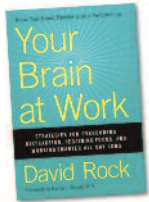




CHANGING OUR MINDS—LITERALLY

BY MICHAEL MCKINNEY



Your Brain at Work
by David Rock

David Rock says, “Your capacity to change yourself, change others, and even change the world, may boil down to how well you know your brain, and your capacity to consciously intervene in otherwise automatic processes.” His book *Your Brain at Work: Strategies for Overcoming Distraction, Regaining Focus, and Working Smarter All Day Long* (HarperBusiness, 2009) helps give you the terminology you need to understand the everyday brain functions we experience.

The book tells the story of Emily and Paul, the parents of two children. Emily is a newly promoted executive in a large corporation, while Paul has his own business as a consultant. We travel inside Emily and Paul’s brains as they attempt to sort the vast quantities of information they’re presented with, figure out how to prioritize it, organize it, and act on it. Woven into the story are 14 different challenges we all face like overwhelming email, multi-tasking, distractions, roadblocks, uncertainty, and relationships.

Rock looks at the tasks Emily and

Paul face, how they handle them, and then discusses what research says about what the brain is trying to do in each situation. Concluding each chapter is a “*Take Two*” section. Here we get to see how they might have handled things differently with the brain in mind. It is amazing how just small changes in how we do a task or view a situation can have dramatic effects on our well-being, resolve, and productivity.

Doing the Right Tasks at the Right Time and in the Right Way

There is a lot to learn here. For example, our conscious thinking brain resources, located in the prefrontal region, are less plentiful than we might think. We are only at our best from a brain perspective for a small part of the day, and we often don’t use these resources wisely, wasting them on low-level activities like answering e-mail. What we need to do is to *develop a greater degree of cognitive control*.

People who seem to have frequent insights do not do so by focusing harder on the problem; instead they have learned to *switch off their thinking*—to access a quieter mind on demand. Having insights involves hearing subtle signals and allowing loose connections to be made by letting the brain idle with minimal electrical activity.

Being Cool Under Pressure

Rock says we also get emotions wrong. Controlling our emotions is important because it maximizes our brain resources. Our emotional experience is connected to a large brain network called the limbic system. When the limbic system gets overly aroused, it reduces the resources available for the prefrontal cortex functions we use in decision making and problem solving. But when we get emotional, we don’t

usually handle it in the best way.

We have three options: express them, suppress them, or change them. Expressing or suppressing them rarely helps and often only makes things worse. Brain research has shown that changing how we think about our emotions is the best course. This strategy has two components: labeling for most situations and reappraisal for the most intense situations.

Labeling is being able to summarize emotions symbolically so they don’t take over. This activates the prefrontal cortex and decreases the emotional limbic system—much like a seesaw works. Rock adds, “Describe an emotion in a word or two, and it helps reduce the emotion. Open up a dialogue about an emotion, though, and you tend to increase it.”

In more intense and ongoing situations, **cognitive reappraisal** works best to regulate emotions. Reappraisal involves deciding to look at the situation differently—to create a different meaning from what you are experiencing and find a different interpretation that will empower you and reflect your goals. Rock suggests you can reappraise by reinterpreting an event, reordering your values, normalizing an event, or repositioning your perspective. The work of James Gross that Rock cites is helpful in understanding the brain activity involved in managing our emotions.

SCARF Model

Rock introduces the *SCARF model* to summarize the five social domains that drive human behavior:

- Status,
- Certainty,
- Autonomy,
- Relatedness, and
- Fairness.

TEAM TIP

The next time your team is struggling to come up with a solution to a problem, instead of continuing to brainstorm solutions, go for a walk. You’ll be surprised how often new insights will follow.

Status is probably the most significant driver in our lives and is easily threatened. Rock points out, “When everyone is trying to be higher status than others there is a decrease in relatedness.”

He continues, “Because we perceive ourselves using the same circuits we use when perceiving others, you can trick your brain into a status reward by playing against yourself.... To play against yourself gives you the chance to feel ever-increasing status, without threatening others.”

The SCARF model can help both generally and individually. “Many great leaders,” writes Rock, “understand intuitively that they need to work hard to create a sense of safety in others. In this way, great leaders are often humble

leaders, thereby reducing the status threat. Great leaders provide clear expectations and talk a lot about the future, helping to increase certainty.

By changing seemingly minute brain functioning, we can create life-changing results in our lives.

Great leaders let others take charge and make decisions, increasing autonomy. Great leaders often have a strong presence, which comes from working hard to be authentic and real with other people, to create a sense of relatedness.

And great leaders keep their promises, taking care to be perceived as fair.”

Out of all of this research comes the realization that by changing seemingly minute brain functioning, we can create life-changing results in our lives. Shifts in your brain’s energy flow can translate into new behaviors and better responses to what we face each day. The thing is, the more we understand our brain, the better we can label both the experiences going on in our life and in our brain and, in turn, begin to activate different brain functions as needed and better adapt to our changing environment. ■

Michael McKinney is president of LeadershipNow. This article first appeared on the Leading: Building a Community of Leaders Blog and is reprinted with permission.