

# REVOLUTION FROM THE TOP

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*Understanding how the brain, the most important 'organ' in the human body, functions is integral to ensuring a more efficient organisation.*

by Annette Brettschneider-Czernik

**T**he diversity of people and ideas raises the likelihood of a company's long-term success. Innovation in terms of new products and services, approaches to pitching for new clients, and realising market

opportunities are key indicators of the internal state and climate of a company. A company shows multiple similarities with the human brain: in both instances a meagre output of ideas reveals a lack of curiosity, engagement, and zero desire to create and develop. There are brains whose interactions between the left and right hemispheres and "above" and "below" do not function effectively. Similar blockades have been identified in companies. These are those which are most likely not set up for sustainable growth and successful survival.

**THE CORRELATION BETWEEN THE HUMAN BRAIN AND A COMPANY** Companies with significant and long-standing track records show parallels with brains that



are used for lifelong learning: they learn by trial and error, have experiences, develop flat and strongly connected structures and adapt

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their inner setup to the constantly changing outer world. Self-optimising communicative networks on and between organisational hierarchies facilitate fast, considerate and sustainable adaptation to new challenges.

**THE BRAIN YEARNS FOR PROVOCATIONS** The human brain is not made for the execution of routine tasks. It is, however, optimised for creative problem solving – it is a connection machine. Moreover, the underlying functionality of the brain is one of finding associations, connections, and links between bits of information. Our thoughts, memories, skills and attributes are vast sets of connections or “maps” joined via complex chemical and physical pathways. A neuronal pathway can broaden and become stronger or weaken and disappear – depending on being needed and used; the brain needs new and differing challenges so as not to get stuck in existing patterns. It needs problems that touch emotionally and have an inherent relevance, which cannot be solved by auto-piloted reactionary patterns. When a stimulus is created within the complex maps, the more archaic areas of the brain are affected, which leads to an emotional arousal. In order to lessen and control the emotional agitation, the brain starts looking for possible solutions.

**IDEAS ARE THE RESULT OF NEWLY CONNECTED KNOWLEDGE** Picture-assisted diagnosis delivers proof that in the brain of a creative human being – while pursuing thoughts or solving problems – multiple and dispersed neuronal networks are activated simultaneously. This way, many knowledge and memory bits that are stored far apart are activated: the regional neuronal networks that initiate activation become interlinked in a new way. Thus, being creative means to connect something already existing, isolated thus far, into something new. One who does not know much can consequently only be creative within his or her limited frame. Knowledge that was recently memorised is no guarantee of exceptional creativity either. In order for a creative process to be successful, you need a broad array of diverse experiences and the ability to play with your stored knowledge.

**A GOOD IDEA ELEVATES SPIRITS JUST LIKE A DRUG** If you find a good solution, the newly created neuronal network that led to the solution is ingrained into your brain as a new experience. A chemical cocktail of hormones that have a neuronal impact creates the necessary heat. That means they trigger synapses to strengthen their connections and to stabilise them. The internal reward system becomes highly active, too. The emotional nuclei in the limbic system of the brain are provoked to release neurotransmitters, which reach the cerebral cortex and cause dissemination of endorphins. The more you experience this state, the more you crave for new connections and transformational processes. Children in particular exhibit this readiness as they experience these “elevated spirits” rather frequently. The more you learn to navigate the world, the more your thinking is directed into existing pathways. Thus if conditions are not supportive, growing older tends to coincide with the lessening of the willingness to engage in new lines of thinking.

**MANAGERS ARE MASTERS AT HINDERING CREATIVITY** Under the regimen of functionality of an organisation, it is small wonder that the uninhibited juvenile curiosity of the brain gives way to standardised solution thinking. Creativity, flexibility, intrinsic motivation and accountability tend to disappear during a career path. Instead, the brain reverts to primitive reactionary behavioral patterns of the limbic system like fight, flight or freeze to compensate for seemingly insurmountable barriers. Whenever we are stressed, the body secretes cortisol, which lasts longer than any adrenaline you might get from excitement about your goal and also interferes with new learning. Imposed rules



and regulations hamper the activation of the higher associative areas of the prefrontal cortex. Despite these findings of neuroscience, managers are still convinced that pressure and fear might be possible means to extract maximal output. Managers who get their team into an inner attitude as described above need to be prepared for increasing inefficiencies. As all active neuronal networks are linked with each other, there is a foreseeable result: negative emotional connotations when employees think of their job.

**EXPERIENCES ARE INGRAINED INTO THE HUMAN BRAIN** Once this attitude is an integral part of the brain, it cannot be modified by arguments, lectures, and punishment or training seminars – neither incentive would work. In these reward or fear spirals, not only is the potential of employees dramatically reduced, managers are affected as well. There is only one way to turn a negative into a positive attitude: supportive leadership that invites and encourages employees to have new experiences. Therefore, the most important potential of a company is all those managers who are able to invite their teams to unleash their potential, to

inspire them, to create a creative spirit that entails a sense of belonging and performance readiness. In supportive leadership systems, staff initiate

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and develop the required discipline to perform well. Thus, the manager has time for strategic topics and to advance the company. The Five Principles of Supportive Leadership:

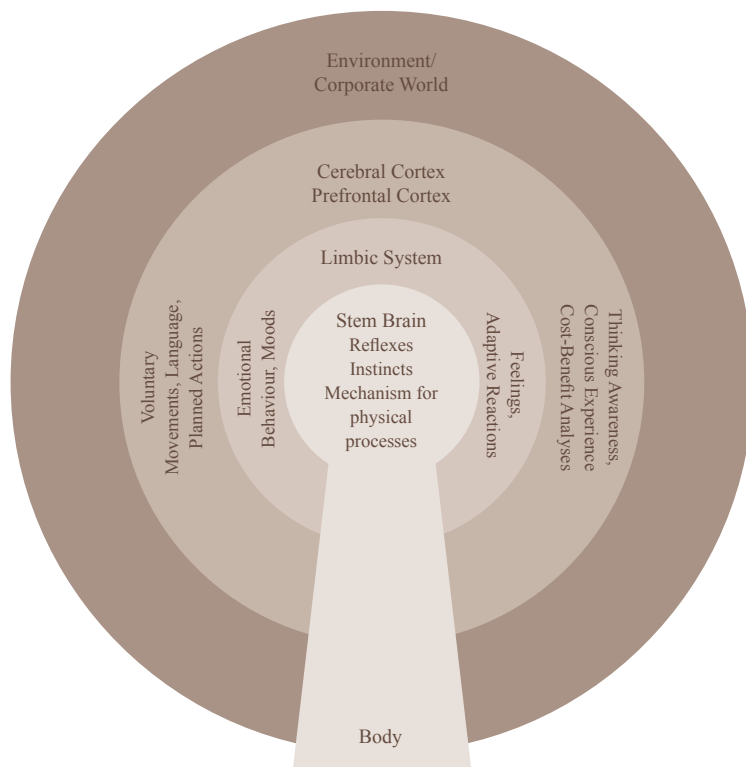
*1. Offer new challenges  
The brain constantly needs diversity of challenges so as not to get stuck in routine thinking. This diversity can cause emotional arousal. To go back to a normal level, the brain flexibly and creatively starts developing adequate solutions.*

*As a manager, offer your direct line managers new challenges on a regular basis, such as: new projects wherein new parts of the organisation are involved or the topic is unfamiliar, or job rotations or overseas secondments are assigned.*

*2. Make an impact with your team  
Change is challenging and the brain always tries to figure a habitual way around it. As the brain gets very attached to its own views and habits, it reacts to variations not with fluid adaptation but with increased rigidity.*

*As a manager, communicate positive imaginations and metaphors. Envisioning a new action or state in vivid, multisensory detail will fire the same brain circuits and cells that are actually involved in performing that activity or making that change. Get something happening that shows you and your staff's brains that this change is really worth doing. Otherwise, you will not*

Revolution from the top | Neuroscience for Managers



**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**New ways of thinking**

- ➔ Creativity and motivation can disappear during a career as the mind follows pre-established patterns.
- ➔ Stress causes cortisol to be secreted which hampers the ability to learn.
- ➔ New, positive experiences must be imprinted on the brain to ensure lasting change.
- ➔ Existing knowledge needs to be linked in new ways to maximise creativity.

activate your brains' emotional experiential memory to make lasting change possible. If there is no emotional heat, skip it. At the same time, it is expected that a manager stays cool, personally.

**3. Create positive experiences for employees**

All neuronal networks in our brains that are activated simultaneously are linked with each other – neurons that fire together, wire together. That's why the brain connects certain emotions with scents, people, or situations.

As a manager, strive for positive connections with respect to yourself as a person in your employees' heads. You could do that by adequately complimenting them, showing an interest in them personally, or listening and providing support in difficult times. By fostering positive neuronal connections, you create a sense of belonging and the willingness to perform.

**4. Allow for mistakes and establish a creative learning culture**

Anxiety is a consequence of insecurity. It triggers an archaic emergency program in the human brain that only allows for three potential reactions: fight, flight or freeze. Other, more complex behavioural patterns are blocked.

Photo: private

As a management team, you need to ensure that in a creative process everyone needs to have the right to make mistakes without sanctions. A creative learning culture is required, meaning that staff are not punished when making mistakes. These need to be regarded as opportunities to learn and grow.

**5. Connect people and knowledge within the organisation**  
 During the creative process the neurochemical "highways" are connected in a new way. Thus, being creative predominantly means to link the existing knowledge and information in new ways.

As a management team, you need to mix the differing knowledge in your organisation over and over again. You could do this by establishing cross-divisional teams, by introducing shadowing, peer coaching, by being role models, or by linking all staff anew during large interactive workshops.

**PERSPECTIVE: YES, YOU CAN**

Knowing how the human steering organ functions enables managers to direct their communication more efficiently and effectively, helps them analyse "staff problems" from a different angle, fosters their efforts to manage their own and their team's careers and will eventually lead to attracting talented people because of the formidable reputation they will earn.

However, there might be resistance, and it might take patience, time, convincing of others, feedback loops, and energy along the way to a supportive leadership system. The revolutionary potential of putting this knowledge into action needs to be carefully dosed in terms of quality and quantity, taking into consideration current situations, places and the states of brains involved.

"Enthusiasm and loving encouragement establish and cultivate new synapses." (Thomas B. Czerner). Managers who realise the aphorism in their daily practice will be successful in the long run, both personally and professionally. They will also help their firms succeed in a sustainable way. |

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