

Achieving the right balance in our heads

What makes a leader? This question has been asked ever since the concept of a leader was first invented. Yet, here we are, many millennia later with libraries full of books on this subject, and still we struggle to find the answer.

Josh Davis and his colleagues at the NeuroLeadership Institute are trying to help by approaching the issue from a different perspective. They are mapping the relationships between the desired traits of a leader and how her brain functions.

They are showing us what areas of a leader's brain are affected and what chemicals are released, depending on her actions or reactions.

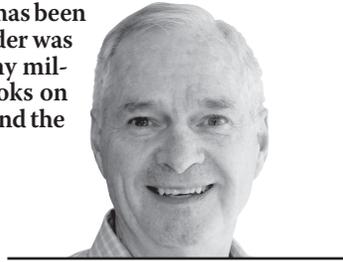
For instance, they have found the same area of the brain — the anterior cingulate cortex, to be precise — is stimulated whenever we experience either social pain or physical pain.

Another area of the brain is also stimulated when we experience a decrease in social pressure or physical pain.

Establishing links

Davis and his team are using this information to establish links between our behaviours in certain situations and what areas within our brains respond so we can better control our behaviours and thus become better leaders.

This takes practice. We have to become more aware of our actions and understand why they are occurring: "When I talk in this manner, what emotion is driving me?"



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LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

More importantly, "How can I control or change it?" Being mindful of our conduct will help us better govern our behaviours and actions.

One way to approach this goal is to imagine we each have two brains. One is our "worker brain" and the other is our "manager brain."

Our worker brain performs all our actions, including verbal, emotional and physical. Our manager brain watches this worker brain and directs it accordingly.

An example of this would be when we are having a conversation with someone and, at the same time, evaluating what we are saying, how we are saying it (such as our tone of voice), noticing we are suddenly feeling happy, sad, angry or frustrated, for example, and also watching how the person is reacting.

Increasing management skills

The challenge most of us have is increasing the management skills of our manager brain. By doing so, it

might not only help us avoid a lot of embarrassing moments, it might also make us a much better person.

Davis says the four primary domains in which the manager brain can be employed are: problem-solving, controlling emotions, interacting with others, and facilitating positive change.

The prefrontal cortex of our brains is the main area in which problem-solving activities take place while our emotions are formed within the limbic system, located at the centre of our brain. The goal is to get these two regions to work in harmony.

Balancing 2 chemicals

According to the NeuroLeadership Institute, the best way to accomplish this is to achieve the right balance between two chemicals produced in the brain: norepinephrine and dopamine.

Norepinephrine is like adrenaline for the brain. It stimulates us, giving us a sense of urgency and alertness.

Dopamine focuses our attention. It dampens down any extraneous "noise" or distractions, enabling us to concentrate more effectively on the issue at hand.

The challenge is to get the right dosage of each. Too little of either fails to energize us enough to properly achieve the task at hand, while too much causes negative effects, such as stress and anxiety.

So balance is important, and this is where the manager brain comes in. It must be aware of the stress lev-

els being created and tell the worker brain when to cool it.

The best way to do this is to utter a single word to ourselves, such as "calm."

And the best way to express this word is to either say it out loud or write it down. Keep it to just one word because more than that can actually increase stress and anxiety levels further.

Co-operation needed

To achieve our goal, be it a business goal or a personal goal, we need the co-operation and assistance of others.

To get this, we have to communicate in a calm, positive, rational fashion. Essentially, we have to keep our worker brain in check.

It sounds like a lot to perform but once we have created the process and practised it several times, it will become a habit.

New neurons will be created, new neuro-communication channels will be developed, neuroplasticity will take effect and, soon, we will be different people — people equipped to lead others in a much more effective way.

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