

NEUROSCIENCE *...helping em*

How does change impact an employee's behavior and what can IC do to ensure they retain high engagement levels? An age-old question that's imperative to an organization's success, especially in the modern business environment where mergers, takeovers and acquisitions are commonplace. **HILARY SCARLETT** explains how the application of neuroscience analysis can help leaders get underneath the physiological barriers to organizational change.

THINK TANK: RESEARCH, IDEAS AND OPINION INFLUENCING COMMUNICATION AND THE WORKPLACE



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Changing employee behavior is difficult. In fact, changing our own behavior is hard enough: it's not easy to establish new habits such as taking more exercise, getting more sleep and eating less. Similarly, it's difficult to change our organization's make-up, shift company culture, establish a collaborative culture and change the way leaders communicate. As a profession, communicators know that these things don't come easily, but what's new is that the field of neuroscience is beginning to explain why these activities are often pain points and more interestingly, what we can do about it.

The idea of using neuroscience in change management and leadership communication has to be one of the most exciting developments witnessed in the Internal Communication sector. At last, we can demonstrate that communicating with employees, involving them, building strong working relationships are not just "nice to do", "the right thing to do" or "soft", but are essential in enabling the brain to focus and in equipping people to think and perform at their best.

Our brains find change hard

To understand why our brains find change difficult to process we need to look to prehistoric times when mankind was at its earliest point of evolution. Fundamentally, our brains still boast the same physical makeup as our ancestors, although we do have a larger and more developed prefrontal cortex (PFC) – the part of the brain that allows us to reflect and consider. Back then, the brain had one key driver: survival. To do this it worked on the

simple principle of avoiding threats and seeking out rewards. Of the two, avoiding threats, such as the sabre-toothed tiger, was far more important to survival and so our brains developed five times more neural networks to look for danger than they have for reward. As a result, our brains today are still subconsciously looking out for threats, five times a second.

Why is all this relevant to today's organizations? It matters because when it comes to uncertainty, for example during a takeover, this represents

employees through change

a major threat. Our brains are not wired to handle this scenario calmly or objectively, so imagine an employee's state of mind during a merger or acquisition.

The negative spiral change creates

Like our bodies, our brains have a limited amount of resources and energy so when the brain is presented with ambiguity or significant change, it goes into a threat response and reroutes energy to fight or flight. This means there is less resource available for our

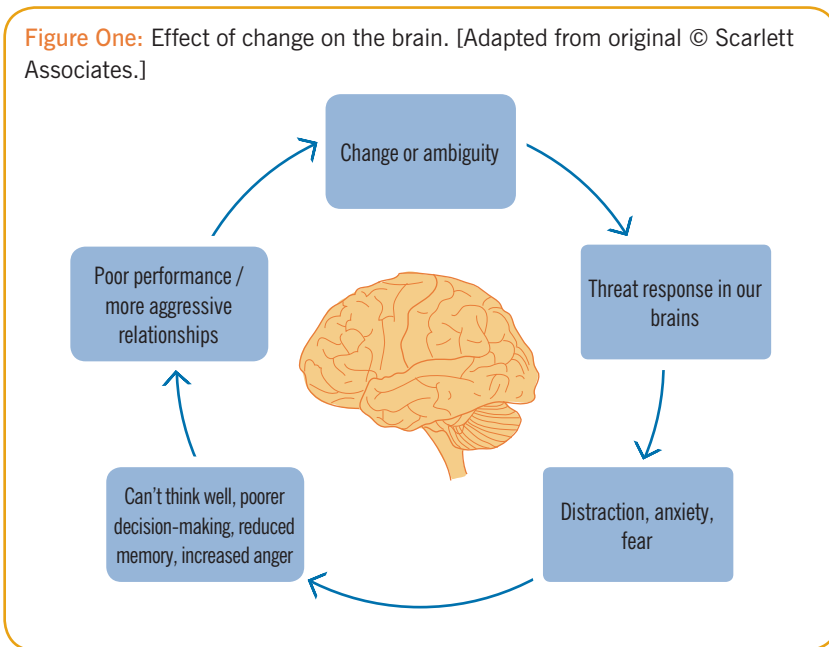
PFC so we become distracted, trying to work out what the threat or uncertainty means for us. This response, when we become anxious and fearful, changes the way employees see the world. They start to see minor threats as larger than they really are, and start to see threats in the workplace where they don't exist. For example, we all know that feeling: "Why didn't my boss say 'Hello' to me this morning? He normally does..." or "What's going on in that meeting room? Why wasn't I asked to participate?" Colleagues



Read this and learn

➤ How you can use neuroscience to understand employee behavior during change.

Figure One: Effect of change on the brain. [Adapted from original © Scarlett Associates.]



◀ are viewed as threats. To add to that problem, the feeling of threat is contagious: if colleagues around us, or our leaders, are feeling worried and fearful, the feeling will spread. Employees are less able to focus on their work and their memory is negatively affected. Additionally, they become less perceptive as their field of focus narrows and they move to a more emotional state, unable to calm their feelings. In fact the brain, when facing change and uncertainty, becomes like the brain of an adolescent, quick to get emotional and angry, struggling to think clearly [see Figure One].

It becomes worse still: as ability to think clearly and perform effectively is reduced, stress levels rise and this sends the sufferer further downward into a negative spiral, and performance declines even more. At the very moment when organizations need their people to be focusing and thinking clearly, the impact of change and uncertainty on the brain is having an entirely opposite effect.

What neuroscience can teach us about performing at our best

This begs the question, what can we do about this? How can we help organizations, employees and ourselves remain resilient during change? Neuroscientists have identified certain “domains” that have a major impact on our brains and therefore on our motivation and engagement. These domains can activate

our brains positively or negatively, depending on whether we feel secure or threatened. If the former, we are more focused, creative and willing to collaborate and we are also more able to learn (the “toward state”); but if our brains detect a threat, we experience all the negative emotions and behaviors that go with that state and people become difficult to influence positively [see Figure Two, opposite]. Dr David Rock summarized these domains in the SCARF model:

- **Status:** Status is partly about where an employee sits within an organization’s hierarchy but it’s also the extent to which they feel respected and valued. Being asked for their opinions or to help on a significant project can boost sense of status. Knowing that they are better at a skill than others, improving at a skill or being offered a development opportunity all improve sense of status and push employees into the toward state.
- **Certainty:** As communicators we have challenged leaders over the years to be more transparent and to share information with employees. Neuroscience now backs us up – the brain craves certainty. When it doesn’t have it, it gets distracted as it tries to work out what pieces of information mean and whether they all make sense. Employees speculate and, because there are five times more neural networks in the brain to detect threat, they become anxious and enter the threat response. To focus, their brains need open, frequent and consistent communication.
- **Autonomy:** This is about the need to have control over our lives, or at least the perception of control. As a rule, employees aren’t keen on being micromanaged and even advice supplied with good intentions can send them into the threat response. Neuroscience demonstrates that involving people puts them into the toward state – willing to collaborate and to help make change happen.
- **Relatedness:** Because human beings need others to ensure our survival, through our early years our brains are wired to be social. We need to connect with other people. Every time we meet a new person, unconsciously our brains are thinking “friend or foe?” and because we have more neurons to detect threat, our tendency is to think “foe”. Research conducted by Dr David Amodio of New York University has revealed some interesting but disturbing facts about how the brain automatically leads us all to be biased, and we are both victims and

protagonists of this bias. Neuroscience backs up the good work that many communicators and change agents undertake – when employees feel they belong to a group they enter a toward state. Time with leaders, team meetings, informal social gatherings and team-based activities are not just nice to do, they lead employees to feel that they belong to “the ‘in’ group” and put their brains into a more constructive mindset. Providing employees with time to meet face-to-face isn’t a luxury – it helps them to build a sense of belonging and trust, and calms the mind.

- **Fairness:** This becomes all the more important during times of change. If things are going to be different then an employee’s brain needs to know that the process will be fair. Fairness is rooted very deeply within us – every child is very quick to point out if something is not fair.
- **Empathy:** Other domains are also emerging as being important. Dr Naomi Eisenberger of UCLA conducted research on empathy that demonstrated how much more resilient employees will be if they feel they are in the presence of an empathetic person – they’ll try for harder and longer at new tasks. This is an important point for leaders in particular to note.

Two questions for you

1. Take a look at the domains: which one matters most to you? All domains matter to all of us but we do have different preferences and these preferences can change in different contexts.
2. Over the next 24 hours, observe your colleagues, friends and family. When someone gets annoyed or goes into an “away state”, analyze why that might be. Which domain has gone into a threat state? Has their status been undermined in some way, do they feel excluded from the group?

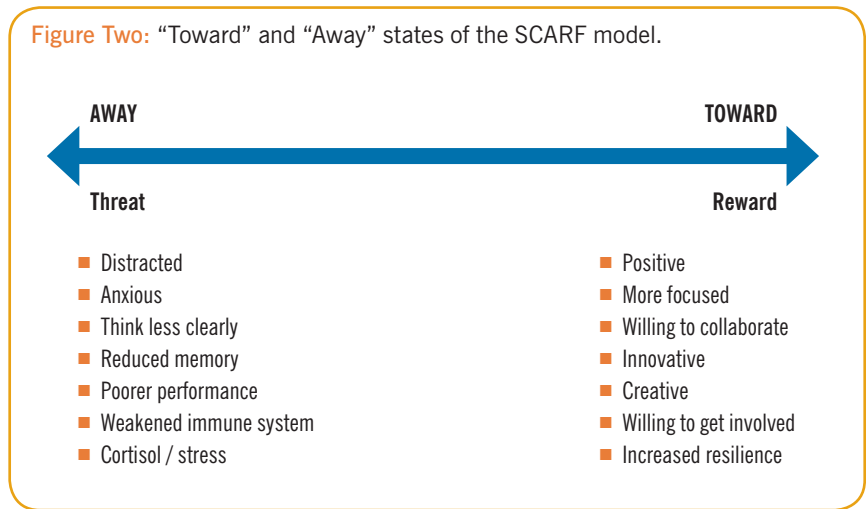
How organizations are applying this learning

So we’ve taken a look at the science, but how can change and communication practitioners use this knowledge to help their organizations?

1. Build awareness of neuroscience and change

If leaders and employees understood the impact of change on the brain, they could plan and implement change in a more constructive, “brain-friendly” way. This would mean organizations would be far more likely to keep employees in a positive toward state while going through change. Every leader needs to understand neuroscience

Figure Two: “Toward” and “Away” states of the SCARF model.



and its implications for work so the first step is to build awareness.

2. Provide a language that resonates with business leaders

Another great benefit is that neuroscience provides a language for talking about employee engagement and change management that is acceptable to even the most hard-nosed leaders. In a recent conversation with the HR and Communications team of a large bank, they shared how they wanted to provide leaders with support on change management and building engagement. Talking communication, or “psycho fluff” as one banker put it, would not appeal, but talking about the physiology of the brain was both new and interesting. Neuroscience provides a means of talking about change that enables senior people to see that communication, empathy and involvement have a direct impact on people’s ability to think at their best and deliver.

3. Planning employee engagement at a macro level

Equipped with knowledge about neuroscience, leaders can plan every aspect of work to ensure employees are focused and performing well. Understanding the brain raises all sorts of questions about how work is planned, the physical work environment, flexibility, etc. Neuroscience is providing new research and insights on areas such as what influences us, how to set goals that really stick and cross-cultural working. It provides a scientific basis that could lead to a better understanding of employee engagement, which is all about being in a toward and focused state. ▶

Using neuroscience in IC means we can demonstrate that communicating with and involving employees is not just “nice to do”, but essential in enabling focus and equipping people to perform at their best

◀ **4. Planning at a micro level – leader and manager workshops**

Neuroscience can also be applied at a more local level. Equipping leaders with knowledge of neuroscience means that they can apply it in their day-to-day work. Leaders can see the physiological advantages of planning time together as a team (Relatedness and Empathy), consulting employees on certain decisions that affected them (Autonomy and Fairness), regular communication (Certainty) and learning and development (Status). With the brain in mind, they can also apply the learning to imminent activities. Take performance management discussions, for example. It could be argued that appraisals send most of us into a threat state – how does the phrase “Let me give you some feedback” make you feel? Keeping neuroscience front-of-mind can help leaders plan how they could shift the experience to being one that creates a toward state.

5. A different way of rewarding people

In these economically tough times, neuroscience also provides food for thought on how organizations can reward employees beyond the usual financial incentives. By identifying what the brain finds rewarding – intrinsic motivators – companies can look at how else

they can recompense people by providing a more rewarding brain-friendly day. Various parts of the brain are activated when we are rewarded and, in particular, the area called the ventral striatum. Neuroscience reveals that money is not the only thing that activates the ventral striatum: there’s large amount of overlap between how the brain responds to monetary and “social reward”. These social rewards include being given positive feedback, feeling that we are being treated fairly by our manager and the organization, getting public recognition and being trusted.

As a field, neuroscience may still be in its infancy but already it’s providing hugely valuable insights as to how we can work better, stay focused and collaborate. For anyone who cares about their organization and enabling employees to do great work, it’s an area to watch. We all benefit from understanding how our brains work. Leaders no longer have to take our word for it; science is providing hard evidence as to why our brains need communication, involvement and empathy. scm

HISTORY OF NEUROSCIENCE

Neuroscience is the study of the nervous system, including the brain. Although applying neuroscience to organizational behavior is very new, the study of neuroscience began millennia ago: in 387BCE Plato was teaching in Athens and suggested that the brain was the seat of mental activity. In the Renaissance, amongst others, Leonardo da Vinci sketched the skull and the brain. With the development of the microscope, studies of the brain and the nervous system became more sophisticated. The 19th century saw many discoveries in particular as scientists observed the behavior and cognitive abilities of people who had suffered from some kind of brain damage. Learning has accelerated over the last twenty years with the arrival of the fMRI scanner enabling neuroscientists to observe our brains being stimulated and identify which parts are activated in different situations.