "where have we come from?" and "what are we going through?" to bring us back to the fundamental question: "*what are we really here for?*" In this way, we can begin to explore - through personal reflection or with an executive or peer coach or mentor - how we collaborate, how we role-model, and ultimately, how to create genuinely cohesive organizations. Here are three tips:

1. Monitor yourself: Start off by raising your awareness of how the functions of the older parts of your brain (gut instinct, emotion) and newer (language, rationalization), work in conflict to define your behaviors, through the ways you think and feel. In what situations do you feel dissonance between these parts of your brain? What elements of your life experience could be causing this? Why?
2. Look around: Take into consideration the influence of factors such as cultural norms, social media and personal competences. What effects might these have on your interactions? Some might be less than obvious. If, for example, you are multi-lingual, you might consider this as a facilitator of communication, of empathy. However, the speed with which you are personally able to express yourself in a group may leave less competent linguists behind and have an alienating, rather than an empathic or mirroring effect.
3. Practice the new: Keep working on your alertness to the impact of neuroscience in interactions, decision-making and relationship building in various scenarios. One way of transforming awareness into reflex is to practice a new behavior with your children at home – a relatively low-risk place to start exercising such behaviors as listening more actively, asking open questions, and giving praise.

In Summary

1. The instinctive tendency for co-operation is deeply embedded in our brains
2. When systems become destabilized, leaders transmit signals that reveal their threat states - and this can set the tone of a business culture
3. When transmitting messages, bear in mind the fact that our brains are still more acutely geared towards loss-avoidance than reward-seeking
4. Decision-making, far from being rational, is based on the accumulation of personal experiences – and this phenomenon also applies to teams and organizations
5. Empathy can raise our awareness of other people's perceptions of threats, and transform threat-avoidance into the trust-building and innovative behaviors that foster high performance
6. Imaging studies have shown that brain regions thought to contain mirror neurons are active when we carry out the same action as another person – and may be involved in the creation of empathy. However, there is a fine line between authentic interest and manipulation, and our gut instinct and motivation centers will alert us to the latter
7. Feelings are combinations of eight basic sets of human emotions (fear, anger, disgust, shame, sadness, surprise/startle, joy/excitement, love/trust). Evidence from research into inter-personal neurobiology suggests that the empathic attitude of 'being interested' is to feel curiosity, a desire to know, and is a manifestation of the surprise/startle emotion combined with excitement and trust
8. Thanks to human neuroplasticity, empathy can be developed through personal reflection and/or with guidance. This development demands reflection to raise self-awareness, understanding the influence of sometimes less-than-obvious factors, and constant practice.

About the Author

With a PhD in neuroscience and a successful career as a medical doctor behind her, Dr. Tara Swart is a unique leadership coach who stands at the forefront of the application of neuroscience to business.

She is an Oxford University-trained doctor who specialized in psychiatry for seven years. Coupled with a PhD in neuroscience and experience in leadership, culture and strategy consulting, this enables Tara to apply a profound understanding of human performance and behavior patterns to the transformational and sustainable coaching of business leaders and their teams around the world.

Tara has 18 publications in journals of neuroscience and coaching and is co-author of the book on creativity and productivity 'An Attitude for Acting'. A key note speaker on the brain in business, she delivers talks at blue chip corporations and educational institutions including Stanford Graduate School of Business, Columbia University, Oxford SAID and MIT Sloan. Topics include: 'Neuroscience in Business' (learning, neuroplasticity, empathy, teams) 'Your Brain on Money' (risk-taking, resilience, innovation) 'Sex on the Brain' (gender differences at work, unconscious bias, diversity) 'Look At Me, Don't Just Like Me' (emotional intelligence, smart media, technology) and 'The Neuroscience of Human Error' (safety, decision-making, leadership).

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About Amrop

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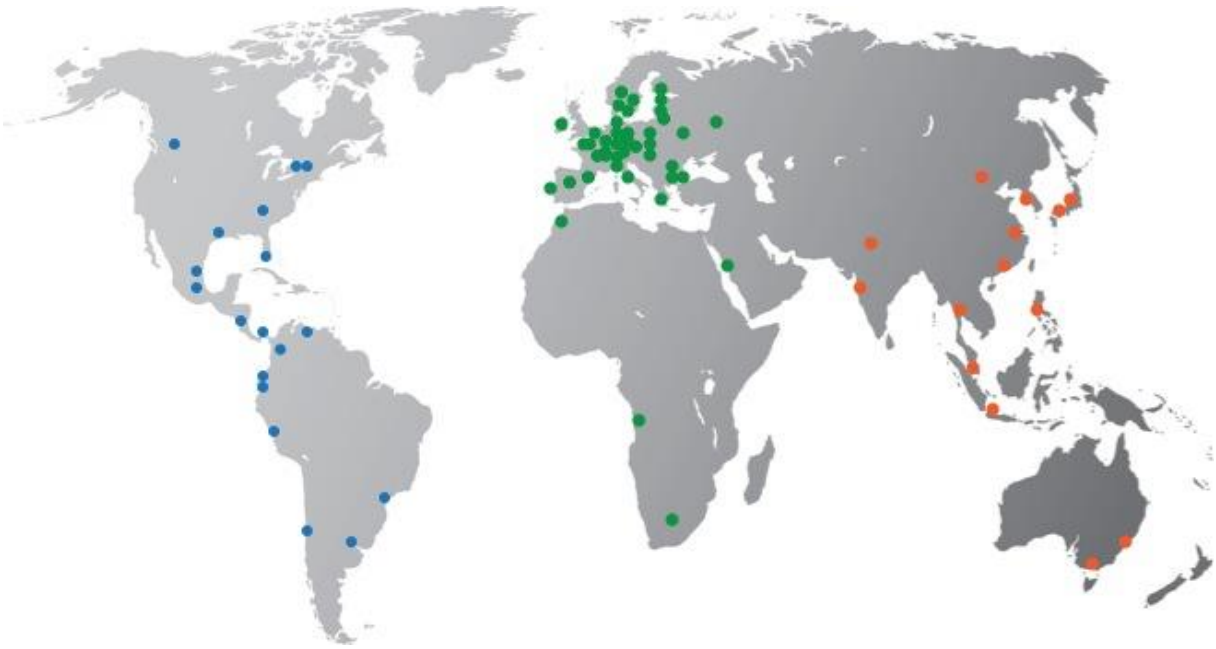
Amrop's Context Driven approach to executive search helps our clients find Leaders For What's Next - top talent, adept at working across borders in markets around the world.



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