

Applying Neuroscience to Change – November 2014

With so much organisational change, you'd think companies would have learned to do it better. Yet most senior managers admit that the many change initiatives fail because cultural and communication issues are mishandled. So what is the central challenge? And how can a broad brush understanding of neuroscience equip communicators do to help an organisation move forward?

At the most recent Comma Partners networking event, senior communicators gathered to listen to Ellen Hake explain how, as communicators, we can use neuroscience research to analyse and support organisations through change. Hake, who completed a Post-Graduate Programme with the Neuroleadership Institute to support her 25 years of experience as a communications professional, works with large corporates in analysing, planning and executing successful change based on how the human brain deals with change. With her customary 'light touch' Hake was quickly able to help the audience understand WHY some of the things we already know about communication work from a brain-based point of view. For example:

- Participation and involvement help people manage change successfully
- People are biologically hard-wired to be threatened by change
- When threatened, people are less able to focus, to use their higher-level thinking and to solve problems through insight
- Managing change is not a one-off event or communication; it requires time and repetition
- Let people know as much as you can as soon as you can
- People are more likely to trust leaders if they communicate in plain language

Hake told us: "The underlying reason why change is so hard is based on evolution. Our brains are wired to recognise that anything different is potentially dangerous to us. Today, 'different' isn't the rustling in the bushes of a sabre toothed tiger about to attack and, while rarely a matter of life or death, organisational change is more likely to mean uncertainty, rejection, loss of autonomy and the challenge of learning new things. What neuroscience shows us is that our brains react to these social threats as if they threatened our survival."

Katie O'Brien, an interim communications consultant who works often in frantic change environments explained: "I've always tried hard to anticipate how things will land with wider audiences and find ways of plugging change teams into the bigger picture, rather than the immediate tactical scene. Context, I suppose. It is such a relief to see that science can back up what some people see as the internal comms 'fluffy' agenda to get people in the know. It turns out to be a basic human need and one that is born out of a fundamental flight or flight instinct:



danger ahead, there's no way I can concentrate on my day-to-day job while all this is going on around me.”

Five reasons why change is so hard – the neuroscience bit

- 1. Habit versus higher-level thinking.** It has been estimated that we run 45% of our lives by habit – the way we drive to work, the way we run a meeting or do anything that we repeat often enough. Anything different requires us to use more of our prefrontal cortex – our higher-level thinking processes. This part of the brain uses up a lot of energy (oxygen and glucose) and tires quickly – it's a very good reason to tackle the tough work stuff early in the day! The brain prefers things that are easy to process – and we tend to trust things that are easier to process. For example, stocks with easy to pronounce names (Walter as opposed to Zbrffkik) regularly outperform stocks with complex names. Hake's own research showed that leaders who write in plain language are viewed as significantly more trustworthy and more capable of leading change.
- 2. The brain's two objectives.** The brain's has two key objectives, according to the integrative Neuroscientist Evian Gordon: Minimise Threat, Maximise Reward. The brain is constantly scanning for potential danger – and anything different can register as a threat. This is what triggers the 'fight or flight' reaction – creating stress in individuals and generally lowering their productivity and ability to use high-level thinking and solve problems through insights. Change sets off an 'error' or 'danger' signal in the brain, triggering the body's fear circuitry to 'fight, flee or freeze' – rather than business as usual. While a change might represent potential benefits, the brain is more attuned to negatives since paying attention to negatives is more important for survival.
- 3. Social pain.** Organisational change is a major source of psychological threat – changes in status, relationships, certainty and the sense of having control over our lives. From a neuroscience point of view, these are some of the main sources of 'social pain', and social pain actually activates the same brain networks as physical pain. The brain reacts to social pain (rejection, loss of status...) as if it threatened your survival because, evolutionarily, losing your place in the tribe was a death sentence. Your higher-level thinking processes recognise that these changes won't kill you – but your brain can react as though they might – because evolutionarily, they might have.



4. **Neuroplasticity.** Neuroplasticity means that everything you think and do changes the structure of your brain. This has led to the saying, ‘neurons that fire together, wire together.’ To illustrate, it takes London taxi drivers two to four years to memorise 25,000 streets and 20,000 locations in order to be licensed (BBC, 2011). Scanning the taxi drivers’ brains before and after found evidence of greater neuron development in the area of the hippocampus linked to skilled navigation (Maguire et al., 2006). On the other hand, you don’t see this kind of development in the brains of London bus drivers, because they only learn one or two routes. You can change thinking patterns and behaviours that are hard wired through repetition, but it takes a lot of time and effort. That’s why people need to build time and repetition into change management – a one-time event and a single training session won’t change how people think or operate.
5. **Cognitive dissonance.** People hate to be wrong. It’s threatening to the brain because if you make wrong decisions and have the wrong information in some situations, you could die. Being wrong generates ‘cognitive dissonance’ - the psychological discomfort we feel when our beliefs, attitudes and behaviours are in conflict. Change can feel as though were wrong before – and being wrong feels like a blow to our sense of status. We need to change something to eliminate the discomfort, and it might be easier to change your thinking, as in “This company is too demanding,” rather than changing your behaviour. In organisations, when you change something, whether the structure of the company or the processes you use, the implication is that what you were doing before is wrong.

So, in short, the brain is hard-wired to resist change. But what does this mean for communicators and organisations going through change?

Applying the science to the day job

There is no question that organisational change is a major source of psychological threat with changes in status, relationships, certainty and the sense of having control over our lives.

In applying neuroscience to change, Hake suggests four key areas to focus on:

- A. Giving people a sense that they have some control or choice
- B. Increasing their sense of status and value
- C. Using repetition and support over long period of time
- D. Increasing certainty: what, when, where, who and why.



Mark Hill, a communications consultant who has worked on major change projects in a number of industries, commented: “As experienced communicators we know what approaches deliver the outcomes we want and the neuroscience and psychological research now available helps us develop an approach with the suitable tools and processes to support people through change. In all my projects, I’m particularly keen to find ways to give everyone involved some degree of control or choice. In one office move situation, this was as simple as being allowed to choose their own chairs and the colours of the walls, and in a cost-cutting situation, staff were able to choose from a menu of items which ones would be taken away. These seem small things perhaps, but enabling your wider workforce to have a voice is enormously powerful. To do this, leaders need to see the benefit of giving up a bit of their control, and the science behind it enables me to make more effective arguments for doing so.”

And O’Brien picks up on the point that leaders hold the key to a successful change outcome: “What resonates for me most at the moment is the instinct for leaders to hug knowledge to themselves, nominally to prevent unrest and disaffection. They are genuinely surprised that the lack of sharing causes, not respect and a nod to leadership, but rather resentment that they hold the answers to ‘the future state’ and the ‘unknown’ which is making their people so uncomfortable. If you keep people in the dark, neuroscience says they will panic and create scenarios for themselves that are sometimes bigger and more scary than the real situation.”

In times of uncertainty and change – as most organisations are today – empathetic managers are more successful. There is plenty of research to show that people trust leaders/managers more who are empathetic and pay attention to their staff. Such leaders, perhaps unwittingly, understand the neuroscience behind successful change communication and work hard to increase certainty. O’Brien again: “A good practical example of where I’ve witnessed leadership behaviour that is (unintentionally) misguided is in resistance to repeating messages about why the change is happening. I have had constant rebuttals along the lines of: ‘we’ve told them this’; ‘they’ve got the picture’; ‘they are not stupid, they can see things need to be different’. But repetition and reassurance emerges as something that our brain needs, way before consultation and involvement can become effective.”

Karen Kimberley agrees: “Ellen made some interesting points that back up scientifically what we’ve been doing all along as communicators. For example she spoke about the need to repeat messages to increase certainty as the brain is hard-wired to resist change. Even though there may not be anything new to say it’s important to keep reassuring people otherwise as soon as there’s a news vacuum the brain makes something up to fill the gap, that may not be true and rumours begin to proliferate.”



If people are focused on the threat and protecting themselves, they are not focused on helping the change succeed. What we know from neuroscience gives us some clues to help analyse what exactly employees may find threatening and enable us to minimise those threats. A useful tool to analyse the most common social threats is the SCARF model, developed by Dr David Rock, which summarises the threat/reward areas of Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relationships and Fairness.

Status: Will people see a potential change to their job, responsibilities, titles or pay? Will they see themselves as winners or losers? Better or worse off than others? Will they lose face?

Certainty: What are the things they can no longer count on – pay structure, raises, pension plan, what they will do, what will happen to the way they work?

Autonomy: Will I have less freedom or less control over what I do or how I do it? Are other people making decisions without my input?

Relationships: Will I lose colleagues? Will they resent me? Will I have to work with different people? Will I be part of the ‘in-group’? How does my boss treat me? (Working with an empathic boss is a strong area of reward. When teams are motivated by reward rather than threat, they share more, feel more engaged, think and perform better.)

Fairness: Is the change process fair? Will people be evaluated based on merit or ‘whom they know’? Do ‘they’ understand my role in order to value it correctly? Whose fault is it? Why do I have to suffer?

When designing change programmes it’s useful for leaders to consider how they might minimise these areas of threat and as communicators we can set up ways to decrease the strength of threat responses – such as listening sessions, two-way communications and coaching leaders to respond appropriately.

But Samira Ashraf, an internal communications consultant and change communications specialist, offers a word of caution: “As a model it’s very helpful. But it does not do the whole job. It can help us define our different audiences, and it can help us to focus on key areas of threat, but for communicators it is our job to synthesise the model and work with each group to really understand how the potential threat varies from person to person, from function to function. It requires a great deal of listening. It takes a great deal of time. Having said that,



knowing that so much of what we recommend is fully backed up by science gives us much greater credibility and objectivity. ”

And Virginia Hicks of Comma partners summed it up for us: “It’s good news for interim communicators that the latest neuroscience research supports much of what we know from experience or instinct or study,” she said. “This can give interims additional confidence in their recommendations, and sometimes leaders will pay more attention if you can say that it is based on scientific research.”

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Article was published by [simply_communicate](#) on 21 November, see link: <http://bit.ly/1As6X0x>

