



# THE LINK BETWEEN LEADERSHIP AND THE BRAIN

## How Emotions Drive Behavior

A few years ago, anyone who's held a leadership position may have been surprised to discover just how much what they do is driven not by intellect, but by emotion. Yet, in the last few years, the neuropsychology and neurophysiology research has made the compelling case that, as humans, we feel before we think. And, given that we are all wired to pay close attention to the people who hold the most power in the room, leaders have begun to realize the critical impact that emotions—theirs and others—play in determining their success as leaders, and therefore, the success of their organizations.

In most organizations, the tendency has been to appoint business leaders or managers on the basis of technical expertise and knowledge. The findings represented in *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence* (HBS Press 2002) by Dan Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee, demonstrate that leaders and managers appointed solely on the basis of IQ and technical competency, more often than not, lack the necessary emotional competencies to enable them to lead and/or manage effectively. **In fact, the greatest difference between average and high performing leaders can be attributed competencies related to emotional intelligence.**

Technical expertise and knowledge is the required baseline, but it is not enough.

<b>Brain Center</b>	<b>Controls</b>	<b>Design</b>
Limbic System (Emotional Brain)	emotions, impulses, and drives	primitive order of brain cells means learning occurs slowly but is retained longer
Neocortex (Thinking Brain)	purely technical abilities like IQ, technical know- ledge, and business expertise	highly efficient learning machine for analytical and technical skills, but not efficient for learning and retaining EI leadership skills



## **Emotions are the driver when...**

### **We rely on old habits to make decisions and live our lives.**

The brain largely masters the competencies of leadership—everything from self-confidence and emotional self-management to empathy and persuasion—through implicit learning, which occurs in the emotional brain. In the case of leadership, a primitive section of the brain picks up and masters the habits we constantly rely on, continually learning how to perform the basic tasks of our lives—everything from stringing a sentence together to how to putt to running an effective meeting.

### **We alter someone's mood just by being around them.**

Recent neurological studies have shown that human emotions operate along an open system in the body that relies on *connections with other people* to manage itself. Studies have repeatedly shown that emotions spread irresistibly whenever people are near each other, even when contact is completely nonverbal. This contagious quality of emotions has particular implications for the perceived leader in a given situation. In studies where leaders were observed in groups, the other individuals in the room watched the leader more closely, concurred most readily with the leader's ideas, and ultimately "caught" the leader's mood.

### **We're able to empathize with a person who needs understanding and help.**

The ability to empathize, in its most basic form, stems from neurons in extended circuitry connected to and in the emotional brain that read another person's face and voice for emotion. These neurons continually attune us to how someone else feels when we speak to them, and the circuitry sends out a steady stream of bulletins which the emotional brain areas use to fine-tune what we say or do next.

### **We feel like we're "on the same wavelength" with someone.**

Circuitry in the emotional brain attunes our own biology to the dominant range of feelings of the person we are with, so that our emotional states tend to converge. Scientists call this neural attunement "limbic resonance." But it's essentially what we mean when we say we're "in synch" or "on the same wavelength."

### **We get a "gut feeling" about something.**

When we face a complex decision that goes beyond the data at hand, the emotional brain activates circuitry that runs from the limbic centers into the gut—giving us the compelling sense that "this feels right." A section of the brain called the *amygdala* lets us know its conclusions primarily through circuitry extending into the gastrointestinal tract that literally creates a "gut feeling." This very real form of intuition offers leaders a direct pipeline to their accumulated life wisdom on a topic.

### **We sometimes act impulsively in the face of fear or stress.**

The thinking brain evolved from the limbic brain and continues to take orders from it when we perceive a threat or are under stress. Emotional impulses follow extensive circuitry that goes from the *amygdala* up to the thinking brain, just behind the forehead. This *prefrontal area* receives and analyzes information from all parts of the brain, then makes a decision about what to do. When this circuitry is working correctly—in other words, when a person has high emotional intelligence—the prefrontal area can veto an impulse from the emotional brain and so ensure that a response will be more effective. But when this circuitry fails—when anxiety is able to



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debilitate the brain’s ability to understand and respond effectively—the result is an “emotional hijack.” We act on impulse, and decision-making is crippled.

**We make quick, decisive decisions on a dime.**

Whenever we face decisions, we actually draw on a lifetime of silent learning, often without realizing we’re doing it. Cumulative learning takes place in a primitive part of the emotional brain called the *basal ganglia*—it’s where our “life wisdom” is extracted and stored via experience. In addition, the circuitry involved in puzzling decisions involves the *amygdala*, where the brain stores the emotions associated with our memories. So when a course of action suddenly “occurs” to us—it is delivered by the part of the brain that wields our feelings.

**We feel motivated to accomplish a difficult goal.**

There is a neural pathway in the emotional brain that is responsible for reminding us how satisfied we’ll feel when we accomplish a goal, helping to keep us motivated and moving in a positive direction. This neural pathway pumps out a stream of good feelings as we do work we feel passion for. It’s also responsible for quieting the feelings of frustration or worry that might discourage us from continuing toward a goal, helping us to take setbacks, frustrations, and failures in stride.

(Source: *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee; Harvard Business School Press; 2002)