


# THE BRAIN THAT CHANGES ITSELF

Can understanding brain science help us build better leaders  
or is the trend for neuroleadership a transient fad?

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by BECKY BARKER

**W**ith President Obama pledging \$100 million to a project set to unlock the brain's hidden secrets, and similar initiatives taking off in Europe, we are entering a new era of scientific discovery. On a smaller scale closer to home, related research is happening at the Florey Institute in Melbourne. While the pioneering work aims to cure debilitating brain disorders in the future, it is likely to have an impact on the way we conduct

business, too. In July, for the first time Sydney's Macquarie Graduate School of Management (MGSM) is conducting a four-day leadership course, Leading With the Brain In Mind, which shows how discoveries in neuroscience can help shape the way we behave at work.

"Because scientists are now able to measure brain activity and study how this impacts the way we behave and make decisions among other things, the field of leadership

is rejuvenating in a way never seen before," says the program's leadership specialist Silvia Damiano, founder of the About My Brain institute.

The scientific training approach, centred around neuroleadership, is already big business in the West, thanks to Australian leadership consultant David Rock. Now based in New York, Rock coined the term in 2006 and co-founded the NeuroLeadership Group and Institute, where around 10,000 people



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DAVID ROCK,  
LEADERSHIP CONSULTANT

have studied open programs and courses including a Certificate in the Foundations of Neuroleadership and an Executive Masters.

So what exactly is neuroleadership and how can it be applied in a human resources arena? Rock's ideas revolve around SCARF principles, a brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others. The acronym refers to the five domains of social experience – status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness – which are said to trigger the same threat circuitry that physical threats, such as pain, activate. For example, if a person feels bullied, isolated or excluded, it activates the same areas of the brain as a threat to one's life; perceived fairness in the workplace sparks the same wiring as a monetary reward. Feeling a lack of control (autonomy) raises a threat response, so some managers would aim to do less micro-managing.

“We are learning that a number of HR processes that look logical actually work directly against the way the brain functions,” says Rock. “For example, forced ranking of employees creates a threat response in most people in all five of the SCARF social

domains. Understanding the brain research can help people rethink their performance management feedback and I have seen a significant improvement in engagement from those who have done this,” explains Rock.

In 2008, insurance company IAG in New Zealand reported a 50 per cent increase in engagement, with staff turnover halved, after introducing Rock's brain-based coaching culture, which has since been rolled out at IAG in Australia. Networking giant Juniper Networks also reported an 88 per cent increase in engagement levels after 45 of its managers completed his custom teleconference program.

Such training strategies and the latest developments in neuroscience will be top of the agenda at this month's Asia Pacific NeuroLeadership Summit in Sydney (June 19–21). Kirk Fisher, of Workplace Training Advisory Australia, is hopeful such advances in brain science will help transform outdated HR practices. “Neuroscience is really at the cutting edge of our field. Now we know so much more about the brain. We can actually see things happening on an MRI that we didn't know about before,” he says. Scientists are looking at how our brains make decisions, such as whether to embrace or reject a person or situation, which stems from our fight or flight response, or how we can gradually change our grey matter through repetitive behaviour. In Rock's book, *Quiet Leadership*, he says: “If we want to hardwire a new behaviour we just need to give our new mental map enough attention over enough time to ensure it becomes embedded in our brain.”

American psychiatrist and obsessive-compulsive disorder expert Jeffrey Schwartz, who has worked with Rock, saw brain shifting occur when he assisted Leonardo DiCaprio on the film *The Aviator*, in which the actor portrayed OCD sufferer Howard Hughes. “Focused attention changes the brain. For example, it took DiCaprio close to a year to fully resolve the OCD he developed for the part,” says Schwartz. Many organisations have already embraced the novel and optimistic nature of neuroscience and its relationship to behaviour and leadership. Consultants at McKinsey have adopted the ideas in client workshops, while banks including ANZ and NAB in Australia, plus NASA, Google, Facebook and Twitter, have



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PSYCHIATRIST

participated to discover how their employees can benefit. Google, for example has established PiLab, an area where experiments are conducted to determine the most effective approaches to manage people and maintain a productive environment. “They are focused on studying what type of reward makes employees the happiest and even looking into what type of calorie intake employees need to have to deliver their best performance,” says Damiano.

But how will all this boost the frontal lobes of our future HR leaders? Many, including Schwartz, whose teachings are embedded in cognitive behaviour and mindfulness (focusing attention to gain a clear perspective), are sceptical about its longevity. “My feeling is that neuroleadership is not being taken up as widely as people would like to believe. One of my questions is whether neuroscientists who know nothing about business can develop much that is really relevant to business,” says Schwartz. “How a person directs their attention has a very significant effect on how the brain gets wired and I am applying this kind of reasoning to business,” he explains.

Anthony Grant, director of the coaching psychology unit at Sydney University, recently spoke to HR practitioners in the US who have decided not to include neuroleadership in their training. “Everyone is looking for something to give their organisation an edge but in what way is this different from what we’ve done before? I am not saying that neuroscience is not useful in helping us understand human behaviour but I am critical of exaggerated claims that it is a foundational science for coaching and leadership development,” says Grant.

## MIND MATTERS

**HUMAN RESOURCES SPECIALIST VIVIENNE GREEN PUTS THE FINDINGS OF BRAIN SCIENCE INTO PRACTICE EVERY DAY AT WORK**

After more than 20 years in human resources, Vivienne Green wanted to upskill in a way that would address the demands of the business world today and tomorrow. “I was looking for a program that would take me into the future and really lift my knowledge. While a lot of people decide to do an MBA, that’s not what I was looking for,” says Green, who is vice president of human resources at global pharmaceutical company Biota.

Having already completed a psychology degree, Green was drawn to the diploma of the Neuroscience of Leadership program run by training organisation NeuroCapability. The 12-month course, which is conducted online with a two-day face-to-face workshop, teaches how information we now know about brain function can assist in changing our behaviours in a corporate environment. Teaching includes David Rock’s SCARF principles. It shows how the five domains of social experience (status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness) need to be addressed in our dealings with other people to keep them calm, creative, engaged and positive.

“One of the things I found most interesting was how to manage change for organisations, how employees collaborate, and the impact of leaders on others. We looked at the idea around threats and rewards, the fact that we respond strongly and quickly to threats and well to rewards, and that emotional hurts, social exclusion or bullying activate the same area of the brain as a threat to one’s life,” she says.

Since completing the program this year, she has been applying her new-found knowledge to recruitment, onboarding and organisational change. “When you have been interviewing people for years, you forget how nervous they are. From the point of view of certainty, I explain the structure of the interview, how many interviews there will be and when they will know the outcome. I build a rapport to address relatedness, treat every candidate the same for fairness and ensure I am there on time to enhance their feeling of status,” says Green, who admits the scientific approach appeals to Biota’s academic staff.

Nick Mills, principal consultant and owner at Eureka Training, has also completed the diploma and says it has enhanced his teachings on emotional intelligence, which he backs up with a 360-degree learning tool on EI called GENOS. “If I’m training someone who is very cynical about emotions in the workplace, I can now explain and demonstrate using the teachings of science that this is actually happening in the brain,” says Mills.

Despite criticism of neuroleadership as a fad, its supporters say it is inspiring and practical. Linda Ray, managing director of NeuroCapability says we need to change our ways to manage the explosion of stress in the workplace and help organisations manage change. “There is strong evidence that the ‘command and control’ management techniques do not get the best out of people or keep them fully engaged, but despite this we are still using processes that are not brain friendly,” says Ray.

Verena Marshall, adjunct professor at Western Australia's Curtin Graduate School of Business and director of training consultancy Skill Matters, agrees. "When people talk about neuroscience, they are really talking about behaviour and emotional intelligence. We are just packaging these under different course titles," says Marshall. Rather than rolling out specific neuroleadership programs, the newest course from the Australian Graduate School of Management (AGSM), the Accelerated Leadership program, focuses on dealing with difficult business situations and helping make high-potential employees wise beyond their years.

"I think we have things a little bit the wrong way round. We don't want to start with how we understand the brain, we need to start with how you lead complex business. The brain only reveals part of our behaviour so focusing purely on that misses the trick of bigger things," says Malcolm Dunn, adjunct director of AGSM's executive development services, coaching. Meanwhile, Melbourne Business School's executive education arm offers Mindful Leadership and the Emotionally Intelligent Leader in its open suite, but has used research from neuroscience in its in-house training.

Paul Saunders, coach and leadership specialist at Melbourne Business School's executive education centre, says brain science simply reaffirms much of the work presented by Daniel Goleman, an American psychologist whose 1995 best-selling book *Emotional Intelligence* discounted the theory that IQ was the only measure of someone's abilities. "Helping people to understand the brain is a bit like opening up the bonnet of a car to see the engine. It's helpful to have a bit more knowledge," says Saunders, who will be presenting part of the MGSM Leading With the Brain In Mind program.

The rise of neuroleadership has raised questions about what's working and what's not in people management. For example, there is evidence that counselling or letting someone talk endlessly about their problems reinforces the same neural pathways. "We need to hear employees but we need to have some framing techniques on how to create interventions or look at things from a different perspective. We are seeing evidence from brain research that



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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF  
EXECUTIVE EDUCATION, MGSM

when people are in a highly emotional state it turns off some of their rational thinking," explains Saunders, who has used portable biofeedback equipment to help people understand their neuro-networks.

In another slant on the theme, Tiffany Gray, director of PRISM Brain Mapping Australia, has introduced a brain-based behaviour mapping tool to companies. It shows the behavioural preferences that relate to work performance and can provide an analysis of a person's personality traits. It is also useful in recruitment for producing job-requirement benchmarks against which candidates can be assessed for

behavioural suitability. "PRISM allows organisations to set up for success from the start to maximise their talent and optimise their performance," says Gray, who runs Melbourne's Neuroleadership Interest Group, part of Rock's NeuroLeadership Institute. "There were about 120 people at the last meeting and interest is growing," says Gray.

MGSM's executive director of executive education Paul Kirkbride agrees that brain-centric management styles are here to stay and has added the courses Neuromarketing and The Digital Era and Female Leadership: Art & Science to the school's open program portfolio. "There is a lot of pretty solid scientific research now and we are at the point of trying to understand its impact," says Kirkbride. "The big question is how can HR professionals leverage this topic and add it to their arsenal or use it from a strategic point of view," he says.

As part of the AHRI Breakfast Club series, co-founder of the NeuroLeadership Institute David Rock will present 'Neuroleadership in Action'. Visit [www.ahri.com.au/events](http://www.ahri.com.au/events). HRm

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