

# LEADERSHIP

(AND INFLUENCING)

WITH THE BRAIN IN MIND

BY **LORI SHOOK**

**Leading people can seem like a mystery. Why do they behave the way they do? At times motivated, inspired and engaged and other times surprisingly disruptive, resistant, irrational or irritable. Why can't they (or rather, we) be more consistent and predictable?**

## **IT'S JUST THE BRAIN'S PROGRAMMING**

If you know some of the secrets of the brain's programming, human behaviour is a lot more understandable, manageable and even predictable. Knowing this programming will help you understand people's drivers, manage their development, prevent emotional reactions and even influence their choices. The first thing to understand is that our brains are pre-programmed for certain sensitivities and needs/desires. This is our nature; we can't get around it and we are constantly

driven by this programming, which shows up as emotional drivers. We may be very logical, but the underlying programming is still having its way as it tries to ensure our survival. This means that people often unconsciously make decisions based upon these primitive emotional drivers rather than logical facts.

The emotional brain is only trying to keep us safe. Its job is to ensure our survival which it does by using chemical signals that tell us to move towards or away from situations, people or activities. We inherently understand this when it comes to physical safety: if we encounter a dangerous animal, we can feel the brain telling us in no uncertain terms to *do something! Run!* This is our basic fight or flight reaction. But because we are social animals, much of our programming is about social threats more than physical ones, which is where things get interesting – and perhaps confounding.

## **EMOTIONAL BRAIN RESPONSE WHEN ANTICIPATING GIVING FEEDBACK**

You know you need to give feedback to someone about their performance, but every fibre of your being is screaming, *don't do it!* This is your survival-focused brain telling you that this conversation poses a threat to your survival. Back when our brains were evolving, such a conversation could have dire consequences; you might have been attacked by the other person or even thrown out of your community. It was better to just keep your mouth shut.

Unfortunately, this innate programming is still very much driving us, even though the circumstances of the twenty-first century are quite different than those more barbaric days. But the brain doesn't really know that – it still thinks the person across the table might be harmful. >

## CARROTS AND STICKS; THREATS AND REWARDS

Our programming generally works as a carrot and stick mechanism using chemicals. If the brain interprets (correctly or incorrectly) a situation as dangerous, it will issue a **threat** signal, by generating doses of adrenaline and cortisol. This tells you to flee or fight back. These days, that might mean

not answering an email, being argumentative or even trying to get back at someone to 'make things right'. A threat signal can occur when you anticipate a feedback conversation, when you are uncertain about what's next, when you feel you are being talked down to or when a manager is micro-managing you.

If the brain interprets that a situation is good for your survival, it issues a **reward** signal by producing dopamine which feels good – it's simply a message to keep doing what you are doing. An experience of dopamine is motivating; when people experience it, they want to continue doing what they're doing or perhaps do what they are being asked to do. >

## Be SAFE & Certain



### Belonging

a need to be a part of a team or group



### Status

a feeling of being relevant in the team



### Autonomy

having a sense of independence in how to do something



### Fairness

feeling that all in the team are treated fairly



### Expectations

anticipation, hopes and dread, especially about what will happen with others

&



### Certainty

knowing what will happen in the future



### Threats

Cortisol, Adrenaline



### Rewards

Dopamine

# ‘These days, that might mean not answering an email or being argumentative?’

This **Be SAFE & Certain** model shows six primary social factors that the emotional brain monitors and creates threats and rewards in response to. Most of us have a favourite one, so as you read through them, think about which of these may be important to colleagues you interact with regularly.

## THE LEADERSHIP ANGLE

Because we are all driven by this threat and reward mechanism and the Be SAFE & Certain factors are always in play, you can easily leverage this as a leader.

Knowing which elements your direct reports are most attuned to or sensitive to, can help you provide motivation and can even influence them to make a particular choice.

You have your own preferences, so be aware of that and don't assume that everyone else wants as much or little belonging, autonomy or certainty as you do. Get to know others and adapt your leadership or influencing style to their needs – it will be worth the effort.

## USING BE SAFE & CERTAIN

Here are some tips for leveraging Be SAFE & Certain to create more motivation (dopamine) and to reduce stress and emotional reactions (from adrenaline and cortisol) in your team.

- Use ‘we’ to create a sense of **belonging** and inclusion – we all belong here.
- Support everyone's **status** and purpose on the team; don't just highlight one or two ‘superstars’ (especially not repetitively).
- Set a direction and let people know the boundaries but still give them some latitude and **autonomy** to use their own initiative.
- Be as **fair** as possible. If you make a decision that favours some people over others, explain why – leaving a decision open to interpretation can trigger feelings of unfairness which leads to a desire to strike back.
- Create positive but realistic **expectations**. Lay out clear expectations you have of

others and what they can expect of you. With lack of clarity, interpretations will take the place of fact and brains will generate their own expectations.

- Create **certainty** by telling others what you know and what you don't. If there is a big topic at play with a lot of uncertainty let people know what you will know by when.

## USING BE SAFE & CERTAIN TO INFLUENCE OTHERS

As an actuary, you will often provide data and a recommendation to someone. As you do so, you can use Be SAFE & Certain to influence how others respond. These tips will help your stakeholders be more willing to listen to you and accept your input.

- **Belonging:** Ensure that the other person feels that you are on the same ‘side’; that you are in this together.
- **Status:** Don't use a superior attitude; instead, make sure they feel like their opinion matters and that they are valued. >

## ‘ **As an actuary, you can use the method to influence how others respond to your recommendations.**

- **Autonomy:**

Give recommendations and show the person where they have some choice and autonomy in how they can use your information. This will move their attention away from the choice of using/not using your information.

- **Fairness:**

Test your recommendations and see if anything might feel unfair to others; if so, explain your rationale.

- **Expectations:**

Paint a positive picture of what will happen when they use your information, perhaps help them understand how they will look good when they follow your advice (and be sure to keep that real).

- **Certainty** may come

straight from the facts and professional assessment that you deliver but people might also need a *feeling* of certainty from you as well. Sharing your own certainty in your data in a friendly manner will go a long way to helping them also feel certain that this is the right approach.



Find your own way to use these in an easy-going way. You want to ensure that you are creating more rewards than threats. The dopamine rewards will have people open to ideas and threats close off opportunities.

Once you understand the brain's programming and use it in different settings, you will likely find that there are many other applications for this as well. <

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