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McKinsey Quarterly February 2016

Key messages

Simple tweaks in communication and role-modeling based on the latest behavioral research can nudge employees into top form and create a more productive environment for everyone.

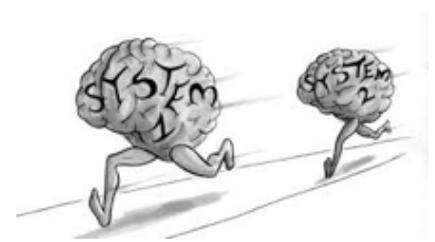
Everyone knows that it's not easy to suddenly make your colleagues more creative, adaptable, or collaborative, however well-intentioned you may be.

However, thanks to research on human behavior, we know what it takes for the average person's brain to perform at its best cognitively and emotionally, even under the pressures of the modern workplace.

These new insights suggest that simple tweaks in leaders' communication and behavior can potentially create a much more productive atmosphere for any team.

The two-system brain

- ▶ The brain's activity is split across two complementary systems: one deliberate and controlled, the other automatic and instinctive.
- ▶ The deliberate system is responsible for sophisticated, conscious functions such as reasoning, self-control and forward thinking. It can only do one thing at a time and tires remarkably quickly.
- ▶ The brain's automatic system lightens this load by automating most of what we do from day to day. But, as the brain's deliberate system starts to tire, the automatic system increasingly takes the reins, and we become more likely to make misleading generalizations and respond to situations with knee-jerk reactions.



The discover-defend axis

Our brain is constantly looking for threats to fend off or rewards worth pursuing. When we're more focused on threats than rewards, we're in defensive mode. In this mode, our brain devotes some of its scarce mental energy to launching a 'fight,' 'flight,' or 'freeze' response. Brain scans show that as these instinctive responses unfold (which look more like 'snap,' 'sulk,' or 'skulk' in the workplace), less activity occurs in the part of the brain known as the prefrontal cortex. To put it another way: in defensive mode, some of our more emotionally sophisticated neural machinery goes offline.

It takes surprisingly little to put someone's brain into **defensive mode**. Anything that threatens a person's self-worth, even the smallest social offence, can do so. This can create vicious circles in the workplace when, for example, people feel daunted from the start, triggering an instinctive defensive reaction that makes it harder for them to solve the problem at hand.

However, there's also **discovery mode**, where people's brains are focused on the potential rewards of a situation, for instance, a feeling of belonging or social recognition, or the thrill of learning new things. If leaders can foster a rewarding environment even amid the most difficult situations, it's likely that they can dampen that primal feeling of being under threat just enough to nudge people out of defensive mode and back into top form.

The social self

Of all the threats we face, social slights are especially high on the list of things our brains seek to defend us against. In the workplace, this means that leaders have to meet three main types of deep social need if they want their colleagues to thrive:

- ▶ Inclusion: "Do I belong?" E.g. you might be worried that you're going to be excluded from an exciting new work project. The newbies, meanwhile, will be wondering whether they truly fit in.
- ▶ Respect: "Do people recognize the value I bring?" Everyone on a team wants to feel that their efforts are useful and appreciated.
- ▶ Fairness: "Am I being treated just like everyone else, or do I at least understand the reason why things are the way they are?"

Tips:

- ▶ To boost feelings of inclusion, deliberately create opportunities for co-workers to get to know each other and to collaborate in cross-functional teams to work on product innovation.
- ▶ In addition, take the time to make everyone feel respected for their individual contribution. Make sure to give people "spot-light moments."
- ▶ Finally, be transparent about the rationale behind your decisions. Transparency is a great investment in minimizing suspicion and defensiveness later on.

The evidence is pretty clear. Colleagues will behave more like their best selves more often if leaders take a few modest steps to foster an environment where people's brains aren't overloaded (where they are more focused on rewards than threats) and where their fundamental social needs are met. With a little behavioral science in their toolkit, leaders can build a more productive team, and a happier one at that.

Read more: McKinsey Quarterly, February 2016, "How small shifts in leadership can transform your team dynamic."