

Tea & Toast: How our brains react to change

Presented by: Hilary Bryan

Three points to start with

1. Start again

Organisational change is sometimes 'sold' as the final answer. Instead, it's part of an ongoing cycle of change. Richie McCaw has a great line for this: *Start again*. And that's what we're doing with change - it's ongoing and we're always starting again.

2. Change isn't over until it's embedded

Day one of the new structure, process, or way of working comes. A sigh of relief? No, it's when reinforcement work begins. And after that change programmes need to be evaluated. But often they're not.

3. It's about emotion

Remember this quote from Maya Angelou: *I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.*

Change is about emotion, not gantt charts.

Why our brains don't like change

Neuroscience gives us some great pointers about how we react during change, based on science.

Brains are designed for survival

That's why we avoid threats and look for rewards. But threat is far more important and powerful. It's far stronger than the reward response.

Threat response

- kicks in faster
- is stronger and lasts longer
- increases our heart rate
- pumps cortisol: stress hormone
- reduces dopamine: reward chemical.

Reward response

- slower to activate
- milder
- shorter-lived
- increases dopamine.

Brains like to predict what will happen and have certainty

And it's very useful. Along with prediction comes certainty. Both are often absent during change.

Let's take this a step further. Would you rather be certain about a negative outcome, or face uncertainty about what's likely to happen? Our brains would prefer the former. One feature of organisational change that fuels uncertainty and the inability to predict is the length of time organisational change takes. Proposals, consultations processes and then final announcements can take time. And during this time, our brains can't predict, face uncertainty and are faced with constant ambiguity.

Here are the neuroscientific elements of this. When we're uncertain, the orbitofrontal cortex (OFC) reports danger to our brain. Also, our amygdala, the emotional/fear-reporting part of our brain, lights up and connects with the insula that generates emotions such as pride and guilt. The result is our brains weren't designed to deal with the constant change we're experiencing in our organisations.

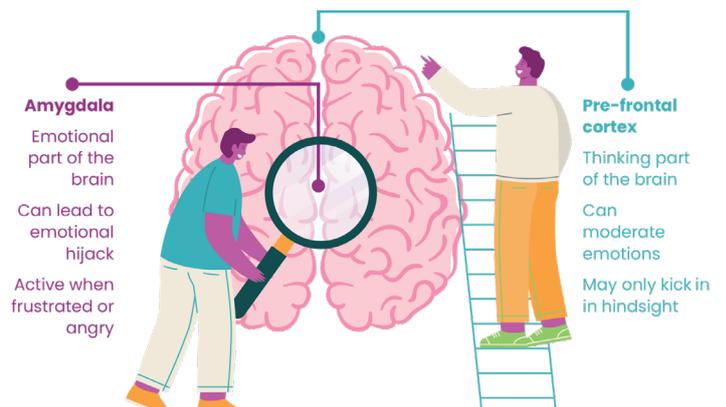
Brains conserve energy and take short cuts

Our brains are 2% of our body weight but use 20% of our energy. So, not surprisingly, they like to conserve energy. That makes them lazy. That's why we have unconscious biases and frequently use short cuts. And the implication for change? If our first reaction to change is fear, then our brain may well stay with that feeling as it works to conserve energy. System 2 thinking is really useful here, but that takes far more energy than a shortcut to System 1.

The four Fs kick in

The four Fs are familiar to us; it's how our brains react to threat.

1. Fight
2. Flight
3. Freeze
4. Flock



Fight or flight responses trigger the amygdala.

Hearts pound, digestion slows, immune systems are suppressed, cortisol increases and the blood vessels to muscles dilate. And lastly, blood flows away from the prefrontal cortex, where we think, plan and manage our emotions. We're on high alert for threats and start to see them everywhere and expect the worst. Our workplaces create a high level of stress, so cortisol is constantly in the system. It may not take much change to further increase cortisol levels.

We're like elephants: we never forget

We remember past events - not always correctly - but it's how we interpret situations we're going through. So, our past experiences of change will have a huge impact on how we see present ones. We'll remember how we felt, even if we got the job we wanted as a result. We'll remember the fear and uncertainty far more than the joy of getting the job.

None of us are clean slates.

How we can work with our brains to cope with change

A word about neuroplasticity: you can teach an old dog new tricks

This is very good news. Neuroscience has taught us that our brains can continue to learn until late in life. Most neuroplasticity happens in childhood and some parts of the brain learn such things as languages earlier in life. But neuroplasticity in older brains is in social skills and emotional intelligence: great news for people leaders leading people through change, and people experiencing change.

We can learn by experience, reflection and mental activity. Our brains change their structure with every different activity it performs. They form new and stronger connections between neurons. So use it or lose it. We can learn new things, new ways of working and get to know new people. But we need the chance to do so.

Let's add a drop of dopamine

Dopamine is a neurotransmitter; it transmits signals between brain neurons. So, it helps neuroplasticity, our ability to learn new things and behave differently. Good news part one. Good news part two is that we seek out dopamine and get a dose when we anticipate it, and when we receive it unexpectedly. But if we anticipate it and then don't get it - the dopamine is suppressed. Low dopamine levels reduce our mental capability.

So how can change leaders increase dopamine levels?

Encourage a growth mindset

Encourage people to learn something new and break out of a possible fixed mindset. Then reward them for it. Treat failure as learning. Get that dopamine flowing and those neurons connecting. Get people on board with the concept of the fixed and growth mindset.

Set short-term goals people can achieve

Break new tasks down into smaller chunks. People will then get a dose of dopamine before they tackle the next chunk. And if people can get into flow, all the better. Flow is a great state, when our neuroplasticity and dopamine give us a fix and we're totally absorbed in something new.



Remind people of past achievements

We're really using our brains to cope with change here. Remind people of what they've achieved and how they can translate past achievements to present change challenges. The result is reward-related dopamine.

Praise and recognise people

Gallup engagement survey asks people to rate how much recognition and praise they've received in the past seven days. It's because the dopamine won't last much longer. Unexpected rewards generate even more dopamine. Remember that lovely feeling of surprise when you get a bunch of flowers delivered? Even if it's only a small thing someone has done, praise them for it. Their brain will thank you for it.

Acts of kindness

Givers and receivers benefit. Small acts of kindness are contagious. Remember Covid lockdown 2020 – Be Kind.

A little bit of novelty

Our brains might not like lots of change, but they like a bit of novelty – something out of the ordinary. Changes of location for team meetings, spontaneous fun events, new ways to communicate – anything that will wake people up and get the dopamine flowing.

Have a laugh

De Bono: **Humour is by far the most significant behaviour of the human brain.** The neuroscientists agree. Watching comedy DVDs increases productivity. Having non-work related fun together as a team is valuable. But you can go a step further and see the humour in the change situation you're in. That's powerful.

Communicate, communicate and then communicate more to boost certainty

This is a basic. Even if there's nothing to actually communicate, communicate anyway. Updates every day at 3pm or every Tuesday at the team meeting or every other day by email all create the certainty our brains are craving.



Let people reach their own insights

Our brains want information but also want to work things out independently. North Korean type, one-way, Big Brother type communication will often get greeted with blank stares and no engagement. Our brains want choices to think things through. So, discussion, transparency and genuine dialogue work better.

We're social animals with social brains

Maslow's wrong

We all know our need for shelter, food etc is the base of Maslow's hierarchy, but neuroscientists challenge this. Lieberman argues social connection and being loved and cared for is paramount.

And the brain processes social and physical pain using the same network. This network includes the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (dACC). It goes into overdrive when we're rejected and lack social connection. Think about it. Remember a time when you felt insulted, treated very unfairly or had a hurtful argument. As Maya Angelou says – *we remember what we felt.*

So, during change, social connection is more important than ever. People need to feel they belong, be listened to and to be part of a strong team. (Remember flock – one of the four Fs.)

So, it follows that our brain's reward network is triggered by social connection. During change when threats and uncertainty abound, make people feel they're part of an in-group. They're all in this together, with leaders spending their time with their team and their people.

Managing emotions during change

We'll touch on one technique here, but a valuable one. Our brains manage emotions better if we label them; it reduces their impact. Naming an emotion increases activity in the right ventro-lateral prefrontal cortex (RVL PFC) that in turn reduces activity in the amygdala. As a result, emotions are dampened down.

So, during change, let people vent and encourage them to name their emotions.

Hilary Scarlett's SPACES

When people are going through organisational change, here's an excellent rundown of what will motivate and engage people. And yes, they're emotions that will turn on the dopamine tap and we get a reward. Some are more important than others for each person.

- S** – Self-esteem
- P** – Purpose
- A** – Autonomy
- C** – Certainty
- E** – Equity
- S** – Social Connection



Self-esteem

We get a reward when we feel important relative to others. Our place in the hierarchy has something to do with this. But during change, people can experience self-esteem by their existing skills being recognised, or by their ability to learn, or by making a unique contribution.

Purpose

Dopamine flows when we feel we're making a meaningful contribution, have some direction or are needed by others. And people need to relate to the whole purpose of a change and be able to relate to it.

Autonomy

Rewards follow from having control over a change situation. We nearly always ask leaders and those going through change to concentrate on what they can control, not what they can't.

Certainty

It's our brain's old friend here again. We want that all-important ability to predict the future. Short-term goals can work well here and clarifying what's expected of people during change and beyond.

Equity

Fairness hits our brains hard. Some may find change consultation processes unfair. **They weren't ever interested in what we had to say.** So transparency, fair and open processes and honesty go a long way to satisfy our brains' need for equity.

Social Connection

As we've already said, social connection is key. We want to feel connected to a group and know someone has our interests at heart. As always, it comes down to communication and particularly coaching and listening.

A final thought on neuroplasticity

We've emphasised the threats our brains feel from change and the losses many people feel as a result. One such loss, is the loss of identity. But remember neuroplasticity: our ability to continually learn. Ibarra argues that when we're faced with a significant change, such as a job loss, we should think big about possible new identities. She rejects the notion of an inner core or true self. Instead, we have many selves and possible selves. And it's unlikely we'll discover those by looking back on our careers and reflecting. We'll find them by experimenting, trying things out and learning.

Luckily, our brains are geared up to help us do just that.

Bibliography

De Bono, E. (1990). *I am right, you are wrong*. London: Penguin.

Dweck, C. (2006). *Mindset: the new psychology of success*. New York: Random House.

Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking fast and slow*. London: Penguin.

Harvard Business Review, *How to stay stuck in the wrong career*, Ibarra, H. December 2002.

Scarlett, H. (2019). *Neuroscience for organizational change*. London: KoganPage.

Thanks for coming!

From The Training Practice team - Hilary, Dinah, Kristen, James and Kiera

Check out our website, with our latest thinking and events: trainingpractice.co.nz

Follow us on [LinkedIn](#)

Get in touch: 027 222 1498 | office@trainingpractice.co.nz

[RSVP to our February Tea & Toast:](#)

Here we go again - how to start something

Friday 18 February 2022, 8:30 - 9:30am