You! The Positive Force In Change
Leveraging Insights from Neuroscience and Positive Psychology

Eileen Rogers and Nick van Dam
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Take-Aways

- To boost your resilience, flexibility and health, make “positivity” a habit.
- Mindfulness unclutters the mind and helps you appreciate the beauty of the moment.
- Neuroscience reveals what motivates people and how leaders should manage their employees.
- Good leaders harness social and emotional intelligence for better decision making.
- No one can be good at everything; “Strengths Assessments” can reveal individual talents. To increase employee engagement, give people work that fits their strengths.
- Organizations should create opportunities for “flow” – immersive fulfillment derived from stimulating work.
- Without trust, all transactions become more complex, fragile and expensive.
- A problem-focused approach to management creates a negative “deficit strategy.”
- A manager’s “appreciative coaching” accepts participants’ normal fears about change and fully values their contributions to the organization’s “change initiatives.”
- People do their best work when leaders create a culture of trust and optimism.
Relevance

What You Will Learn
In this summary, you will learn: 1) How neuroscience informs the study of leadership; 2) Why positive, mindful management tactics work better than “carrot and stick” or “command and control” strategies; and 3) How fear of change affects individual and organizational well-being.

Review
The human brain is wired to resist change. Leadership experts Eileen Rogers and Nick van Dam cite its reaction to change, the “fear factor,” as a root cause of organizational and personal failure. They advocate using a positive, evidence-based approach to management as an empathetic alternative to old-style authoritarianism. This strategy can help managers allay the fear of change that locks people in place and prevents them from considering important issues logically. The process of neuroplasticity helps the brain form the new connections people need to deal with novel situations, but it works best amid “mindful” calmness. A negative state of mind is contagious and breeds inflexibility, but positivity can help leaders and their employees handle change. Although the book refers to many touchstone findings in brief, and moves quickly on, the need to lead with optimism and emotional inclusion emerges as its main message. getAbstract suggests the authors’ insights and methods to progressive managers making the transition to a more consultative, “emotionally intelligent” approach to leading change.

Summary

Leadership for Meaning and Purpose
Leaders can harness insights from neuroscience and psychology to broaden the meaning of work and to make it more fulfilling for their employees. Leaders need flexibility, positivity and understanding to prevent demotivation from blighting their workforce. If they discuss change openly, positively and inclusively, leaders can prevent fear and disruption. They should channel their “moments of leadership” both for their firm’s good and for social good. Businesses must act differently in the 21st century; leading-edge management now includes such concepts as “not just for profit” and “ethical capitalism.”

Modern cognitive science is quickly taking apart old “command and control” approaches to management. Leaders tend to be either “dissonant” or “resonant,” according to organizational theorist Richard Boyatzis. Old-style rigid leadership is dissonant and top-down; modern consultative, empathetic leadership is resonant. Emotional intelligence is central to resonant leadership. Good leaders recognize that the hierarchical work structures of the 20th century are unsustainable. In light of modern insights about what really motivates people, savvy leaders instill meaning and purpose in their employees.

What Your Brain Is Doing
Even in adulthood, your brain remains amazingly “plastic”; you can master new skills throughout your life. The brain’s neuroplasticity enables you to learn. For instance, even if you tended toward negativity in the past, you can learn to adopt a positive approach to change. Using mindfulness training and its techniques, you and those you lead can break out of the damaging mental inflexibility caused by negative “feedback loops.”

When a change issue arises, the brain’s automatic response is to perceive it as a problem or barrier. The brain tends towards negativity, because change can seem threatening. In
evolutionary terms, change often involved real danger. Big change is not easy, painless or risk-free. Approaching change with a positive mind-set may take self-discipline, since a person’s level of optimism or pessimism about change is genetically determined. That genetic coding is, in the words of the late computer scientist Randy Pausch, author of the *The Last Lecture*, the “cards you are dealt.” However, you can train your brain to reframe problems and view them positively.

Everyone explains difficult issues to him- or herself and infers conclusions. Optimists reach for a different style of explanation than pessimists. Optimists handle bad circumstances by believing “that their troubles are transient, controllable and specific to that one situation.” The pessimist tends to see failures as symptoms of deep-seated personal weaknesses; the optimist sees failures as temporary and superficial. Psychologist Martin Seligman, author of *Authentic Happiness*, highlights the way optimists’ “explanatory style” contributes positively to their health and success, noting that pessimistic styles have equally strong negative correlations. Positive self-explanation leads to positive thinking and positive results. Individuals and organizations both can tap into this virtuous loop to become more resilient in the face of adversity.

**Mindfulness**

When you multitask, your brain cannot properly focus on any single task, and stress indicators – such as brain cortisol production – rise. Even though you need to focus, it’s nearly impossible to direct your attention and feel engaged when your mind is fretful and cluttered. You can’t fully appreciate the abundant but fleeting beauty in the world if you are not present “in the moment.” Practicing mindfulness centers your thinking in the present, soothes stress and reduces the mind’s tendency to ping-pong between thoughts of past and future in a chaotic, unfocused way.

According to the US Military Academy, “volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity” (VUCA) characterize the modern era. Given that, it’s little wonder that people spend so much time in “fight or flight” mode, with the amygdala – the “fear center” of the brain – running in overdrive. Mindfulness can reduce this self-damaging state of mind.

Affective neuroscience – the neural study of how emotion works – reveals that the brain’s fast-acting amygdala can “hijack” your feelings when you are upset. Take cognitive steps, such as counting to 10, to hold off that reaction after something makes you feel angry or tense. Strong emotions can cloud your judgment, leading to poor decision making. Be aware that your stressed mood can infect the mood of your whole organization.

Psychologist and author Howard Gardner teaches that in addition to IQ, people have “multiple intelligences,” including social intelligence and emotional intelligence. When leaders exercise genuine emotional intelligence and show that they understand their staffers as individual people, they generate a shared sense of personal value. To find out what motivates the people you manage, ask them openly and empathetically.

**Core Strengths, Hidden Strengths**

Synaptic pruning begins in the brain starting at around age three. Little-used neurons dissipate, but the networks of neurons you use the most survive through adolescence into adulthood, forming your core skills. The saying that you can be great at anything you set your mind to is flawed because everyone loses some of that childhood mental flexibility. Your core skills dominate. But, thanks to neuroplasticity, you can still form new networks of neural connections and acquire new skills, strengths and values as an adult.
Some personal strengths are obvious; some are hidden. For your company to achieve its full potential, you need to draw upon all the strengths your workforce offers. Assessment tools like the Gallup StrengthsFinder and the Capp Realise2 help people identify “signature strengths” that could otherwise go untapped. Identifying such abilities is not about exploiting them to boost shareholder returns; it’s about increasing employees’ engagement and job satisfaction. People love to do what they are good at, so they need to know what that is. Once they identify their strengths, they can work with their leaders to sculpt job descriptions that both parties value. This also benefits the company because it prevents costly disengagement and disruptive staff turnover.

**Nurturing “Flow”**
When you become immersed while engaging in an enjoyable task, you are in a state of flow. You are so in tune with your task that you lose track of time. Too many of the meaningless chores organizations assign to employees don’t foster flow. Some CEOs, including Douglas Conant of Campbell’s Soup, recognize that employees increasingly want their work to have meaning so they can engage with it fully. They need a mission. For instance, Conant involved Campbell’s employees in meeting ambitious targets to make the company more eco-friendly, resulting in drastically reduced water consumption and greenhouse gas emissions.

Engagement is a two-way process. Corporations can’t create a sense of community from the top down. Employees have a duty to find flow in their jobs and their employers should be aware enough to help them achieve it. Lack of employer awareness fuels “quit and stay” employees who cost a lot of money but contribute little heart. A job can become a “calling” only when workers feel stimulated and enlivened. A mindful employer helps every person find his or her calling.

**The Circle of Risk and Trust**
In a VUCA world, trust seems rare, but companies need it to operate efficiently. All interactions are more costly, complicated and time-consuming without a “culture of trust.” People want to deal with reliable, trustworthy organizations. However, trust can be fragile. Legislation like the 2002 Sarbanes-Oxley Act, which the US Congress passed in the wake of the Enron scandal and other corporate misdeeds, is no substitute for a genuine culture of integrity.

When you trust people, you take the risk that they might let you down. You assume the same risk when you trust an organization. A company or an individual must continue to earn trust to avoid sparking the kind of suspicion or risk that damages relationships. Companies also take a calculated risk in trusting their people, partners and customers, but they benefit over the long term from the “trust dividend.” High trust makes good business sense, which is just one reason that strong organizations build honesty and ethics into their infrastructure.

When you feel a sense of trust, your brain releases neurotransmitters, such as oxytocin. Having someone reciprocate your trust consolidates related neural connections, making you more likely to trust that person again. “Trust is a calculated risk – a leap of emotional commitment based on data, but a risk nonetheless.” Trust is also a feedback loop that has to begin somewhere, and the best place to start is with yourself. Differentiate between “metacognition” – thinking about and understanding your own thoughts – and “rumination,” which means brooding or obsessing. Both processes cause structural change in the brain, but aim for self-understanding, not worrying.
Valuing Collaboration and Imagination

Many organizational change ventures fail. To help your change initiative succeed, involve people fully in the change process. Use “appreciative inquiry” and “appreciative coaching” to engage them positively and to allay their concerns that change means instability. Initiatives like “Imagine Chicago” – a futuristic vision for that city – show how major change projects can involve people and groups at all levels and bring them together as stakeholders and co-creators, not bystanders.

The old-style, business-school approach to dealing with corporate problems is a “deficit strategy” based on “fixing” perceived faults. This approach often involves criticizing employees even though people don’t respond well to negativity. By involving everyone positively and discussing what is good about the present, instead of what is wrong with it, facilitators can begin a healthy, optimistic dialogue that enables participants to use their imaginations freely. This appreciative, inclusive approach is the sensible, emotionally intelligent way to build the nimble organizations that will thrive in the 21st century.

Such agile organizations need a “coaching mind-set.” Embed coaching in your ethos to elicit the best from employees. By constantly listening and questioning, progressive leaders honor and enable “lifelong learning.” They don’t just offer staffers access to knowledge; as management expert Peter Drucker says, they take on “the most pressing task…to teach people how to learn.”

Appreciative coaching, which helps people connect to their values and use their neuroplastic capacity to find enjoyment in work, can take many forms, but its essence is to connect with people’s values. Increasingly, employees want authentic collaboration. Business coach Marshall Goldsmith thinks “feedback” doesn’t work, mostly because people find it negative and unidirectional. His form of appreciative coaching is the “feed forward technique,” where an individual chooses a goal, then openly and appreciatively seeks advice about how to achieve it. Coach Robert Quinn’s “Best Reflected Self” method, another style of appreciative coaching, takes a similar approach. It uses open-ended questions to build a “self-portrait” of a person at his or her best. Both exercises lead to action plans.

“Flourishing” Now

As leaders pursue ways to imbue work with meaning, employees are gaining a fresh understanding of motivation. For corporations – and entire nations – that are accustomed to command and control, this is a huge challenge. Leaders who want to improve their understanding of well-being, should look to new forms of statistical analysis, such as Gallup’s global well-being poll, which assesses the “thriving, struggling or suffering” status of 150 countries.

Leaders who understand neuroscience, positive psychology and mindfulness have an advantage. People want to flourish and be happy. Change is emotionally hard; it can set off alarm signals. But “positive change” can be inspiring if you defuse its risks and help people engage wholeheartedly.

About the Authors

Eileen Rogers is founder and CEO of the LeadershipSigma consultancy. Nick van Dam is McKinsey & Company’s global chief learning officer.