

Get Inside Your Head: How Knowledge of Your Brain Can Make You a Better Leader

By *Bruna Martinuzzi*

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“Your capacity to regulate emotions,” says David Rock “is absolutely essential to success in life.” Managing our emotions is crucial because it allows us to use our brain more efficiently. When our limbic system, also known as the emotional brain, is overly aroused, it de-activates our prefrontal cortex which handles higher order thinking such as analysis, complex problem solving, organizing, and prioritizing. Compared to the limbic system, the prefrontal cortex is a small, fragile, energy-hungry region. This means that experiencing strong negative emotions at work, for example, significantly diminishes our capacity for staying focused and our problem solving abilities.

Your limbic system is continually on the lookout for any threats, and it gets overly aroused when it perceives a threat. Understanding these threats can help you cope with them on a personal level, and minimize their occurrence for those you lead. Social neuroscientists have discovered five major threats and rewards that drive all of our behaviors. David Rock describes these five, which he dubbed as the SCARF Model, in his book: *Your Brain at Work: Strategies for Overcoming Distraction, Regaining Focus, and Working Smarter All Day Long*. You can also view *a fascinating video-taped lecture* the author delivered, at Google, on the subject. SCARF is an acronym for:

Status (where you feel you stand in the pecking order)

Certainty (your perception of how well you can predict the future)

Autonomy (a feeling that you have choices)

Relatedness (feeling safe with others; feeling a sense of trust)

Fairness (a feeling of fair exchanges and fair connections with others)

When these five social domains are not threatened, we experience a reward and it makes us more productive and able to do good work. Conversely, when they are missing, we experience a threat response. The threat response activates our limbic system which at the same time deactivates the prefrontal cortex and this has a strong impact on our ability to do our best work. How can you use this information on how your brain works to be a better leader? Here are some tips:

1. Develop strategies for managing your negative emotions. Suppressing negative emotions, commonly known as keeping a stiff upper lip, doesn't work as it doesn't dampen the activity in the emotional brain. Expressing the negative emotions doesn't work either as it is not always appropriate and can cause collateral damage to the

relationship.

A better way is a strategy called “cognitive reappraisal” pioneered by James. J. Gross, editor of *Handbook of Emotion Regulation*. First, you briefly label the emotion—for example, “I am getting angry.” Then, immediately re-appraise your perception of the aversive situation in more positive terms in order to lessen its emotional punch. Colloquially, this is another way of saying: “Look on the bright side.” So, for example, instead of dwelling on: “This is the second time he submits a report with errors in it,” immediately reframe your thinking with: “This is an opportunity for me to show leadership qualities and coach this person to improve and grow.” It doesn’t matter whether this is an objective re-appraisal or not—Gross has shown that the action of re-appraising can profoundly affect the quality (which emotion) and the quantity (the intensity of the emotion) of the subsequent emotional response.

Practicing cognitive reappraisal is a way of training yourself to catch the small droplets before they become a flood. Use it as a tool to help you stay cool under fire. Remember that all of this is in order to dampen the activity in your limbic system so that it doesn’t deactivate your prefrontal cortex and allows you to focus on problem solving, productivity, innovation—in short, on what matters.

2. Give your people more access to your boss. Consider that people like to know that their boss’s boss knows the great contributions they made to a project or the significant effort they made in writing a report that does not bear their name. Knowing that their leader is representing them well to upper management increases a person’s sense of status and is a high-octane motivator. It also engenders fierce loyalty.

3. Handle the annual employee performance review as a fragile object. While these reviews may be necessary, consider that they are a form of mild torture for those undergoing an evaluation because “feedback” on one’s performance unless handled with the utmost of fairness and authenticity, ends up being a threat to an individual’s sense of worth. Much misery and wasted intellectual resource have been the by-product of the dreaded annual review.

4. Share knowledge and information. If you habitually hold meetings behind closed doors, think about how constituents on the other side of the door might feel. Being in on things is shown to be a prime motivator for employees: it’s a status enhancer. Knowing what’s going on makes people feel like they are a part of the family rather than hired hands.

5. Create an even playing field for everyone. While it’s natural that there will be some members of your team that you might favor over others, catch yourself if you unwittingly play favorites. Constituents’ radar detector is highly tuned to notice such occurrences that may tap into their sense of unfairness and status.

6. Hire positive people. Consider the cost in productivity and loss of focus that negative people cause in the workplace. Heed those words from research conducted by Tom Rath and Donald Clifton who state that: “Where productivity is concerned, it would be better for organizations if people who are negative stayed home.”

7. Make people feel safe by establishing a culture of trust. If one wants to crack the code that will dramatically increase collaboration and productivity by managing negative emotions in the workplace, one needs to start with the trust factor. This taps into “relatedness”—feeling safe with others. The trust factor is all about individual behaviors and it applies to everyone on the team. Do individuals behave in a trustworthy manner or not? There is only a pass or fail. And what are these behaviors? We all instinctively know them but sometimes, we need to remind ourselves, and each other, of what they are. Ask yourself:

- Do I share information that I know is helpful to others or do I withhold it?
- Do I treat everyone with grace? Grace is a disposition of kindness and compassion.
- Do I practice benevolence in my dealings with others? Benevolence is a disposition to do good.
- Do I follow through on my commitments, even if it is at considerable personal expense?
- Do I seize opportunities to encourage others?
- Am I just as happy about others’ achievements as I am of my own?
- Do I strive to consistently deliver work that is exceedingly great?

8. Sharpen your conflict resolution skills. Consider that the most time-consuming problems you deal with at work may very well be people related rather than technical issues. People issues become insidious energy bandits, if we don’t manage them well. It’s advantageous to increase your ability to negotiate and resolve disagreements and de-escalate conflict so that people can perform at higher levels and achieve results. Attending conflict resolution training pays dividends.

Keeping the SCARF model in mind and reminding yourself that every day behavior at work is governed by the overriding principle of minimizing threat and maximizing reward is a powerful tool in your arsenal as a leader. There is a saying that goes: “The successful man is the average man focused.” Knowing how the brain functions and using this information to regulate your own emotions and those of others is the quickest path for staying focused and improving mental performance for yourself and your team. It’s a smart move.

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