Managing People, Workplace Change and Neuroscience

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Neuroscience is the scientific study of the brain and nervous system. In the last 20 years there have been major advances in this field primarily due to magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) technology. This enables scientists to accurately depict activity in the brain through observing changes in blood flow. Many neuroscientists and practitioners have started to explore how the key findings from cognitive and behavioural neuroscience relate to individual behavior including workplace behaviour.

The knowledge gained through neuroscience can be applied in managing people at work and this has become an emerging and growing field. It is being reflected in thinking about how to manage and influence people in relation to workplace and behavioural change, motivation, performance, leadership, learning and development, and workplace health and safety.

A leading neuroscience practitioner and proponent, David Rock, coined the term NeuroLeadership. Drawing on global research he has developed the SCARF model to help us to understand fundamental drivers of human social behavior. Insights from this model can help understand how people respond to events in their working life.

Rock's SCARF model identifies five domains of social experience that the brain treats as survival issues. For each of these our brains are hardwired to seek out primary reward or primary threat responses.

That is responses that increase and sustain rewards for each domain while also avoiding or mitigating perceived negative threats.

Status	This is about perceptions of relative importance to others. In the workplace an individual may attain a sense of status for example from their relative place in the hierarchy, seniority, expertise, knowledge or experience.
Certainty	This has a lot to do with our sense of security in our ability to reasonable predict the future. At work an example could be certainty of consequences from workplace behaviours, certainty of expectations for performance, certainty in processes and procedures to be applied or followed.
Autonomy	This is about our sense of control over events. At work an example may be our degree of self-determination in our daily activities such as in planning and decision making, levels of discretion in how we work, and our ability to achieve flexibility in working conditions and arrangements.
Relatedness	This is about our sense of safety with others, as 'friend or foe'. In the workplace this can translate into feelings of inclusiveness, trust, feelings of being supported by managers or team members, or conversely feelings of not being supported, being undermined, being bullied or excluded.
Fairness	This is about a perception of fair exchanges between people. In the workplace this may relate to perceptions of fair treatment between people, access to information, benefits etc.

Responses relevant to each of these domains are seen to be hardwired into our behavior.

Perceived rewards or threats in these areas trigger similar brain activities as a physical threat (eg. to one's life) or a physical reward (such as a financial reward).

Most of us are unaware of this circuitry at work. Therefore our responses to rewards or threats in these areas may occur without our being conscious of them. Similarly we may sense others reactions without fully comprehending the underlying basis for them.

Having personal awareness and appreciation of these triggers can help in self-management and in managing others, pointing to areas to optimise reward responses and minimise threat responses.

A number of well-known global and Australian organisations have been using the developing knowledge of these principles to inform management practices such as in the design of learning and development and leadership development activities and in change management design and implementation.

Educating managers and staff about neuroscience and related leadership concepts can improve management and team practices. Consciously considering the effects of these domains on people's reactions and behaviours can improve plans in developing and executing change at organisational and workplace levels. This is done primarily through considering actions which acknowledge and address the SCARF model – as fundamental needs that when met allow people to productively participate in change processes and to make sense of their own and others reactions to significant workplace change.

Further reading:

By David Rock, Coaching with the Brain in Mind: Foundation for Practice; Quiet Leadership – 6 Steps to Transform Performance at Work; and Your Brain at Work.

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