

Leadership – It’s Time to Change Our Brains

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In May 2012, I posited on our website that the 21st Century leader needs creative thinking, a tolerance for ambiguity, global dexterity and a more adaptive, responsive and innovative style. I also wrote that we needed to ‘change’ our brains – that is, to change the overused neural pathways that we use to process information.

I went on to write that the human brain fills in the blanks of incomplete or new information by using deep neural pathways, those pathways that form our mind maps. These have served us well in the past, assisting us to interpret information in the most expedient way for our brains. This makes life easier. Difficulties arise, however, when there are new problems to solve or situations that have not been encountered before – like the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

So while we bombard our brains with the new information, our brain’s drive for efficiency leads us to take perceptual short cuts, to follow our entrenched neural pathways and save energy. The results are real neurological limitations or more bluntly, thinking errors brought on by over-learnt associations and inflexible approaches to processing information. As a result, we perceive what we expect to find, not the reality before us. This is known as a cognitive blind-spot. In fact, after 8-10 exposures to similar circumstances the brain uses few of its resources to interpret the situation. We are mistaking the speed with which we process information for true understanding. The costs are high; a reliance on redundant solutions and a lack of innovative and creative alternatives. This is fine when there are predictable situations to deal with and relatively simple solutions are called for. Our problems stem from the fact that our brains evolved in a time of stability, high certainty and little change. This is no longer the case. Leaders now face a multifaceted, complex, ambiguous and uncertain world, packed full of novel problems and challenges we have not had to deal with previously.

What we require today is a collective intelligence, a collaborative intelligence and a creative and innovative intelligence. As one of my favourite thinkers, Dan Pink, says, ‘the future belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different mind – designers, story tellers, carers, empathisers, big-picture thinkers and meaning makers’.

To deal with the challenges we face, we need new ways of validating information, we need to gather different and diverse opinions, we must challenge our over-learnt approaches, entertain and explore ‘what-ifs’ and unlikely circumstances and then reframe our current circumstances, all the while we must be much more emotionally intelligent. We have the tools but we must learn to use them differently.



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