

ACCESSING 'SAFE BRAIN'



FACTSHEET

Exploring how self-compassion is the key to creating resilience in leaders and organisations



Neuroscience shows us that a culture of fear is unhealthy and invariably destructive of both people and businesses. Fear costs human beings their physical and emotional well-being. It costs companies money and time to deal with the damage done to employees. A culture of fear produces companies that are increasingly inefficient, non-competitive and uninventive. They may survive, but they may not thrive.



Brown, Kingsley and Paterson, p. 1

Conflict, disengagement and burnout – unfortunately not uncommon occurrences for leaders. Modern corporate life has seen a steady rise in stress levels.

The landscape is becoming increasingly volatile, uncertain and complex, creating corporate environments that are highly pressured and competitive. And this results in 'threat brain' responses – where behavioural choices are reduced to three options – fight, flight or freeze. By learning how to access their 'safe brain' through self-compassion (Wickremasinghe, 2014), leaders can broaden their range of behavioural choices. And this can have huge benefits for their relationships, their productivity, their creativity and their own wellbeing – helping them to become more resilient, and therefore create more resilient organisations.

What are 'threat brain', 'safe brain' and 'drive brain'?

Neuroscience tells us that there are three basic motivators for human behaviour – threat, safety and drive (Wickremasinghe, 2014).

Threat brain

The 'threat brain's' evolutionary function is to identify threats quickly and urge us to take action – the fight, flight or freeze response. It can be triggered by imaginary threats as well as real ones and often treats complexity in the same way as a threat. When we experience threat our body is flooded with noradrenaline and cortisol – chemicals that boost energy and help us take action. These chemicals tire the brain and body quickly and have negative health impacts, increase defensive and narrow thinking, affect the ability to process new information and decrease memory capacity.

Safe brain

The 'safe brain' is the soothing or contentment system – evolving from the need to nurture and protect. Being able to rest and soothe the self stimulates reparative changes in the body. It releases endorphines and oxytocin, reducing blood pressure, stimulating the immune system, having anti-anxiety effects and stimulating positive social interactions. Research shows that this sort of mind is also able to think more clearly and develop new insights more readily.

Drive brain

The 'drive brain' is where our desire to compete, achieve and accumulate things comes from. The chemicals it releases can become addictive – spurring people on to achieve more. Often in business these drive behaviours are seen as desirable – competition and ambition is encouraged. But it often comes from a place of 'threat brain'. Whilst these drive behaviours may serve us in the short term and deliver the results that we need, in the longer term without engaging 'safe brain', they can create an unhealthy loop that quickly leads to burnout and stress related illness.

The benefits of accessing 'safe brain'

Increased productivity

When people's behaviour is driven by 'threat brain' for too long the harmful chemicals it releases can lead to burnout. This results in absenteeism, or even presenteeism, where work is not completed. Accessing 'safe brain' helps to reduce these harmful chemicals and allows people to repair, restimulate and re-engage with their work.



Only recently has compassion become a component of my own leadership development. The impact it's having on my personal leadership style, performance and effectiveness is immeasurable. Having the courage to be more self-compassionate has created a profound shift in how I go about being a leader. As I continue to learn and develop my improved performance has become far more sustainable and resilient, which I attribute to bringing compassion into my leadership.



Recent 'Compassionate Leadership Programme' delegate

Enhanced creativity and innovation

"Stress causes the part of the brain that is responsible for the human capacity to integrate new information, make complex decisions and creatively adapt, to shut down" (Brown, Kingsley and Paterson, p. 144). Accessing 'safe brain' enables people to develop new insights, and think more clearly – helping them to break free of unhealthy threat-drive loops.

More effective relationships

Accessing 'safe brain' stimulates positive social interactions. It releases the hormone oxytocin which facilitates attachment and affiliation with others. This attachment leads to increased trust and therefore more effective, harmonious relationships.

And all of this result in healthier, happier and more resilient leaders, and therefore healthier, happier and more resilient organisations.

How to access 'safe brain'

Accessing 'safe brain' is a practice. It's not a tool or technique that can be learned once and then applied. As leaders are increasingly required to delve into complex and uncertain problems, they need to have skills that go beyond the normal A – B problem solving. They need to be able to access the part of their brain that is open to new thoughts, interested in divergent points of view and driven by inquiry rather than action. So how can they achieve this? It's an area that we regularly work in – here are some of the ways in which we help leaders to access their 'safe brain'.

- Self-compassion is the first step. Compassionate attributes include empathy, non-judgement, care for wellbeing, sensitivity, sympathy, tolerance to distress (Wickremasinghe, 2014). Leaders who develop these in areas are more likely to access their 'safe brain' capabilities.
- Appreciation is also a proven way of accessing 'safe brain'. Spending time focusing on the things you have done well, or 'appreciating', will trigger the parasympathetic nervous system and the production of oxytocin which counteracts the cortisol associated with 'threat brain' behaviour.
- Self exploration allows leaders to develop awareness of the behaviour patterns which may be getting in the way of how they respond to the different situations they face at work. Leaders need to become aware of their own values, experiences and behaviours in order to uncover issues and address them, therefore reducing the likelihood of threat-based responses.
- Many bright, ambitious and successful leaders have a strong inner critic (Wickremasinghe, 2014) – a voice that provides a commentary to the decisions that they make, the way they relate to others and their abilities. By becoming aware of this and recognising thoughts before they become corrupted by their inner critic leaders can access their 'safe brain' capabilities.
- Practices that allow leaders to notice how they are feeling and what they are sensing in the moment – such as mindfulness and meditation – can help them to recognise and put a stop to the reactive behaviours that arise from 'threat brain'.

References

Brown, P., Kingsley, J., Paterson, S., 2015. *The Fear-Free Organisation: Vital Insights from Neuroscience to Transform Your Business Culture*. 1 Edition. Kogan Page.

Wickremasinghe, N., 2014. *Is that all there is? Self compassion and the imperfect life*. Other thesis, Middlesex University/Ashridge Business School.

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