

## Change communication isn't brain surgery, but it's work

To successfully manage organizational change, we need to consider human nature

In his book *A Whole New Mind*, best-selling author Dan Pink writes that there is a disconnect between what science knows and what business does.

Well stated! For example, consider these five ways that many organizations often introduce change:

1. **The strong-arm approach:** muscling change through at any cost.
2. **The rational appeal:** explaining the reason for change in data and numbers.
3. **The “all hat and no cattle” style:** inspiring talk with little to no action.
4. **The silent type:** working under the radar to introduce the change before anyone notices.
5. **The herky-jerky move:** doing a combination of all of these and confusing people at every stage.

Why do these methods generally flop? They don't consider how our brains work. Whether we're engineers, finance types or communicators, our brains are more similar than different. Each of us has a rational side and an emotional side, which often fight with each other.

To communicate effectively, we must present evidence to the former and paint a picture for the latter. So, in talking with a large group of people—say, 10,000 employees—we're really trying to influence twice that: 10,000 rational brains and 10,000 emotional brains.

What's the point? To be successful influencers/communicators, we can't submit entirely to those who say, “Just share the facts. This is business communication.”

We also must stop playing funeral music, assuming the change journey is a passage of personal loss. As Theresa Welbourne, president and CEO of the human resources management firm eePulse, says, the grief models for explaining change worked well when change was an episodic event that had clear starting and stopping points. Today, when we're careening from one change to the next, we don't have the time to follow the grief cycle (shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance).

Instead, we need to consider what neuroscientists know about the brain. For example, in my work, I follow David Rock, who has developed a brain-based approach to executive coaching. He's collaborating with several leading neuroscientists to explain the neural basis of self-awareness, reflection, insight and accountability, all of which have a major impact on how leaders facilitate change, collaborate with others, stay cool under pressure, make decisions and solve problems.

In my role, I don't have to know how the prefrontal cortex, the limbic system and other brain elements work. However, I should know about the duality—and tension—between the rational and the emotional that exists in each person's head, from the CEO down to the frontline worker.

It's also important to know that the brain wants to minimize danger and maximize rewards. It's human nature to react more strongly to threats than to something pleasant. Our attention naturally gravitates toward the negative. Many of us prefer to wallow in the awful unless we make a special effort to change our interpretation of a situation, which the experts call *reappraisal*.

I was working recently with a top executive who was concerned that his span of control was decreasing. A number of his direct reports, as well as some of their staff members, were transferring to another joint venture. To him, this change represented a demotion, or at least a lack of confidence by his leaders. Yet the C-suite is betting the company on this leader and his team of technologists. They are providing this small, talented group with more resources so they can study specific issues to revitalize the company. After reappraising his situation and seeing the big picture, this executive got excited and started to share his enthusiasm with his team.

Those of us who are change agents need to view ourselves as a type of personal trainer for the brain. Through our careful use of appropriate language and actions, we help people learn how to think mindfully so they can better adapt to new situations. This isn't brain surgery, but it's fun, important work! •



### about the author

Liz Guthridge is the founder of Connect Consulting Group, which focuses on achieving clear and credible change. Guthridge works with communication professionals who want to become more strategic in their work, and with company department leaders who need to introduce complex initiatives to employees who are confused, angry or in denial about the change.

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