



Neuroscience and its implications for Human Resources

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About this Guide

What is neuroscience and what impact could it possibly have on our industry?

It might seem like one of those fad terms as it's everywhere at the moment, but neuroscience has a lot to offer the discerning L&D professional, people manager and leader. With great advances over the past few decades in what we can see the brain doing in the lab, through scans and chemical analysis, we can gain useful insights for the real world of work too.

Neuroscience is the study of the brain – or more technically the nervous system including the brain and spinal cord – so it's like learning how people really work.

Think about how strange it would be to have a laptop or a smartphone you knew nothing about, or didn't know how to use. How frustrating would it be to get basic things done if you didn't know what you were working with?

Arguably that's how we've been working with our brains – unsure of what's really going on. Neuroscience then gives us the instruction manual – or at least a few top tips – and that's the purpose of this article: to share the top insights from neuroscience that can help you raise performance and increase learning.

The great news is that sharing these insights with managers and leaders has been shown to increase application of learning and job performance. We already use these in our programmes and see great results, so here are our favourites for you to use too.



Threat versus Reward

Are you a carrot or stick manager? We have all experienced the benefit of both carrot and stick motivation – the threat versus reward idea. Do people act to avoid a punishment, or work towards a reward they would like? Well whilst many might say they'd rather work towards a reward, the fact is that our brains respond faster and more powerfully to threat.

We can all recall a time when we acted to avoid some threatening situation – be it a last minute deadline to avoid being the one who failed or stepping out of an event to avoid being the one asked to present. Think about how much more strongly you react to bad news or criticism than good news or praise – which also links to memory storage.

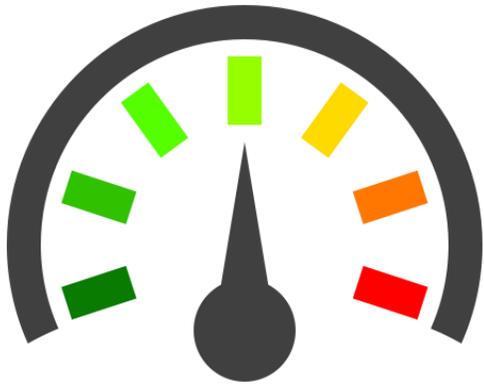
At the end of a week – do you remember all the compliments or the one insult?

So if you want people to move at pace – threaten them. You're probably wondering how on earth we could make this claim, as it seems so opposed to everything else we write in our articles – but threat is certainly the best way to get a fast response. Yet here's the danger with the idea: when we do threaten or create a threatening environment, we damage people's capability to think effectively.

For the people who now feel threatened, all of their energy has gone into self-preservation – and that is as far from calm, effective and creative problem-solving as you could ever be. So threat gives you a quick response, but the response won't be much use to you when you're looking for effective problem solving. If you want people to give their best work, spot problems and create great solutions, they need to feel safe and as though they are working towards something meaningful.

This is a priceless insight for managers and leaders when we introduce this idea and ask the question: What threats do you create in the way you lead people?

When might you have created a threat response in your team through constructive feedback, a harshly toned email or the threat of public humiliation of any kind? What could you be doing to create a safer, more pleasant working environment, so that people are doing their best thinking and delivering their best results?

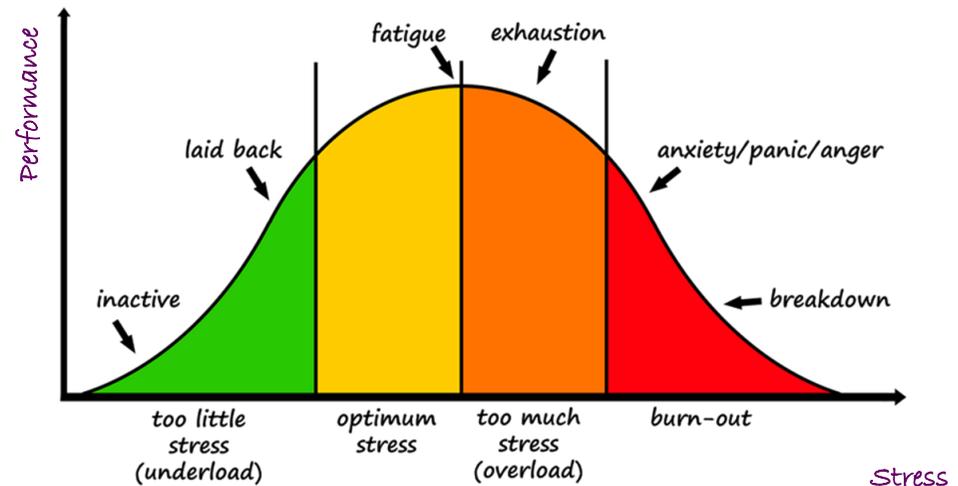


Stress versus Performance

And this question becomes all the more relevant when you consider how our performance changes under stress. The Yerkes-Dodson graph was an estimate based on common sense and observation, but now we have neuroscience to back up the idea: with too little stress, we are bored and performance is low.

With too much stress, we burnout and performance drops. And stress is often caused by that threatening environment: the pressure to hit a deadline, to not be at the bottom of the league table or avoid being asked to present reasons for poor performance.

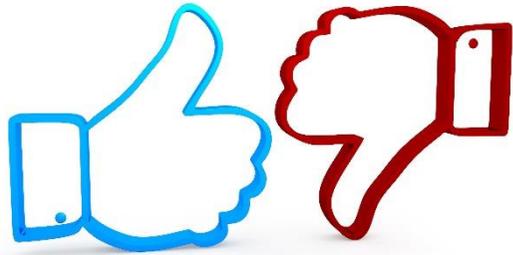
These are all threats which could stop us from performing at our best.



How often are we asking people to do more with less? How often are we packing more into our learning programmes so that people learn everything they could ever need to know all in one sitting? Both of these examples are likely to create too much stress – causing low performance or low learning.

Consider ways of helping people find that optimum level of anxiety, pressure and stress – which will be different for each person.

For example, you might find it helpful to have a conversation with each person in your team to understand what works best for them.



Social Pain

Have you ever felt socially rejected? Maybe you went to a party and nobody spoke to you for a while. Or you went to a team meeting and someone made a side comment about your work being sloppy. Maybe your manager has not invited you to something, which made you feel unwelcome. When you think about whatever example you have, how does it feel?

The scary news is that we experience social rejection just like physical pain.

In fact, in brain scans it is difficult to tell the difference between someone experiencing physical pain and someone who has just experienced, or is remembering some form of social rejection.

How often are our delegates crying out for encouragement and reassurance that they're right? How scary is it for a delegate to say what they think is a reasonable answer to a question, to be told they're wrong? How many times do small group activities or ice-breakers raise the threat of social rejection?

It's helpful to be aware of this to simply understand how social rejection can be so damaging. You can't protect your delegates from all the risks, but being aware of these things might help you keep an eye on the inclusiveness of your activities.

As a people manager or leader, keep an eye on your actions, your favouritism for certain members of your team and your tendencies to dismiss certain people or comments.

You could be causing damage and again dampening your chances of having a high performing team.



Neuroplasticity

The exciting news for anyone older than 21 is that, contrary to earlier beliefs, we now know that adults can learn – a lot. Our brains are malleable and able to re-shape, like plastic, so you can in fact teach an old dog new tricks. As with learning at any age though the said dog must want to learn! Scans show that adults at any age can increase the size and complexity of certain areas of the brain.

The most famous example being London cab drivers, who show larger, more developed parts of the brain associated with spatial memory. We've written more on this [fascinating development here](#).

There are two critical messages from this that we find have great impact with learners. Firstly, it is a challenge to the frequently claimed **"I can't do that," or "I can't change."** We now have the scientific evidence that people can indeed change and learn to do new things.

Second, and perhaps most important is **the impact of our beliefs and thinking**. As Carol Dweck has [shown repeatedly in her](#) research the belief that we can learn, change and grow at something is often the greatest predictor of whether we do then learn, change or grow.

You might find it helpful to share this with delegates, so they can make the choice. Neuroscience might just be catching up with the wisdom of Henry Ford, but having the scientific clout behind something can often help people buy in to the concept more readily than a cliché motivational poster quote.

"Whether you think you can, or you think you can't - you're right."

Henry Ford.

Why not start every workshop with the two critical messages above and ask, "So what will you choose to learn and change?"



The Science of Choices

Fundamentally linked to that last point is the importance of choice. Again this is a case of science backing up what many people have always known: people are far more likely to do something if it is their idea or choice.

This is of course why coaching, or asking questions to facilitate someone's thinking, is such a powerful tool. As a coach, what we are doing is helping someone find their own answers and/or their own solutions – which they are then far more likely to act on.

Many clients come to us with the complaint that coaching programmes for managers and leaders have not been successful. It seems that people are learning acronyms like GROW but they are not getting what that really means, why it's important or when to use it.

We're finding success with explaining more of the science behind why this works.

As we share all of the neuroscience covered in this article, people start to understand how their own and their team's brains work. It becomes clear that we can learn, we can change, we simply need to choose that over sticking with what we've done before.

Yes, there are circumstances where you just need someone to do what you tell them – though of course the way in which you tell them will have a huge impact on your success. But when you need higher levels of commitment, for example to a new project or change initiative, give people the information they need to come to their own decisions.

Our brains crave information - it's harder for us to accept change when we have not had the privilege of all the information which often the business leaders have been studying for weeks or months. Business leaders could therefore benefit greatly from sharing more of the story behind change, explaining all the information and ideally giving people time to consider it themselves.

Whilst everyone might not come to the same conclusions, at least they will better understand the thinking.



Then ask questions to engage people and give them some choices:

- **What do they think is the best course of action?**
- **What role will they play in the change?**
- **What name should be given to this change initiative?**

That last one might sound ridiculous, but various studies have shown that giving some form of choice, however small, can have a really positive impact on people's feelings and engagement.

The key message here is that choice is critical for buy-in and success. In fact, to go full circle, lack of choice can lead to a feeling of no control, which often results in a threat state.

So when people don't have choices, they can feel threatened and then you get all the negative results of threat explored in our first top insight from neuroscience. Facilitate your workshops so that people come to their own conclusions and make choices about their learning and take away actions. Facilitate your team meetings so that people are making their own decisions rather than being told what to do all the time. Lead change initiatives by providing more information, data and story and asking people what conclusions they make – then give them some further choices to explore.

All of these actions will keep brains happy by providing both information and the chance to choose.

Conclusion



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With all of these insights from neuroscience, we find the best approach is simply to share them with delegates as interesting topics of discussion.

We might start a workshop with, “Here are some interesting things we now know about the brain... What do you think?” Try out one or all of them and see how you get on.

If you’d like any support in introducing neuroscience into your learning programmes, we run a range of HRBP and L&D team development workshops – helping professionals become stronger business partners and experts in talent management.

We’d love to have a chat with you about it.

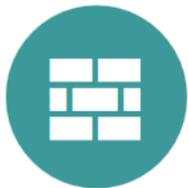
about Totem

People at their Best

build:

We support you in uncovering your vision, mapping talent and developing end to end processes to manage talent within your organisation.

Focusing on profits through people



engage:

We help you to engage individuals and teams—supporting change, gaining commitment to your vision and retaining your highest performers.

Making sure you get the best from your people



assess:

We provide you with tools, techniques and assessors to help you map the talent and potential of individuals in your organisation and/or in selecting new talent.

Helping you recruit people who fit and deliver results



develop:

We design and deliver exceptional, focused and blended development, allowing each individual to grow in their role, capability and motivation.

Maximising potential and personal contribution



What our clients say about us:

We're nimble

"What sets Totem apart? It is their ability to be very thorough in their approach whilst at the same time willing to offer innovative suggestions that can be implemented in a time and cost effective way. Would I recommend them to others? Without question!"

HR Manager, Pulse

We get them

"I'd definitely recommend working in partnership with Totem – I say partnership, as this is exactly how they operate. They seize every opportunity to learn more about your business and by doing so are able to support projects with this insight, often going above and beyond the original scope."

Resourcing Manager Carphone Warehouse

We inspire confidence

"Always engaging conversations with plenty of coloured pens, we found the insights from every meeting invaluable, and asked Totem to run various workshops for our L&D team."

Totem have taken the time to understand our business and deliver learning that really sticks and challenges people's thinking. "

Global Head of Talent, World Duty Free Group.