

TEACHING HIGH PERFORMANCE LEADERSHIP - LESSONS FROM NEUROPSYCHOLOGY



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Have you ever heard the adage that “most people only use 10% of their brain power”? Research findings in the neurosciences are proving that there is a lot of truth in that old saying and the implications for training high performing leaders is significant.

Neuropsychological research is proving that typical leaders, engaged in making vital business decisions, managing change, and solving difficult employee relationship problems, are conscious of and utilizing only a tiny fraction of their intuition and experiences. However, top performing leaders have developed the capacity to fully tap into their vast cerebral storehouse of information, and purposefully draw upon it at exactly the right time to make important decisions and handle critical situations. These are the leaders who demonstrate that uncanny ability to respond to difficult situations with exactly what is needed, when it is needed, rather than relying on status quo thinking, and automatic reactions.

But exactly how does a leader go about that process of increasing their capacity to effectively draw upon a lifetime of experiences and knowledge and apply it in a way that is most productive? Advances in neuroscience and neuropsychology over the past decade have provided many new and surprising clues to help answer this question.

The newest neuropsychological research is providing models which help create more effective leadership training techniques that actually increase our ability to more fully utilize our brain power and apply it to the practical problems confronting today's business leaders. One of the most important findings this research has revealed is that the brain centers involved in some of the most vital of leadership functions can not be taught with traditional classroom and textbook methods.

For many of the high level leadership skills such as self-awareness, self-management, empathy, authenticity, creativity, and the appropriate use of intuition, traditional classroom teaching simply falls short. Neuropsychology has taught us, this is

because the brain centers involved in controlling and directing those high level leadership skills are only weakly connected to the verbal and language systems of the brain, where traditional classroom teaching methods have been designed to have their greatest impact.

This means that most traditional classroom based leadership development programs are not sufficient in teaching leaders how to develop their full potential. Rather, the neuropsychological research has shown us that programs that integrate experiential and process oriented instruction, that is specifically designed to tap into those nonverbal

brain centers, is needed.

Experiential programs, as the name implies, teach by having the student actually experience and practice the concept being taught. To attempt to teach important leadership concepts such as self-awareness

or empathy in the classroom is simply not effective. Rather, teaching through participation in exercises that allow one to actually experience such concepts and practice them in a setting where they can receive corrective feedback is much more productive. This teaching approach allows for a much more direct connection to those parts of the brain that are disconnected or only weakly linked to the brain's language centers.

Similarly, process oriented teaching is far different from traditional classroom teaching in the way learning is facilitated. In traditional classroom settings, an instructor tells you what to learn and why it is important. In contrast, facilitators in process oriented teaching, guide students through a series of processes that are specifically engineered to allow the students to discover for themselves the relevance of the material being presented and then be able to come to their own conclusions as to how this new material can be best utilized to impact their leadership effectiveness. This type of teaching bypasses the brain's “logical” language system and goes directly to those non-verbal brain centers that are critical in

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controlling and directing leadership skills such as use of intuition and some forms of creativity. It is also in these brain centers that those flashes of insight sometimes called the "Ah Ha" experience occurs and this phenomenon is most frequently and reliably created through process oriented teaching rather than traditional classroom settings, which focus on skills.

Neuropsychological research has demonstrated there is one more added bonus to teaching through experiential and process oriented programs. Findings have demonstrated that learning which takes place by these methods is much more likely to be retained and implemented. In contrast, learning that takes place where a teacher (or boss) tells you what to learn and why it's important, will vanish once external consequences are removed (a new boss for instance). This is not to say that there is not a place for traditional classroom teaching in leadership training programs. Many aspects of becoming an effective leader involve learning and applying models and information that is logical, verbal, and best learned through the brains language and verbal memory systems. But use of this type of teaching alone leaves a huge gap that can only be filled by experiential and process oriented learning.

In summary, traditional classroom teachings, combined with experiential training embedded within a process oriented curriculum, are the leadership training programs that will produce superior results. So, the neuropsychology of leadership is not just about interesting models for scientists to tinker with and academics to discuss. There are real world practical implications for how cutting edge leadership programs will incorporate these neuropsychological findings into their models of leadership, and design programs for leadership development utilizing these models.

Farr Associates is a pioneer in providing experiential and process oriented components within their leadership programs. Farr goes beyond simply teaching leaders about how perceptions impact leadership effectiveness by drawing models on a whiteboard. Rather, Farr

provides them with an experientially based teaching module that allows them to actually experience and dissect how they form perceptions as well as develop awareness of the perceptions they create in others. Then they are led through a series of processes to help them understand how to use that self awareness to increase their ability to generate loyal followership. As a firm, Farr is committed to continue to develop these types of experiential and process oriented methods of teaching within their curriculum to create the most innovative and powerful leadership training programs available and produce graduates who become high performance leaders.

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