



Esther Cameron

Growing leadership maturity

Neuroscience 101 for leaders

Every week a new piece of scientific research is published that reveals yet more insights into what's going on in our bodies and minds, and how this impacts the way we act. This covers everything from finding out what leads to consistent high performance through to the study of happiness, personal growth and what it means to be human. These pockets of hard evidence have led to increased openness within the business world to new ideas about staying healthy in mind, body and spirit.

This article draws on research from the world of neuroscience, an ever-broadening discipline that connects biology, psychology, mathematics, engineering, linguistics and chemistry. Neuroscience is essentially the study of anything to do with the body's nervous system, how it develops and how this affects our thoughts and actions.

What is neuroscience telling us, and why does it matter?

Over the last 20 years, advances within neuroscience have revealed more hard evidence than ever before about what's actually going on in our bodies, and the implications of this. This evidence comes in the form of such things as brain scans, tissue analysis at a cellular level and new information about the way body chemicals such as hormones and neurotransmitters work.

All this new knowledge and insight is incredibly helpful when it comes to educating and training leaders. However, most leaders – and maybe some leadership developers, haven't yet got to grips with the implications of all of this, perhaps preferring to stay with what they know and trust. So most traditional leadership programmes are only just beginning wake up to all of this.

As a first step for some, though perhaps familiar to others, here are five key ways in which leaders can help their teams to stay healthy in body, mind and spirit. This list is backed up by recent neuroscience research, which you can follow-up in detail via the links below, and in conjunction with others studies via



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[Essential Leadership \(Kogan Page, 2017\)](#).

1. Understand the basics about the body

It's important that leaders understand, and role model at least some of the [proven basics](#) about how to treat your own body. Sufficient sleep, healthy nutrition, good hydration, regular exercise and the practice of deep breathing to oxygenate the brain all have positive, measurable effects on performance at work. Avoiding too much caffeine and alcohol helps too.

Creating a climate that encourages people to take time out to eat decent food, [drink plenty of fluids as they work](#), take exercise even if just a few stretches every hour, not work too late or obsessively, etc. can be incredibly helpful.

Warning: Be careful not to turn any of this into a punishing regime, which is likely to create anxiety and resentment.

2. Recognise all three 'brains'

[Research completed 20 years ago](#), evidences the existence of three fully functioning neural networks. So rather than just relying on the brain in our heads as often thought, we also have two additional complex, independent neural centres to serve us. These reside in the heart and the belly.

All three networks are capable of learning and remembering, and all three can affect our sensations and actions. These three 'brains' need good care if people are to perform well: the head flourishes when things are clear and make sense; the heart thrives on trusting relationships and emotional connection; and the belly benefits from time to digest complex experiences before taking robust action.

Leaders need to be aware of how complex we are as humans, and consider what they need to do to support everyone's head, heart and belly thriving. This means continuously making good sense, building a



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climate of trust and engagement, and appreciating the need for reflective time, particularly in a complex or high pressure setting.

Some say that it is this healthy alignment of the three centres that enables our human spirit to thrive.

Warning:

If a leader's own head, heart and belly are not in good order, this can trigger significant difficulties for others! (see below)

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3. Build a climate of trust and care

Without trust, it’s difficult to inspire and motivate people. If people feel trusting of their leader, [research indicates](#) that their bodies release a calming hormone that helps them to relax and speak more openly. This only happens if the team senses that a leader is truly wishing to support their success.

Fear, on the other hand, is a ‘survival’ emotion and can restrict the brain’s capacity to do anything except focus on this. So leaders who engender some fear or anxiety in their people, consciously or not, can expect a reduction in their team’s creativity, innovation, learning and relationship building. Expressing anger, breaking promises or criticizing people in public are all leadership actions that can trigger various levels of fear in followers. Sometimes this is unconscious and needs to be brought into awareness by a coach, or a friendly bystander.



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Warning: It's good to bring care to the way meetings are convened and run, and to the way 1:1 discussions are done. This builds trust. However it's not helpful to 'over-care' for people such that they become infantilized and stop taking responsibility for making decisions, taking action, speaking up or asking for help.

4. Actively support learning

Neuroplasticity, a new concept from neuroscience, indicates that with **focus, practice and reward** we can learn almost anything we want to. This is great news for organisations facing significant change, and needing people to learn new skills.

The trick is that people have to *want* to learn. So to get the best results out of the team, leaders need to: i) help their people to get clear about what they need to learn; ii) support them to understand the consequences of not learning; iii) help them create space for practice and iv) encourage them to seek good quality feedback.

Warning: Once you've clarified the task and offered good quality support, if people continue to refuse to be open to learning and have been given a chance to say what's getting in the way, there isn't much more you can do to help.

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5. Establish your own self-care routines

Leadership can be a stressful and lonely experience at times, so it's incredibly important that leaders learn how to care for themselves.

Heroic images of mythically strong leaders who act alone, and never run out of energy and enthusiasm, are not helpful. We're all human, and we all need care and downtime to ensure we are resourced.

This is all rarely spoken about openly, so when people struggle with sleep, nighttime anxiety, concentration difficulties, a sense of pointlessness, these are signs that self-care needs to be prioritized, with some urgency. It's not about weakness, and is definitely not a source of shame. I have known too many people who have struggled with this, including myself.

Warning: If any of these symptoms seem to apply to you, one of the best things you can do is find someone you trust, who you know cares for your well-being, and talk about it. Long walks and exercise can help too. [Leadership coaching from a skilled person](#) can also be useful if you are in a position to access this.

Implications for leadership training

The five pieces of advice above may seem clear enough, and well-evidenced, yet they represent quite a stretch for many aspiring leaders. In this complex age with increasing levels of fragmentation and instability, leaders need to get better at looking after themselves, as well as understanding what it takes to build a trusting, healthy working environment. The sooner the above learnings can be embedded in



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leadership programmes by skillful trainers, the better!

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A version of this article also appeared in [TrainingZone](#) on 30th May 2017