

To foster change, understand how the brain works

Denver Business Journal - by Michael Higgins with Darrell Mullis

James reports to his boss today. He's worried. Hank has been irritated with recent reports. He's given James directions several times, but he makes the same mistakes over and over. "I'll just have to rewrite it again," Hank says, sighing.

When managers have people who make repetitive mistakes after being told multiple times how to do a task correctly, the situation can cause serious damage -- even end a relationship in which there may be many positives. But if Hank knew more about how the brain works, he could get what he wants from James and make his own job easier and more satisfying.

Why do people keep smoking when they know it is harmful? Why do people not wear seat belts when they know they could die without them? As Hank learned from James, information by itself doesn't create behavior change. When behavior change happens, it's usually driven by more than just knowledge or information.

So what drives behavior change? The answer lies in a study by Paul MacLean. His "Triune Brain Theory" states that humans have three-part brains.

He called the brain stem the Reptilian Brain. It maintains personal safety and performs unconscious functions such as heartbeat, blood flow, body temperature, food intake and waste disposal. The reptilian brain also is involved in social rituals such as like flocking and hoarding, and sexual activities such as flirting and primping.

Territoriality is reptilian behavior, as is dominance and submission -- the little dog rolling over for the big dog. What Hank doesn't realize is that his "big dog" behavior towards James makes James act like a "small dog." Small dogs write mediocre reports.

The need for bonding and nurturing requires a bigger brain, hence the development of what MacLean called the Limbic Brain. It makes behavior choice possible. It's the center of our emotions. What Hank doesn't know is that emotion, rather than

repetitive information, creates long-term memory and provides the meaningful context for behavioral change.

The third part of the brain is the Neo-Cortex, the thinking cap that gives humans our extraordinary capabilities. Instinct and emotion are the only language available to the Reptilian and Limbic brains, but our thinking caps have almost unlimited capacity for formal language and communication. Planning and strategy take place in the Neo-Cortex.

One problem for managers is that business overemphasizes the Neo-Cortex and forgets that humans also possess reptilian and limbic needs -- and won't be open to learning or changing behavior unless those needs are met. When Hank gives James a big challenge and doesn't balance the challenge with enough safety and meaning, he's setting them both up for failure.

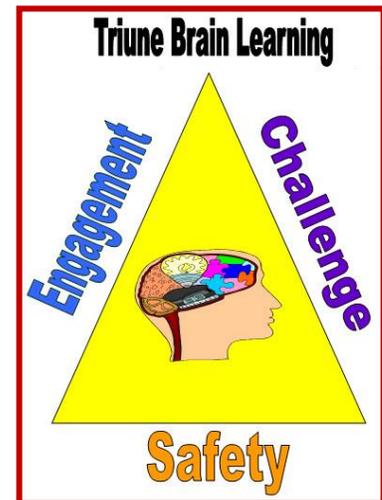
Think of our three brains as an equilateral triangle. The base represents the reptilian brain. For this "fight or flight" part of the brain, safety is paramount. Managers can attend to the reptilian brain by:

- Ensuring physical safety -- Allow time to eat and rejuvenate, install protective equipment in hazardous environments, maintain appropriate rules and limits.
- Fostering a safe environment to deal with embarrassment, humiliation and confrontation -- Make behavioral operating agreements around "how we treat each other." If the agreements are broken, correct them immediately.
- Make it easy for people to bring up safety issues at any level.

The left leg of the triangle represents the Limbic brain. Here, meaning is the driver. If workers find their jobs and daily activities personally meaningful and fulfilling, they'll work harder, longer and be more creative, and feel lucky to be at such a great company.

Managers can create meaning at work by:

- Sharing the big picture -- Why is our business important to the world, what real difference does it make, who does it help?
- Asking people's opinions and listening to what they say -- Letting someone else do the talking while you do the listening leads to more meaning for the person giving their opinion.
- Giving people an opportunity to say what they think, even if what they say is difficult to hear -- Once they believe it's safe to get it off their chests, people will experience a greater connection to the business and go out of their way to make it successful.



The right leg is the Neo-Cortex, where challenge is everything. The Neo-Cortex is a supercomputer with the capacity for making roughly 100 trillion calculations per second. The basic message from this part of the brain is "Don't bore me!" To ensure enough challenge, managers can:

- Create an environment where it's OK to take chances, make mistakes and fail.
- Don't solve problems for people in their areas of expertise. Ask good questions, help them with resources, then trust them to find and thoughtfully implement solutions you couldn't imagine.
- Let workers spend part of their time making up projects that make you money and ignite their passion.

Understanding the way people learn and how they choose to change behaviors, and giving them a safe and meaningful environment, will allow them to take on bigger challenges and provide any business with a valuable competitive advantage.