

Guru Speak: An insight into your mind

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David Rock has a simple agenda - to make people think about how they think. Rock started out doing something a lot of people do; he was a leadership facilitator helping people hone their execution abilities. Over time he realised that the quality of ideas and insights was significantly higher when they discussed softer issues, but in a scientific manner. This is what triggered his interest in, and eventually led to him coining the term neuro-leadership, and co-founding the Neuro-leadership Institute in Sydney. Simply put, neuro-leadership explores how processes within the brain influence behaviours in the workplace.

"Neuro-leadership is the study of leadership and management from the perspective of what happens in the brain. It is the human, not financial, side of leadership," says Rock. He has authored a number of books on the subject including *Quiet Leadership* and *Your Brain at Work*.

Rock recalls how during a training session at NASA, one of the participants said to him that while they could determine exactly where a particular piece of metal would be in space ten years from now, they didn't know what would happen at their next meeting. And that's where neuro-leadership comes in.

"Neuro-leadership can predict the impact of decisions, and help improve the positive impact of any activities a leader may undertake," he says. "The main applications of neuro-leadership are in improving personal resilience, the quality of conversations, growing talent and leading

change," he says. Most times, when leaders have conversations with their team, their intent is very different from what they actually end up communicating.

The most common manifestation is when a leader is trying to motivate a team by focusing on the specific problem at hand, say how targets aren't being met. "This will only put additional pressure on the team, which views it as a status threat. When people feel like their current status is in threat, they act like their life is in danger," says Rock.

Naturally, that's not going to help. Once leaders understand this, their approach changes. The conversation should instead focus on sharing the overall long term goal, and asking questions which will make the team think in a certain manner, eventually leading to better results. "Threats are bad for thinking," says Rock. "However, if you learn how to improve your own thinking, it will make you a better leader. You become more efficient at what you do, and you learn how to influence others' thinking, which is an important part of being a leader."

The other area where neuro-leadership can be extremely effective is change management. When you talk about what's happening it helps create a language for experiences that we don't understand. When you have a language for something, you also have more control over it and it lets people know that it's normal. The three key steps are to first create a 'towards state' or paint a picture of the future.

Once you identify what future state you want to achieve, it will minimise the threat and fear people have. Next, the leader has to change how their brain works by facilitating new connections and finally, embed new habits and behaviours. These are the building blocks of organisational change at any level.

When most organisations try to change, they focus on the past problems which creates a strong fear state; brain science teaches you how to manage this change more effectively. For a leader to be effective, it is important that he understands this as a crucial part of his role is to influence how others think.

Studies have shown that social carrots and sticks are far more effective than financial rewards and recognition as they are linked with a sense of fairness. Neuro-leadership studies have also helped explain the phenomenon of insights.

The conscious brain is very limited, and can only solve basic problems. The unconscious brain on the other hand, has extraordinary processing capacity and is a powerful trouble-shooter, but we often miss out on the signals it is sending us because of the constant noise in our heads. "An insight is really just your unconscious mind solving a problem for you and it is important as many business problems are far too complex for the conscious mind to solve," says Rock. "That's why most people have their 'aha moments' or insights early in the morning, or in the shower when their minds are relatively quiet."

An emerging area where Rock sees potential for neuro-leadership is in the assessment of leaders. Assessing leadership skills by understanding the neurological strengths and weaknesses of the leaders can be an effective tool in evaluating them, although we are still some time away from

introducing this column in appraisal forms. So what advice does he have for someone who wants to use their brain more effectively? "It is important to start thinking about your thinking. We are thinking for a living and most jobs involve some degree of problem solving. It is time we become observant of how we think," he says.