

THE NEW LEADERS

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Leadership and the Brain's Design

No creature can fly with just one wing. Gifted leadership occurs where heart and head—feeling and thought—meet. These are the two wings that allow a leader to soar.

All leaders need enough intellect to grasp the specifics of the tasks and challenges at hand. Of course, leaders gifted in the decisive clarity that analytic and conceptual thinking allow certainly add value. We see intellect and clear thinking largely as the characteristics that get someone in the leadership door. Without those fundamental abilities, no entry is allowed. However, intellect alone will not make a leader; leaders execute a vision by motivating, guiding, inspiring, listening, persuading—and, most crucially, through creating resonance. As Albert Einstein cautioned, "We should take care not to make the intellect our god. It has, of course, powerful muscles, but no personality. It cannot lead, it can only serve."

The neural systems responsible for the intellect and for the emotions are separate, but they have intimately interwoven connections. This brain circuitry that interweaves thought and feeling provides the neural basis of primal leadership. And, despite the great value that business culture often places on an intellect devoid of emotion, our emotions are, in a very real sense, more powerful than our intellect. In moments of emergency, our emotional centres—the limbic brain—commandeer the rest of the brain.

There's good reason for this special potency of emotions. They're crucial for survival, being the brain's way of alerting us to something urgent and offering an immediate plan for action: fight, flee, freeze. The thinking brain evolved from the limbic brain and continues to take orders from it when we perceive a threat or are under stress. The trigger point for these compelling emotions is the amygdala, a limbic brain structure that scans what happens to us from moment to moment, ever on the alert for an emergency. As our radar for emotional emergencies, the amygdala can commandeer other parts of the brain, including rational centres in the neocortex, for immediate action if it perceives a threat.

This arrangement worked well during the last 100 million or so years of evolution. Fear guided early mammals through the real dangers of predators; anger mobilized a mother to fight to protect her young. And social emotions such as jealousy, pride, contempt, and affection all played a role in the family politics of primate groups— just as they do in the underworld of organizational life today.

While emotions have guided human survival through evolution, a neural dilemma for leadership has emerged in the last 10,000 years or so. In today's advanced civilization, we face complex social realities (say, the sense someone isn't treating us fairly) with a brain designed for surviving physical emergencies. And so we can find ourselves hijacked—swept away by anxiety or anger better suited

for handling bodily threats than the subtleties of office politics. (Just who the hell does this guy think he is! I'm so mad I could punch him!)

Fortunately, such emotional impulses follow extensive circuitry that goes from the amygdala to the prefrontal area, just behind the forehead, which is the brain's executive centre. The prefrontal area receives and analyses information from all parts of the brain and then makes a decision about what to do. The prefrontal area can veto an emotional impulse—and so ensure that our response will be more effective. (Remember, he's giving your annual review— just relax and see what else he says before you do something you might regret.) Without that veto, the result would be an emotional hijack, where the amygdala's impulse is acted upon. This happens when the prefrontal zone circuitry fails in its task of keeping these emotional impulses in check.

The dialogue between neurons in the emotional centres and the prefrontal areas operates through what amounts to a neurological superhighway that helps to orchestrate thought and feeling. The emotional intelligence competencies, so crucial for leadership, hinge on the smooth operation of this prefrontal-limbic circuitry. Studies of neurological patients with damaged prefrontal-limbic circuitry confirm that their cognitive capacities may remain intact, while their emotional intelligence abilities are impaired. This neurological fact clearly separates these competencies from purely cognitive abilities like intelligence, technical knowledge, or business expertise, which reside in the neocortex alone.

Biologically speaking, then, the art of resonant leadership inter-weaves our intellect and our emotions. Of course, leaders need the prerequisite business acumen and thinking skills to be decisive. But if they try to lead solely from intellect, they'll miss a crucial piece of the equation.

Take, for example, the new CEO of a global company who tried to change strategic directions. He failed, and was fired after just one year on the job. "He thought he could change the company through intellect alone, without moving people emotionally," a senior vice president at the company told us. "He made radical strategic changes without bothering to get buy-in from the people who would execute those changes. A storm of e-mails from employees to the board complained of his tuned-out leadership, and the CEO was finally ousted."

How the Four Core EI Domains Interact

We are by no means the first to suggest that the main tasks of a leader are to generate excitement, optimism, and passion for the job ahead, as well as to cultivate an atmosphere of cooperation and trust. But we wish to take that wisdom one step further and demonstrate how emotional intelligence enables leaders to accomplish those fundamental tasks. Each of the four domains of emotional intelligence—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management—adds a crucial set of skills for resonant leadership.

These domains are, of course, closely intertwined, with a dynamic relationship among them. For instance, a leader can't manage his emotions well if he has little or no awareness of them. And if his emotions are out of control, then his ability to handle relationships will suffer. Our research has found a system underlying this dynamic. In short, self-awareness facilitates both empathy and self-

management, and these two, in combination, allow effective relationship management. EI leadership, then, builds up from a foundation of self-awareness.

Self-awareness—often overlooked in business settings—is the foundation for the rest: Without recognizing our own emotions, we will be poor at managing them, and less able to understand them in others. Self-aware leaders are attuned to their inner signals. They recognize, for instance, how their feelings affect themselves and their job performance. Instead of letting anger build into an outburst, they spot it as it crescendos and can see both what's causing it and how to do something constructive about it. Leaders who lack this emotional self-awareness, on the other hand, might lose their temper but have no understanding of why their emotions push them around. Self-awareness also plays a crucial role in empathy, or sensing how someone else sees a situation: If a person is perpetually oblivious to his own feelings, he will also be tuned out to how others feel.

Social awareness—particularly empathy—supports the next step in the leader's primal task: driving resonance. By being attuned to how others feel in the moment, a leader can say and do what's appropriate, whether that means calming fears, assuaging anger, or joining in good spirits. This attunement also lets a leader sense the shared values and priorities that can guide the group.

By the same token a leader who lacks empathy will unwittingly be off-key, and so speak and act in ways that set off negative reactions. Empathy, which includes listening and taking other people's perspectives, allows leaders to tune in to the emotional channels between people that create resonance. And staying attuned lets leaders fine-tune their message to keep it in synch.

Finally, once leaders understand their own vision and values and can perceive the emotions of the group, their relationship management skills can catalyse resonance. To guide the emotional tone of a group, however, leaders must first have a sure sense of their own direction and priorities—which brings us back again to the importance of self-awareness.

These dynamic relations among the four EI domains are of practical, not just theoretical, importance. They're the basic ingredients of effective primal leadership—of resonance. Next we'll explore the neural anatomy that underlies the EI abilities that allow leaders to prime resonance in the people they lead.

How the Brain Matters

Emotional intelligence, (as mentioned above) involves circuitry that runs between the brain's executive centres in the prefrontal lobes and the brain's limbic system, which governs feelings, impulses, and drives. Skills based in the limbic areas, research shows, are best learned through motivation, extended practice, and feedback. Compare that kind of learning with what goes on in the neocortex, which governs analytical and technical ability. The neocortex grasps concepts quickly, placing them within an expanding network of associations and comprehension. This part of the brain, for instance, can figure out from reading a book how to use a computer program, or the basics of making a sales call. When learning technical or analytic skills, the neocortex operates with magnificent efficiency.

The problem is that most training programs for enhancing emotional intelligence abilities, such as leadership, target the neocortex rather than the limbic brain. Thus, learning is limited and sometimes can even have a negative impact. Under a microscope, the limbic areas—the emotional brain—have a more primitive organization of brain cells than do those in the neocortex, the thinking brain. The design of the neocortex makes it a highly efficient learning machine, expanding our understanding by linking new ideas or facts to an extensive cognitive network. This associative mode of learning takes place with extraordinary rapidity: The thinking brain can comprehend something after a single hearing or reading.

The limbic brain, on the other hand, is a much slower learner —particularly when the challenge is to relearn deeply ingrained habits. This difference matters immensely when trying to improve leadership skills: At their most basic level, those skills come down to habits learned early in life. If those habits are no longer sufficient, or hold a person back, learning takes longer. Re-educating the emotional brain for leadership learning therefore, requires a different model from what works for the thinking brain: It needs lots of practice and repetition.

If the right model is used, training can actually alter the brain centres that regulate negative and positive emotions—the links between the amygdala and the prefrontal lobes. For example, researchers at the University of Wisconsin taught "mindfulness" to R&D scientists at a biotech firm who were complaining about the stressful pace of their jobs. Mindfulness is a skill that helps people keenly focus on the present moment and drop distracting thoughts (such as worries) rather than getting lost in them, thus producing a calming effect. After just eight weeks, the R&D people reported noticeably less stress, and they felt more creative and enthusiastic about their work. But most remarkably, their brains had shifted toward less activity in the right prefrontal areas (which generate distressing emotions) and move in the left—the brain's centre for upbeat, optimistic feelings.

These findings - and many more like them - belie the popular believe that starting early in adulthood, neural connections inevitably atrophy and cannot be replaced (and the corollary belief that as adults, it's too late to change our fundamental personal skills). Neurological research has shown quite the opposite. Human brains can create new neural tissue as well as new neural connections and pathways throughout adulthood. For example, researchers have found that London taxi drivers, famous for their navigational feats in a maze of one-way streets and clock-stopping traffic, show brain plasticity as they learn their trade. Over their years of driving through London, the part of the brain that handles spatial relationships (i.e., how to navigate) grows in size and strength of activity. At any point in life, neural connections used over and over become stronger, while those not used weaken.

Clearly, then, the act of learning is the key to stimulating new neural connections. When it comes to developing leadership, it takes an emotionally intelligent approach to create these neural changes: one that works directly on the emotional centres. As scientists have concluded, "When a limbic connection has established a neural pattern, it takes a limbic connection to revise it".

The original window of opportunity for learning effective leadership abilities extends through adolescence into the early twenties. During this period, the brain—the last organ of the body to develop anatomically—continues to lay down the original circuitry for emotional habits. Young people who work at mastering a discipline of any kind or who are members of teams or who have the

chance to hone public speaking skills are laying down a neuronal scaffold that, later in life, will offer crucial support for leadership. This early learning will support competencies such as self-control and the drive to achieve, collaboration, and persuasion.

If people lack the previous experiences that allow them to master a given leadership competence, however, it is still not too late—but it requires motivation. The brain's ability to sprout fresh connections continues throughout life. It just takes more effort and energy to learn in adulthood lessons that would have come more readily in our early years, because these new lessons fight an uphill battle against the ingrained patterns the brain already has in place. The task is doubled—we have to undo habits that do not work for us, and replace them with new ones that do. That's why motivation becomes crucial for leadership development: We have to work harder and longer to change a habit than when we learned it in the first place. Building emotional intelligence happens only with sincere desire and concerted effort. A brief seminar won't help, and it can't be learned through a how-to manual. Because the limbic brain learns more slowly—and requires much more practice—than the neocortex, it takes more effort to strengthen an ability such as empathy than, say, to become adept at risk analysis. But it can be done.

Sustainable Learning: The Evidence

Because the kind of limbic-brain learning we've just described takes more time and practice, it's also much more likely to be retained. So people not only can improve on the emotional intelligence competencies, but also can sustain those gains for years, as data from a unique series of longitudinal studies still under way at the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University have already shown. The studies, conducted with students since 1990 as part of a required course on competence building, allow students to assess their emotional intelligence competencies (as well as some cognitive ones), choose which competencies they wish to strengthen, and be guided by an individualized learning plan to strengthen the targeted skills. Objective assessments of students at the beginning of the course, again at graduation, and again years later in their jobs have allowed a unique opportunity to gauge the long-term power of this approach to leadership development.

The results have been impressive. In contrast to the honeymoon effect of most leadership development programs, the gains lasted years for these MBA students. Up to two years after going through the change process, they still showed 47 percent improvement on self-awareness competencies such as self-confidence, and on self-management competencies such as adaptability and the drive to achieve. When it came to social awareness and relationship management skills, improvements were even greater: 75 percent for competencies such as empathy and team leadership.

These gains are also in stark contrast to results from standard MBA programs, where there is little to no attempt to enhance emotional intelligence abilities. The best data here come from a research committee of the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business. In its study of two highly ranked business schools, it found that, compared with when they began their MBA programs, graduating students showed improvements of only 2 percent in emotional intelligence skills. In fact, when students from four other high-ranking MBA programs were assessed on a more thorough range of tests, they showed a gain of 4 percent in self-awareness and self-management abilities but a decrease of 3 percent in social awareness and relationship management.

Looking again at the Weatherhead study, gains in emotional intelligence were also found in part-time MBA students, who typically take three to five years to graduate. By the end of their program, these groups showed 67 percent improvement in self-awareness and self-management competencies and 40 percent improvement in social awareness and relationship management competencies. But even two years after these part-timers had graduated (which was between five and seven years since they had taken the courses), Jane Wheeler, a professor at Bowling Green State University, found that the gains continued: 63 percent showed improvement on the self-awareness and self-management competencies, and 45 percent had improved on the social awareness and relationship management competencies.

Among full-time MBA students, the improvements documented in these studies showed up across the spectrum of all fourteen emotional intelligence competencies assessed. There was not a single competence in which students were not able to improve, provided they targeted it in their learning plans.

These remarkable results are the first to demonstrate gains sustained over many years in the emotional intelligence building blocks of resonant leadership. They are hopeful in light of the 10 percent improvements shown from training programs over the one to two years in which the results were tracked, or the 2 percent improvement in emotional intelligence competencies shown from typical MBA programs. But there was yet another, unexpected, bonus that Jane Wheeler found in her data: Five to seven years after the original course, people were showing improvements on additional competencies, not just those on which they'd already improved after three to five years. In other words, once they'd learned how to improve the emotional intelligence abilities that make leaders great, they continued developing new strengths on their own. That finding provides solid evidence that these competencies can continue to be acquired throughout life.

More evidence of this kind of lifelong learning comes from a study done with senior executives in the Professional Fellows Program at Case Western Weatherhead School of Management. The program, designed for experienced executives and advanced professionals (with an average entering age of 48, versus 27 for MBA students), attracts top executives, lawyers, and physicians who want to hone their business and leadership skills. In longitudinal studies of these senior executives up to three years after the program, improvement was found on two-thirds of emotional intelligence competencies.

Clearly, then, leaders can be made more effective—if they are offered the right tools for learning. Such deep learning, however, goes even beyond using the right tools. It is a process that isn't necessarily linear and smooth; rather, it is a journey full of surprises and moments of epiphany.

A Wake-up Call

As he clicked his mouse on Send, Nolan Taylor realized he had just sent a scathing e-mail criticizing the company's recent announcement of layoffs—and his boss's role in it—not to his friend in another division, as he'd intended, but to his boss. Yet even as he was trying to think of ways he could somehow retrieve the message before his boss read it, the larger issue that this e-mail represented struck him. It was a shocking moment of awakening: He realized that he was not acting like the person he wanted to be.

For years, Nolan Taylor had vowed to control his outbursts and find ways to increase his self-control. The shock of such a glaring misstep, and its possible consequences, resulted in a different, much stronger commitment to his goal. He wanted to increase his optimism and to see the positive possibilities in daunting situations without resorting immediately to cynicism and criticism of others. With that sent e-mail, he had to confront a discontinuity— the glaring gap between his ideal self and the reality. And in that moment he committed himself to changing.

Such discontinuities can lead to powerful change, even in the natural world. Complexity, or chaos, theory states that many processes are better described as abrupt changes rather than as smooth transitions. An earthquake, for example, occurs as a sudden fracture of the earth, even though the pressure beneath the earth's surface may have built over time.

Likewise, in building leadership, sudden, shocking discoveries about our lives may shake us into action, "wowing" us with a stark truth about ourselves and offering new clarity about our lives. Such startling discontinuities can be frightening or enlightening. Some people react by running from them. Some simply deny their power and shrug them off. Others hear the wake-up call, sharpen their resolve, and start to transform self-defeating habits into new strengths. But how do they actually make those changes?

Self-Directed Learning

The crux of leadership development that works is self-directed learning: intentionally developing or strengthening an aspect of who you are or who you want to be, or both. This requires first getting a strong image of your ideal self, as well as an accurate picture of your real self—who you are now. Such self-directed learning is most effective and sustainable when you understand the process of change—and the steps to achieve it—as you go through it.

The self-directed model of learning (see diagram on last page) was developed by Richard Boyatzis during three decades of work in leadership development, both as a consultant to organizations and as an academic researcher.

The Five Discoveries

Self-directed learning involves five discoveries, each representing a discontinuity. The goal, of course, is to use each discovery as a tool for making the changes needed to become an emotionally intelligent leader on the eighteen EI leadership competencies (see descriptions from page 11).

This kind of learning is recursive: The steps do not unfold in a smooth, orderly way, but rather follow a sequence, with each step demanding different amounts of time and effort. The results of practicing new habits over time are that they become part of your new real self. Often, with changes in your habits, EI, and leadership styles, come changes in your aspirations and dreams, your ideal self. And so the cycle continues—a lifelong process of growth and adaptation.

When you go through the discovery of uncovering an ideal vision of yourself, you feel motivated to develop your leadership abilities. That is, you see the person you want to be. Whether this vision

actually comes to you in a dream, through getting in touch with the values and commitments that guide your life, or through simple reflection, the image is powerful enough to evoke your passion and hope. It becomes the fuel that maintains the drive you need to work at the difficult and often frustrating process of change.

The second discovery is akin to looking into a mirror to discover who you actually are now—how you act, how others view you, and what your deep beliefs comprise. Some of these observations will be consistent with your ideal self, and can be considered strengths; others will represent gaps between who you are and who you want to be. This realization of your strengths and gaps prepares the way for changing your leadership style.

But for that change to succeed, you'll need to develop an agenda for improving your abilities, which is the third discovery. A plan of action needs to be constructed that provides detailed guidance on what new things to try each day, building on your strengths and moving you closer to your ideal. The plan should feel intrinsically satisfying, fitting your learning preferences as well as the realities of your life and work.

The fourth discovery comes in practicing new leadership skills.

The fifth discovery may occur at any point in the process. It is that you need others to identify your ideal self or find your real self, to discover your strengths and gaps, to develop an agenda for the future, and to experiment and practice. Leadership development can only occur in the tumult and possibilities of our relationships. Others help us see things we are missing, affirm whatever progress we have made, test our perceptions, and let us know how we are doing. They provide the context for experimentation and practice. Although the model is called a self-directed learning process, it actually cannot be done alone. Without others' involvement, lasting change can't occur.

To summarize the process, people who successfully change in sustainable ways cycle through the following stages:

- The first discovery: My ideal self—Who do I want to be?
- The second discovery: My real self—Who am I? What are my strengths and gaps?
- The third discovery: My learning agenda—How can I build on my strengths while reducing my gaps?
- The fourth discovery: Experimenting with and practicing new behaviours, thoughts, and feelings to the point of mastery.
- The fifth discovery: Developing supportive and trusting relationships that make change possible.

Ideally, the progression occurs through a moment of discovery that provokes not just awareness, but also a sense of urgency.

