



Hearts, Guts & Minds

HOW OUR MULTIPLE BRAINS MAKE FOR GREAT LEADERS

By Carlos Davidovich, M.D., MBA and Suzanne Hood, Ph.D.

In our current age of rapid change, strong leadership skills have never been more valuable. Many words come to mind when thinking of an ideal leader: rational, logical, decisive, single-minded. But how true is this ideal image? The latest findings from neuroscience would suggest otherwise. In fact, new research is providing support for old ideas that great leaders think not just with their brains, but with their hearts and guts, too. Making the

most of these ideas is key to advancing the field of leadership coaching.

MULTIPLE BRAINS

Usually, we think of our brains as a kind of CEO, an executive entity at the top of our physical hierarchy that issues commands to subordinates below. But increasingly, we are discovering that our physical sensations and emotions unconsciously influence the rational thinking and

decision-making of this executive. To illustrate how profoundly this information affects our thinking and behaviour, we can think of ourselves as having multiple brains, each of which responds to different types of information:

Our left and right cerebral hemispheres are specialized to perform different tasks, leading to the idea that we have two brains; our left brain prefers language, reasoning and linear thinking, whereas our

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right brain excels at processing creative and holistic information.

In the course of our evolution, we have developed three brains. Although the newest of these, the neocortex, controls our conscious thinking abilities, like reason and focused attention, the other two, evolutionarily older brains, are attuned

to social and emotional information: the reptilian brain values information about survival, sex and safety, whereas the limbic brain is in charge of our motivations and emotions.

Another brain resides in our hearts. The heart contains neurons, the same type of cells as those found in the brain.

Activity in our heart-brain is tied to our emotional states and affects activity in our CEO brain, giving substance to the adage, “What does your heart tell you?”

Yet another brain is in our stomach and bowels. This gut-brain contains as many neurons as contained in the spinal cord, and monitors our internal state and emotional status – our “gut feelings.” Not only is the gut brain the body’s largest producer of serotonin, a brain chemical closely linked with happiness, our gut brain is keenly active when we are faced with challenging or risky situations.

“I THINK, THEREFORE I LEAD – RIGHT?”

What does this all mean for those in leadership roles? Clearly, our neural hardware is as sensitive to social and emotional cues as to facts and figures that we consciously analyze. Crucially, more than 50 per cent of the information received by our CEO brain is channelled through our emotional and gut brains. This means that those in leadership roles must integrate the activity of this network of brains to meet performance expectations; not only do we need our rational brains to set strategies, but also our emotional brains to engage

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effectively with others and our gut brains to take risks when faced with challenges.

What does this mean for those who coach leadership? Improving leadership skills means encouraging the ability to integrate this information. By developing this ability, managers can make better-informed decisions as a result. However, a roadblock to improving this ability is our innate tendency to dismiss information from our emotional brains. We all know the unease we've experienced when the team goes ahead with a decision, even though we feel in our gut that another strategy would be better. Yet, we usually hold back from voicing our dissent because we can't find the words to justify our feelings. Under the pressures of the business world, we are quick to overrule our fast, but non-verbal emotional brains when we are unable to immediately express our

feelings using the language of our rational brains. Put simply, we are unwilling to take the time to translate these sensations.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP COACHING

Until recently, best practices in leadership have called for impartiality and rationality in making tough decisions. But according to the perspective described here, our visceral and emotional responses play a fundamental role in influencing our thoughts and behaviours. How, then, does this affect leadership coaching?

As an HR professional tasked with coaching leaders in your organization, encourage your executives to develop insight into their emotional brains using the following strategies:

- Build confidence in listening to our guts and hearts. They are educated advisors

that only grow wiser over a career of varied experiences and challenges.

- Pay attention to social and emotional cues. These are critical for productive relationships with colleagues and subordinates.
- Practice taking time to “translate” the activity of our emotional brains into the language of our rational brains. Through repetition, expressing our gut reactions to others will become easier and faster.

Having insight into our multiple brains is key to training the leaders of today and tomorrow. With effective coaching, leaders can improve their ability to make decisions that are consistent with their hearts, guts and heads. ■

Carlos Davidovich, MD, MBA is vice president, Executive Coaching at Optimum Talent.

Suzanne Hood, Ph.D. is a scientific writer and editor.