



COMMUNICATE CHANGE THE BRAIN-FRIENDLY WAY AND GET BETTER RESULTS

By Liz Guthridge

The way we communicate in work settings—especially about change—is often in direct conflict with what science now knows about the brain.

For example, recent research in neuroscience shows that the brain is less rational than we have believed, and also tires much faster than we ever dreamed. The brain also loves to make connections—with other people and other information—and look at pictures.

Yet, think about these five ways many organizations often introduce change:

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

These methods generally flop because they don't consider how our brains work. And if we continue to ignore the science, we increase the risk of contributing to failed or suboptimal change initiatives and weak business results.

In contrast, we tend to follow proven practices in other aspects of our work and life. For example, if you jumped in a body of water with the goal of swimming to the other side, you wouldn't stay at one end and tread water, would you? More than likely, you'd start swimming, even battling waves and the current, to get to your end goal.

So we need to embrace the science as we work to influence people to change their behavior. And in doing so, we need to acknowledge that each person's brain is different, yet there are many similarities. Regardless of whether we're engineers, finance types, or human resources professionals, each brain has a rational and an emotional side that often fight with each

other. This duality—and tension—between the rational and the emotional makes change so hard. We're dealing with our own internal conflicts.

If you're working as a change agent and champion, you have to keep in mind the number of brains you need to communicate with and influence. For example, when you're introducing change to a sizeable group of employees—say 3,500—you're really trying to influence double that: 3,500 rational and 3,500 emotional brains.

To connect effectively and make an impact, you must present evidence to the former and paint a picture for the latter. Yes, your communication must work on two levels: the emotional and the rational.

Also, all brains want to minimize danger and maximize rewards. It's the "fight or flight" tendency that's deep inside us. So it's human nature for people to react stronger to threats than to the pleasant, which is another reason why change is so hard. Our attention naturally gravitates toward the negative.

We need to stop feeding these feelings by playing funeral music and assuming the change journey is a passage of personal loss. As Theresa Welbourne, President/CEO of eePulse says, the grief models for explaining change worked well when change was an episodic event that had a clear starting and stopping point. Today when we're careening from one change to the next, it's not appropriate to follow the grief cycle of shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

We change ambassadors need to make a special effort to change our interpretation of a situation for people so they won't wallow in the awful. The experts call this "reappraisal." As much as possible, you position issues from the positive perspective rather than the negative—although you don't want to put lipstick on a pig, as the saying goes.

When you use reappraisal and paint a picture of the possibilities, you create a safety zone for people. Especially with encouragement and recognition, they'll start to think bigger, more creative thoughts and feel more self-assured and self-reliant in their ability to rise to the challenges facing them and their organization.



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Here's an example of how this looks, based on my work with one of my clients. As background, this company is eight months into a massive transformational change. The company is undertaking a wide range of actions but they're not yet seeing the results they want, especially on the financial front. With many fundamental changes now in place, the leaders believe they need to accelerate the speed of change, especially since the external marketplace and the competitors continue to move quickly.

To explain this to employees, the president took a different approach than he normally did, based on my counsel. He first thanked everyone for what they've been doing and acknowledged how far they've come. He noted specific actions that they've taken that serve as building blocks for the change and the company's new strategy.

The president then noted that they still have a long way to go. Then, he expressed his confidence that they can do it. He cited five reasons why he's confident: the healthy industry in which they work, the superior products they make, the loyal customers they have, the new company strategy, and the talented and committed employees. He then made his appeal for quickening the pace of change.

The reaction? A noticeable change in perception. In a survey of the top 100 leaders, conducted before they gathered for the meeting to learn the details of the accelerated pace, several of the participants commented that they were very tired and working with their "hair on fire." In the post-meeting survey, these same leaders said they were more confident in senior leaders, they felt empowered to lead the charge, and they had the tools and resources to move forward.

With the employee meeting and with other communication, too, we're trying to avoid information overload and clutter. All too often, the current practice many of us adopt is to try to crowd our brains—and others' brains—with information. Information needs to be interesting and useful, and preferably actionable. As one of my gurus says, "Information without action is clutter."

We're focused on crafting powerful, punchy messages that people will remember. We want to grab their attention so we can inspire and influence rather than bore or alienate them. We also are working on introducing involvement techniques that help people get on board with the change.

So, is this advice beginning to seem a bit overwhelming? Are you about to despair and drift to the dark side?

7 TIPS FOR BRAIN-FRIENDLY COMMUNICATION

- Name things—emotions, programs and goals.
- Be succinct, specific and solicitous.
- Be visual.
- Use metaphors.
- Be positive, but don't sugarcoat.
- Set deadlines.
- Help people slow down so they can go faster later.

Please think happy thoughts instead. You can follow these relatively simple seven tips to leverage the brain science. These tips apply a 100,000-foot overview of brain science—specifically, how our minds take in new information, process it, and decide what actions to take.

THE SEVEN TIPS ARE:

1. **Name things—emotions, programs, and goals.** When you put words to emotions or other things, you help the pre-frontal cortex conserve energy for other tasks. That means you help this brain region focus on what it does best—decision making, moderating correct social behavior, and orchestrating thoughts and actions.
2. **Be succinct, specific, and solicitous.** This can be hard to do when you're crafting and delivering the message because it means you first have to be clear about your intent. Then you have to develop a clear message that includes some specifics. Yet, from the standpoint of the receiver's brain a short message that has specific details rather than glittering generalities is easier to grasp and remember.
3. **Be visual.** The brain pays more attention to visuals than to sounds.
4. **Use metaphors.** Metaphors are fundamental to the brain. We use what we know about our physical space and social experiences to try to understand other subjects, especially new situations.
5. **Be positive, but don't sugarcoat.** When people are in a state that's positive rather than negative they are more open and curious to new things. By contrast, if they are in a negative state, they feel threatened and can shut down.
6. **Set deadlines.** The brain likes certainty, which in today's work world is in short supply. However,

giving deadlines is one way to provide a sense of certainty.

7. **Help people slow down so they can go faster later.** About 90 percent of our brain processing is unconscious. When people reduce external stimulus, sleep soundly and exercise, they help their unconscious brain function better. The unconscious brain works on problems, makes connections, and creates ah-ha moments.

You can apply these tips on your own. As you work with them, start viewing yourself as a type of personal trainer for the brain.

Through your work, you can help people use their brains better, which will help them adapt to new situations faster and easier.

You won't be doing brain surgery; however, you will be doing interesting, important work for people and their organizations. ■■

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