

# INTELLIGENT LEADERSHIP

# FINALLY... A MODEL GUARANTEED TO SOLVE YOUR REAL-LIFE LEADERSHIP PROBLEMS

It's time we get serious about the brain. Let me explain...

When it comes leadership guidance, many of us turn to top-selling books on leadership models and theories. Some of these books are quite useful; others of them are worth their subtitle. There is one thing that is often forgotten even in the most brilliantly written books.

So, what is that one enduring feature of quality leadership so often overlooked? Effective leadership works the way your brain works.

I've been exploring how the brain works for nearly twenty years. I've seen first hand the problems and solutions applied in a variety of industries from defense to healthcare, and I've worked with leadership from all levels

and with varying degrees of experience. I say all of this not to bask in my accomplishments but to make the very strong case that when you have that kind of first-hand experience, you can confidently present conclusions that will help other leaders solve most of their day- to-day challenges and ultimately reach their full potential as leaders.

The greatest one thing I've learned is that successful leaders - whether they realize it or not - act in accordance with a brain-based leadership model. A brain-compatible, versus a brain-antagonistic, environment is one that takes into account brain-based learning principles. Specifically, a brain-based leadership model has 7 characteristics:



## CHALLENGE

Challenge is creating a safe environment where challenge is maximized and threat is minimized - intentionally.

## RELEVANCE

Relevance includes communicating to employees how each job fits -- why it matters and makes a difference.

## ACTION

Action is purposefully balancing work and life and realizing that cheaper, better, and faster doesn't always apply to the human brain.

## NOVELTY

Novelty is doing the unexpected, seeking and rewarding innovation, celebrating, and veering from conventional methods.

## INTERACTION

Interaction is honoring employees' input, leveraging the wealth of experience in a group of people, and gaining loyalty through allowing others a choice and a voice.

## USING EMOTION

Using emotion is capitalizing on emotional intelligence theory, putting to practical use the power of the emotional brain.

## MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES

Finally, multiple intelligences is maximizing the various intelligences all employees bring to the workplace and ensuring the fit of each job, engaging people by placing them in the right job and with the right responsibilities so that strengths rather than deficits are highlighted.

Still a little skeptical? Let's look at five real situations where this brain-based leadership model was put to the test to solve practical leadership problems.

## CHALLENGE

**Situation:** *I was working with an agency in the federal government which trains a specific branch of law enforcement for highly stressful situations. After hours of training - totaling millions of taxpayer dollars - many of the agents forgot the basics when in the "heat of the battle" so to speak. Seriously...forgetting how to load their weapons.*

Let's take a look at the impact of threat for a second. One recent "aha" is that threat to the brain is threat to the brain. The brain doesn't stop and say, "Oh, this is physical threat" and "this is psychological threat" and "this is emotional threat" and then reacts differently based on the type of threat. Nope, the brain simply reacts to threat. So, maybe you can relate to the last time you were

in a threatening situation and had difficulty making basic decisions.

So, what happens when the brain reacts to threat? The prefrontal cortex is virtually hijacked which means critical abilities such as innovation, creativity, proactive thinking, and reasoning many of us link to "being in our right mind" are almost completely offline.

Because of the way the brain responds to threat, I can't think of one reason why threat needs to be present in the workplace. In fact, the greatest one thing a leader can do is identify what is perceived as threat and intentionally eliminate or seriously minimize it. After all, what do we need our employees to have each day they come work? (innovation, creativity, proactive thinking, and being in their right mind).

So, what about the agents? We incorporated into their training specific instruction about how the brain responds to threat. They saw brain images of threat, identified triggers

and warning signs of threat, and through simulations, practiced ways of effectively operating within a threatening situation. Their performance improved dramatically.

Ideally, leaders can help remove threat so employees don't have to operate in a battle zone.

## RELEVANCE

**Situation:** *I will never forget one lady who had over 25 years experience working in manufacturing. I met her when I was developing training for a division of a large defense company and part of the process was conducting a job task analysis. Now, this really just involved observing and interviewing employees and figuring out what it was they did on a typical day. When I asked her where the part she was finishing ultimately went, she pointed to the next line and said, "It goes to Margie."*

Hmmm. Let's take a look at Relevance.

Relevance is understanding how each job fits within the larger picture - how what each employee does matters to the bottom line, to the customer or patient, and to the good of society and the world.

The brain is naturally wired to the station WII-FM (yep, what's in it for me) and releases a host of feel good chemicals when there is purpose in what we do. In fact, these chemicals trigger activity in the ever important prefrontal cortex.

In addition, when employees read a mission statement, they aren't just reading words; they are literally getting a picture burned into their minds. (And we all know a picture is worth a thousand words). In an article reporting on work by David Rock back in 2006, when people read a mission statement while being scanned by an MRI the visual cortex in their brain lit up. Rock said, "If people can't hold a picture in their mind, they're not on board." (Brain)

So, back to my manufacturing friend. What she did not realize

at the time was the part she was finishing was absolutely critical to the accuracy and precision of the javelin missile system. A rather important detail to communicate to her and everyone else on the line.

More than a few changes were suggested and implemented such as large posters, live feeds of field practice and media coverage, and moments in meetings to directly connect activity in the shop with customer contact, end product, and bottom line.

## INTERACTION

**Situation:** *One of the most common complaints from leaders is how to get honest and authentic feedback from employees. One healthcare system I am privileged to support has found the answer.*

Let's take a look at the importance of Interaction. From the same article featuring David Rock's study quoted above, another profound finding was reported,

"the brain pushes back when told what to do." I love to quote this finding because I honestly believe it could be included in a book called "The Duh Research." But seriously, not to downplay Rock's wonderful work and contributions to the field, he goes on to say, "this is attributed to homeostasis" - the brains desire for things to remain the same and resistance to change. Certainly, this is true, and aren't we all glad the brain fights for homeostasis? It is one resilient piece of equipment - the last thing to go when the rest of the body expires.

The article goes on to say, "On the other hand, brains will release an adrenaline-like rush of transmitters when people figure out how to solve a problem themselves rather than being told how to solve it by higher up" (Brain)

So, rather than being told what to do, people want a choice and a voice. In our "got to have it now and who are you to tell me what to do" culture, this is increasingly true as a new generation

enters the workforce. So, the challenge for leaders is how to give that choice and get that voice in a constructive way.

As the obstacles for soliciting authentic feedback are ever increasing ...

Enters healthcare with a method called Rounding. Coined and developed by Quint Studer, a longtime healthcare transformist, Rounding is quite similar to the image one gets when thinking of a doctor Rounding on patients - methodical, genuine, consistent. Leaders formally, systematically, and regularly round on their employees with a predetermined form asking predetermined questions. A sampling of the questions might be something like:

1. Let's talk about one or two things that are going well? (allows the leader to start with the positive).

2. Is there anyone I can recognize or show appreciation to for doing outstanding work? (allows the leader to then follow up with recognition for those supporting the team)

3. What are one or two systems that need improving? (allows the leader to gain shared insight into what needs improving and possible solutions)

4. Do you have what you need to do your job? (allows the leader to then provide support, training, or resources that may be an obstacle for employees)

5. How else can I help you right now? (allows the leader to clear the path for the employee or candidly address questions the employee may have)

What is the end result if rounding is implemented as it is intended? An excellent and constructive way for employees to be ensured a choice and a voice. For more information on Rounding, visit [www.studergroup.com](http://www.studergroup.com).

## MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES

**Situation:** *The account managers in a large manufacturing firm were struggling - low numbers, difficulty securing new business, and extremely high stress.*

*The account managers were spread across the US with each assigned a specific region. Did this make the most sense? Maybe not.*

Let's look at multiple intelligence theory. There's a great deal of debate about what constitutes intelligence. Unfortunately, in our American culture we are still chained to the IQ test as our "real" measurement. But Howard Gardner, developer of multiple intelligence theory, has worked diligently and encouraged many of us to think much broader about intelligence. He has made many significant contributions.

First off, he redefined intelligence. Rather than the score on an IQ test, he defined intelligence as "the ability to create products or solve problems important to the culture." (Gardner) So, in his repertoire of intelligences, a naturalist intelligence in the days immediately following the horrific Haitian earthquake of 2010 might be considered more valuable than linguistic intelligence.

Why? Well, because the culture might have been more interested in finding clean drinking water than hearing an eloquent speech. I'll buy that.

Secondly, he got many of us changing the question from "how smart are you?" to "how are you smart?" In other words, he encouraged people to identify and leverage strengths. Since that time, a large body of work has been released on building strengths-based organizations. Recently, I heard of a concept called the purpose-driven organization where "purpose" was simply where strength and passion intersect.

Leaders who get this realize that when we leverage strengths or purpose, i.e. tune into intelligence, and plug people into the right projects and the right jobs, the result is engagement! And when employees are engaged, they don't leave. Thus, turnover and turnover costs decrease dramatically, culture improves, and the organization sees results. Were the strengths of those account manag-



ers being leveraged? Or, were they doing one thing they were really good in and twenty things they were really mediocre or even failing in? My recommendation was to reorganize according to strengths.

What did that look like? One account manager was excellent at forecasting - let him forecast. Another account manager was particularly skilled in negotiating contracts - let her negotiate. A third account manager was a master at relationship building - let him make the initial contact and build the proverbial bridges.

Let's build on strengths - it's a lot more fun and requires a lot less energy.

## EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

**Situation:** *A small three-person autonomous team got a new manager. (OK, that's the good) The team enjoyed a flexible work schedule, with the most senior team member working this sched-*

*ule for more than ten years. The new manager came in and in the first few weeks decided to take away the flexible work schedule. (Now, that's the bad and the ugly).*

We have so many books and materials out on Emotional Intelligence, why don't we see more of it lived out?

Primal Leadership is one of those books I've returned to many times. In the beginning paragraph of chapter one, the authors state the following:

Great leaders move us. They ignite our passion and inspire the best in us. When we try to explain why they are so effective, we speak of strategy, vision, or powerful ideas. But the reality is much more primal: Great leadership works through the emotions.

How true. Many times it isn't what leaders do but how they do it.

We now realize in the world of brain-based learning that we aren't thinking individuals who happen to have emotions, we are emotional individuals who

happen to think. The emotional center of our brain is a powerful force. One key learning about the brain, which I eloquently call one of the “Big Deals,” involves this emotional center.

One of the “Big Deals” I often teach on is that prior to advanced brain imaging, we thought information entered through the “thinking” part of the brain - the prefrontal cortex. Like any good organization, we believed information entered through the CEO which then in turn determined where the information needed to be processed and how the information needed to be disseminated. Ok, that’s a little more simplified than maybe we actually thought, but how wrong we were. We realize now information is largely processed in the emotional center of the brain and hopefully calls on the prefrontal cortex but oftentimes overrides the CEO, resulting in what is commonly known as an emotional hijacking. Ever been to a little league baseball game? If so, then there is a good chance you’ve

been an eye witness to an emotional hijacking. So emotional intelligence is not a touch, feely or happy, clappy concept. The theory is tied directly to how the brain, on average, receives and processes information. Leaders who know this are way ahead of leaders who don’t.

I wish I had a happy ending for this manager or her team. My recommendations, sadly, were not followed. My recommendations, supported by brain research and common sense, advised the manager to build a case for ending the flexible work schedule, involve the team in deciding possible options rather than a hard cut to a very personal and emotional perk, and remain open to a variety of solutions until the best solution was tried and proved.

Unfortunately, common sense as we all know is not so common. She exerted her authority, took the commanding style of leadership, and the costs (including mediation) were astronomical - both personally and to the organization.

## CONCLUSION

When I landed my first corporate job, I was greeted during new hire orientation by the ergonomics team. In matching shirts, they meticulously measured my height, arm length, and so forth so that when I returned to my desk, my workspace would be designed just for me. They knew the importance and the direct and indirect costs of making my environment physically-friendly.

How much more is this true for an environment that is brain-friendly. After all, our brain is the source from which we will get the next greatest new idea, the motivation to work in harmony with others, and the abilities to lead. The brain is the greatest piece of technology we have.

It's time we get serious about the brain.



Dr. Sherry Yellin has over 20 years experience designing, creating, and delivering learning and coaching solutions to leaders in education, government agencies, and private industry. She has a background in brain-based learning and wholeheartedly believes when we lead, teach, and live the way the brain learns best we get immediate and extraordinary results, and is the author of the book *“Unforgettable Leadership: 7 Principles for Leading, Learning, and Living.”*

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