



Three Steps to Being a Confident Leader

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Think you can't teach an old dog new tricks?

Neuroscientists discovered that changing the brain's activity changes its physical structure. Your brain's ability to change is called *neuroplasticity*. The discovery has led to big breakthroughs for children with dyslexia and for stroke patients (Begley, *How Thinking Can Change the Brain*).

Neuroplasticity is good news for leaders, too. It means you can suffer less.

The New Drug: Thinking

Now scientists can measure how some thinking makes us miserable. And, how changing our thinking alters our mood and our brain.

Neuroscientist Helen Mayberg isn't very popular with the pharmaceutical industry. In 2002, she discovered that inert pills (placebos) work the same on the brains of depressed people as antidepressants do. With either pill, activity in the frontal cortex or higher thought area, increased; activity in the limbic or emotion area, decreased. She wondered if teaching people to view their stressful thoughts differently would have the same impact on brains (Begley, *How Thinking Can Change the Brain*).

Along with colleagues at the University of Toronto, Mayberg took brain images in depressed adults. Then, some of the volunteers received the antidepressant Paxil, while others got multiple sessions of cognitive-behavior therapy. They learned to break the habit of perceiving minor setbacks as tragedies, for example concluding from blank faces in a meeting that your direct reports hate you.

The results? Depression lifted in all of the patients, regardless of whether their brains got a powerful drug or a different way of thinking.

Scientists expected the brain scans at the end of this study would show similar results to the placebo study. But instead of increasing the frontal cortex/higher thought area like the antidepressant and placebo did, the cognitive-behavior therapy muted overactivity in the frontal cortex. And, instead of lowering activity in the limbic/emotion center of the brain like antidepressants do, the cognitive-behavior therapy raised activity in the limbic system. Dr. Mayberg concluded that cognitive therapy rewires the brain to create different thinking circuits.

Neuroplasticity and Confidence

What does Dr. Mayberg's research have to do with leaders? If you train your mind reasonably well, you'll never have to worry about whether you did something right or not.

In coaching and training thousands of leaders over the last 20 years, I've learned that leaders are rarely undone by what's actually happening; it's what they think about what's happening that confuses and weakens them.

How often do you think:

- I did the wrong thing.
- I shouldn't speak up.
- They're going to disagree with me.

These universal leader beliefs lead to loads of agitation and lost sleep.

Confidence, on the other hand, is caring enough to make the hard call, and then not worrying about what will happen next. It's not that you don't care what happens next, it's that you don't scare yourself to death imagining the worst.

Many leaders believe they should just make themselves feel confident by using affirmations or by ignoring the doubting thoughts. I wish it were that easy. Ever tried to make yourself happy? If it was possible, we'd all be happy all the time.

Same with confidence. We can't will confidence into our mental state. Instead, confidence comes from letting go of the fearful and self-doubting thoughts that all humans have. Confidence comes from listening to and investigating negative thoughts like "I can't do this," "I'm not good enough," "I'll make a mistake."

You Can't Make a Mistake

Confident leaders spend more time doing and very little time thinking about what they do. It's not that leaders shouldn't think. You should seek data from multiple sources, reflect on options, and make thoughtful decisions. Those are good action steps.

But, once you've made a decision, don't spend any time worrying about it. Let it go; send it into the ethers, and see what comes back.

The outcome might be magic or mess, but a confident leader knows that whatever comes back, s/he will deal with it. It will never be too much for you to handle.

How do you let negative thoughts go? "Train your mind" sounds like some sort of mental boot camp that develops a tough psyche. On the contrary, a trained mind is alert and flexible. The trained mind understands that a flash of anger when a prized employee moves to a competitor might be immediately followed by a moment of sheer bliss from an industry award. The trained mind stays in the present moment and reacts with calm confidence to the constantly changing flow of ups and downs.

How can you be more confident? Here's a very brief story of how my client Tim used three steps.

Step 1 | Listen

First, listen to yourself.

Tim managed five people in an engineering group. Right after he took the job, funding ran out for one of his staff. Over the next six months, management meetings with his boss and three peers included talk of how to handle the layoff. That's right, six months and no plan. Tim didn't enjoy letting people go, but he knew it had to be done to stay on budget.

When we began coaching, I asked Tim to listen to the reasons he thought the process was stalled. His thoughts included: "It's not my job to push this decision; my boss should be in charge." "My boss is uncomfortable firing Brian." "I haven't been a manager long enough to speak up or take control of the layoff." "My peer, John, hijacks every meeting agenda and talks too much."

I also asked him to listen to his strong feelings. He felt powerless spending hours in unproductive meetings where everyone was in denial about what needed to happen. And, he was angry that delaying the inevitable was costing the company in lost productivity and stress.

Step 2 | Inquire

Once you can hear your thoughts and feelings, inquire about what is true and how they impact your behavior.

I asked Tim if he had ever pointed out in a meeting that John was changing the subject or that the group wasn't making progress. His reply: "It's not my place to speak up. Besides, they wouldn't listen to me."

Through a series of questions I asked, Tim investigated whether his negative beliefs were really true. Was it really inappropriate for him to speak up? He was a member of the team who saw what needed to happen more clearly than anyone else. Was he sure they wouldn't listen? Did he have a crystal ball?

I asked Tim to develop a broken record, a 12-word or less statement he would repeat as often as needed to take his teammates out of their trance. He said, "Let's stop rehashing this, and set a date to layoff Brian." He didn't believe he would have the guts to actually say it, but I invited him to be the change agent that he wanted his boss to be.

Step 3 | Affirm

After we inquire internally into what's true, we can calmly affirm externally what we expect.

The next meeting got off track as usual. John talked too much, and the group made no progress on the layoff. Tim listened to himself during the meeting. He noticed right away that he was upset, and said his broken record in a calm, firm voice: "Let's stop rehashing this, and set a date to layoff Brian."

Tim was surprised that it worked the first time. He reported in our next coaching conversation, "We got a lot further than I imagined. We set a date and made a plan for me to layoff Brian." Tim learned that his limiting thoughts were not only untrue, but they were shrinking his confidence and immobilizing him.

Lucky for Tim and his team that he stepped up. Within a few weeks, the company rolled out a major workforce transition. There would be 14 more layoffs in his department. The management team asked

Tim to handle all of the layoff conversations. His confidence was so high that he agreed to do it. In our coaching session, I asked Tim to listen (Step 1) to his fears and concerns about delivering the bad news: “They’re going to argue and ask, ‘Why me?’” “They’re going to blame me.” “They won’t be able to find new jobs.” “One guy is going to get really angry, and he might even be violent.”

Using the inquiry questions (Step 2), Tim discovered what was true. He was nervous but also excited about helping not only his organization but each individual handle the job loss in an open and honest way. He prepared what he would say and how he would handle pushback from the staff. He wrote a broken record to focus the conversation (Step 3) with Angry Guy on the future: “It’s understandable you’re upset, but we’re not going to discuss the past.”

In our next coaching session, Tim reported that none of the 14 people fought back. And, Angry Guy? Their conversation was actually the most honest and heartfelt. Angry Guy said he would miss the company but understood that the lay off wasn’t personal.

Tim’s Ah-ha: “I assumed the worse, but it didn’t happen. Just because my boss and Human Resources have been through layoffs before, they aren’t any more experienced than I am. I have to go with my gut and step up when the situation calls for it. I should give people more credit for how they handle difficult change.”

Tim learned that most of his stress came from imagining a horrible future. Fear fantasies paralyze leaders. Investigating lets us see a mind filled with fearful thoughts that just aren’t true.

Confidence Boost

I acknowledged to Tim how he grew as a leader. He displayed confidence through so many qualities: honesty, respect, equality, consistency, strength, preparedness and professionalism. In our final coaching session, Tim said, “Being a manager isn’t rocket science. I’m not as far behind as I thought. Thanks to coaching, I have a lot less fear. I forced some action with my boss rather than accept the same old patterns of delay. Even though I was new in the job, I made change happen.”

Perhaps Dr. Mayberg would say that Tim changed his mind.

Next Steps

Read Sharon Begley’s article on neuroplasticity at http://www.themindtolead.com/support-files/how_thinking_can_change_brain.pdf

Email comments about this article to Suzanne at <http://www.themindtolead.com/contact.html>