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How small shifts in leadership can transform your team dynamic

Simple tweaks in communication and role-modeling based on the latest behavioral research can nudge employees into top form and create a more productive environment for everyone.

by Caroline Webb

Once upon a time, saying "the soft stuff is the hard stuff" was a snappy challenge to business convention. Now, it's a cliché. Everyone knows that it's not easy to suddenly make your colleagues more creative, adaptable, or collaborative, however well-intentioned you may be.

But thanks to research on human behavior, we know what it takes for the average person's brain to perform at its best, cognitively and emotionally—even under the pressures of the modern workplace. These new insights suggest that simple tweaks in leaders' communication and behavior can potentially create a much more productive atmosphere for any team. In this article, I'll describe three leaders who knew enough of this science to spark positive behavioral shifts in their organizations.

THE TWO-SYSTEM BRAIN

Antony heads a successful technology consultancy that has grown rapidly since it was founded in 2011. Before starting the firm, he worked for a big agency with a toxic culture. "There was a sort of 'cultural presenteeism'—

you needed to look like you were always working." At his new company, he wanted to forge a very different culture that would enable people to be both innovative and focused, collaborative and emotionally balanced. He and his two cofounders did all the usual things—hired carefully, developed an inspiring vision for the company, and designed an inviting workspace.

But Antony knew enough of the research on optimal brain function to see that more tangible measures were needed. In particular, he raised the issue of information overload and multitasking and how their team could avoid it. Antony knew that the brain's activity is split across two complementary systems—one deliberate and controlled, the other automatic and instinctive. The *deliberate system* is responsible for sophisticated, conscious functions such as reasoning, self-control, and forward thinking. It can only do one thing at a time and tires remarkably quickly. The brain's *automatic system* lightens this load by automating most of what we do from day to day, but as the brain's deliberate system becomes more exhausted, the automatic system increasingly takes the reins, leaving us prone to make misleading generalizations and kneejerk responses.

That's why multitasking is such a problem. We think we can parallel process, but each tiny switch from one conscious task to another—from email to reading to speaking on a conference call, for example—wastes a little of the deliberate system's time and mental energy. And those switches cost us dearly. Research shows that people are less creative, more stressed, and make two to four times as many mistakes when they deal with interruptions and distractions.

Another way that the deliberate system's limitations play out in the workplace is that decision-making quality drops the longer people go without a break. Classic cognitive biases like groupthink and confirmation bias take firmer hold, and we're more prone to sloppy thinking in general. In one study, where hospital leaders were trying to encourage the use of hand sanitizer, they found that compliance rates fell when people worked long hours without a break.

But here's the silver lining: if leaders can encourage people to go offline when doing their most important work, as well as taking more frequent breaks, they'll see an uptick in productivity, innovation, and morale.

As Antony thought about how to do this, he knew that a common hurdle to taking breaks and avoiding multitasking was that people often feel they need to show their responsiveness to senior colleagues by being constantly available, whether on email, instant messaging, or in person. So he knew

that his own behavior would be central to shifting norms in his organization. He decided to place a timer on his desk to signal that he was taking 25 or 45 minutes to go offline—something that also helped him focus his brain on the task at hand—and wore enormous noise-canceling headphones to amplify the message. And then, between deep working sessions, he would "bugger off for a walk," as he puts it. The role modeling worked, he says. "It's become a collective thing in the office now. And everyone's decided that breaks are a legitimate use of time because we get so much more done afterward."

Antony and his cofounders also created a "Monday meeting" for all of the staff to discuss how they were working together as a company. After some time, it surfaced that pressures were mounting, threatening to derail their commitment to focusing and recharging. "It was an emerging cultural behavior, and we wanted it to stop. So we set some rules, like 'we encourage each other to have lunch' and 'we schedule breaks between meetings.'" Most important, he felt, was that "we as leaders had to take responsibility for our behavior and give out the right signals, use the right language, celebrate the right behaviors in others. So we cheered people for leaving the office to go for a run. Later, we adopted the phrase 'leaving by example,' encouraging people to use it instead of a mumbled, guilty excuse for taking a break."

In the Monday meeting, the leaders took one further step to reduce cognitive overload, by asking everyone to name their two priorities for the week. Antony says "the 'two priorities' rule encourages people to be realistic and focused in their work. Sometimes you really have to force yourself to decide what really matters this week. But it always pays off." They also use the meeting as an opportunity to highlight opportunities to redistribute work. "When it looks like someone has too much on, people are encouraged to offload rather than suffer in silence." The result: great creativity and camaraderie, without a foosball table in sight.

THE DISCOVER-DEFEND AXIS

Ros is one of the most senior leaders in the UK's state-run healthcare system. She oversees the complex web of relationships between the system's many payers and providers and ensures that the interactions between the two help rather than hinder improvements in patient care. Budgets are tight and the outcomes of her team's work are often subject to scrutiny by politicians and the media. So Ros has to help her colleagues stay energized and on their game as they pursue their noble goals, even when the going gets tough. Resilience is key.

The problem is, our brain is constantly looking for threats to fend off or rewards worth pursuing. When we're more focused on threats than rewards, we're in *defensive mode*. Our brain diverts some of its scarce mental

energy into launching a 'fight', 'flight,' or 'freeze' response, and as those instinctive responses unfold—looking more like 'snap, sulk, or skulk' in the workplace—brain scans show less activity in the parts of the brain known as the prefrontal cortex. To put it another way: some of our more emotionally sophisticated neural machinery has gone offline.

This matters, because it takes surprisingly little to put someone's brain into defensive mode—anything threatening a person's self-worth, even the smallest social slight. This can create vicious circles in the workplace when, for example, people feel daunted from the start, triggering an instinctive defensive reaction that makes it harder for them to solve the problem at hand.

But then there's *discovery mode*, where people's brains are focused on the potential rewards in a situation—for instance, a feeling of belonging or social recognition, or the thrill of learning new things. If leaders can foster a rewarding environment even amid the most difficult situations, it's likely that they can dampen that primal feeling of being under threat just enough to nudge people out of defensive mode and back into top form.

Ros has put this insight at the heart of her leadership style. First, she creates a positive frame for difficult tasks or discussions. "We've got a huge project where 95 percent of it is going fine, but three things aren't going so well," she says. "We're getting a lot of questions about those three things, and I can see my team tensing up whenever we talk about them. So now I always begin our meetings by talking about what we've done well. And you can see how it calms everyone down and helps people think more clearly." She's keen to emphasize that "it's not about trying to spin or gloss over the problems. But beginning with what's working well puts everyone in a more open frame of mind, meaning we can look at what's not working without people getting defensive."

By focusing on something positive before getting into the tough stuff, leaders can help people stay in high-performance discovery mode. It doesn't take much. Research found that when volunteers were given a puzzle where they had to navigate a little mouse out of a maze, all it took to lift their performance by 50 percent was seeing a picture of some cheese next to the exit instead of a menacing owl. In a meeting, the metaphorical "cheese" can even be as simple as discussing the ideal outcome everyone's shooting for, before talking about the steps to get there.

Ros also reinforces her team's feelings of autonomy and competence—two things that feel highly rewarding for the average brain. Usually, when a

colleague has an issue, leaders help by offering advice or direction. But that can backfire, because a well-intentioned "have you tried this/that . . ." can be subconsciously interpreted as a judgment, as in: "why haven't you tried this/that?" And this mild cognitive threat can be enough to constrain the deliberate system and make people less creative in their own thinking. The alternative: create space for people to do their own best quality thinking. Ros uses the "extreme listening" technique. She asks someone what they want to think through, and lets them talk without interrupting or making suggestions. Sounds simple, but Ros says it's rare enough to feel a little strange initially.

She describes the first time she used it with her deputy, Alex. "He had an issue he wanted to talk about" and "I actually explicitly told him the 'rule' I was following. I nodded, encouraged him, and asked 'what else?,' when he flagged. Within five minutes, he'd literally solved the whole thing himself. We both laughed so hard. It absolutely worked." Alex went on to use the technique with his colleagues, too, and now it's a team habit. Ros is clear on the lesson for leaders: helping colleagues feel capable of handling matters on their own "is one of the greatest gifts you can give someone," providing a great boost to their resilience and confidence.

THE SOCIAL SELF

Charles heads the marketing function of a major retail chain. He's overseeing a lot of change in the way his team works, as they take advantage of new technology. "Marketing is evolving fast," he says. "Traditional marketing requires creativity." He adds, "Modern marketing still requires that, but we now get to benefit from new analytical tools that allow us to track return on investment of our marketing campaigns. And that data crunching requires quite a different type of skillset—much more quantitative." That means he's had to hire new types of people in the marketing department, alongside existing staff.

It sounds like nothing but upside for the marketing team. As Charles says, "it's fantastic to be able to combine the best of both skillsets." So what's the challenge? "Whenever you have a very new group of people joining an existing team, you've got to pay real attention to motivation," Charles warns. The reason for this lies deep in our highly social brains. Of all threats, social slights are especially high on the list of things against which our brains seek to defend us. This social sensitivity probably helped keep us safe when tribal belonging determined whether we'd survive the dangers of the prehistoric savannah—but in the workplace, it means leaders have to meet three main types of deep social needs if they want their colleagues to thrive:

- *Inclusion*: "Do I belong?" In Charles's case, existing staff may be worried that they're going to be excluded from the exciting new work. The newbies, meanwhile, will be wondering whether they truly fit in.

- *Respect*: "Do people recognize the value I bring?" Everyone on the team wants to feel that their efforts are useful and appreciated.

- *Fairness*: "Am I being treated just like everyone else—or do I at least understand the reason that things are the way they are?"

If the answer to any of those questions is "no," people's brains can quickly go into defensive mode—which, as we learned earlier, is a sure recipe for dysfunctional behavior. Indeed, Charles said "people were clearly feeling anxious and nervous. As a result, they started complaining about things they've never complained about before—making snide comments or questioning things that they saw as scope creep or turf invasion. People here are generally polite and friendly, and passionate about their work. So they weren't hostile. Just unsettled."

To boost feelings of inclusion, Charles deliberately created opportunities for both groups of staff to get to know each other and later collaborate in cross-functional teams to work on new product innovation. In addition to emphasizing these shared wins from teamwork, Charles also takes the time to make everyone feel respected for their individual contribution. "You have to make sure to give people 'spotlight moments.' I look for opportunities to get them in front of the management team. I hate it when someone works on a presentation and then their boss delivers it. If people have done the work, they present it."

Finally, he's transparent about the rationale behind his decisions. As he explains, "it's a great investment in minimizing suspicion and defensiveness later on." In doing so, he personally takes time to balance his time between the creatives and the technical folks, and if someone's giving up some responsibilities to one of the new hires, he says, "I make sure to explain why that's happening and emphasize the opportunities they will have to do new stuff in other areas—often areas that they're better at and enjoy more."

As a result, Charles says, "both sides are learning and growing by being exposed to each other." It's not something he sees as a one-off effort, either. "The company never stops changing. The people who are currently 'new'

will become the 'old guard' and then there will be a new generation of skills needed." After all, he says, "this sort of attention to the social dimension is important in any industry where systemic change is happening."

The evidence is pretty clear. Colleagues will behave more like their best selves, more of the time, if leaders take a few modest steps to foster an environment where people's brain's aren't overloaded—more focused on rewards than threats—and have their fundamental social needs met. With a little behavioral science in their toolkit, leaders can build a more productive team—and a happier one at that. Q

Caroline Webb is a senior adviser to McKinsey and an alumnus of the firm's London office. This article is based on research in her new book, *How to Have a Good Day: Harness the Power of Behavioral Science to Transform Your Working Life* (Crown Business, February 2016).