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How you can engage the brain to influence sustained change

1. Acknowledge that there is a degree of pain associated with all change. Even if it's change you want to make, remember that your brain has to work less hard to revert to old habits than to start mastering new behaviour. Awareness will help ensure your good intentions are not ambushed by unconscious resistance.
2. It's much more useful to imagine action that you'll be taking rather than thinking about the change at an abstract or intellectual level. For example, think about the actual script you will run when working more personally with a staff member. Do this instead of just reflecting on your intention to be more approachable.
3. Take action! Even if it's only one small step at a time, you should realise that converting intention to action is a significant step towards making the change. Procrastination is intention trumping action.
4. It's easy to imagine and your ideas may even release a flood of feel-good chemicals. But changing behaviour is where the rubber hits the road. It can be tough. Don't get stuck repeating the 'feel-good' of intentions because, ultimately, they won't lead you to the benefits of the change you seek.

RECRUIT BRAIN CIRCUITS TO INFLUENCE SUSTAINED CHANGE

A major change

Hinchingbrooke probably won't mean anything to most. And February 1st, 2012, was likely little different from the last day in January or the next in February. But, on that day, Hinchingbrooke Hospital became the first National Health System (NHS) hospital in the UK to be managed privately.

It's an enormous ideological change. But, with £38m in debts, according to the Financial Times, the probable alternative was closure. To turn those unsustainable financials around will require significant and protracted change.

Just how does CEO of the Circle management company, Ali Parsa, intend achieving the turn-around? Whether or not he sees it this way, he's already introduced some extremely powerful initiatives that speak directly to the brain's change circuitry.

Engaging the brain to influence change

Let's review some of the key brain-based factors impacting change. First, most change behaviour will cause you some level of discomfort. Your memory bank of old behaviours, or habits, is arranged in a way that makes them readily and easily accessible.

In contrast, new behaviours you want to substitute are processed using the short-term memory system. This is far more brain intensive. Greater effort is needed compared to automatically repeating a habit.

Before deciding to act, your brain's accountant takes stock of a variety of inputs, including the total effort required. If the overall costs outweigh perceived benefits then change action will stall or cease.

Your reward centre also plays a key role in evaluating whether the change effort is worth making. Being able to imagine positive rewards as a consequence of change is a powerful motivator for making the change. The reward centre also signals any reduction of negative conditions as a credit, for the positive side of the decisional ledger.

Change will also engage your emotional centre. Emotions are part of any decision-making and contribute input to your brain's accountant. Even if you're not aware of the emotions attached to a particular decision, be sure that they're present and operating at an unconscious level. Further, negative emotions, such as stress, will likely have a disruptive effect on performance. Brain centres, including your memory and your attentional centre, are affected.

Key change influences at Hinchingbrooke

So, how would we rate the Hinchingbrooke change efforts to date? First, 1200 of the 1700 staff contributed to developing the new plans during one of 17 four-hour 'partnership sessions'. CEO Parsa

told the Daily Mail that the sessions which developed a shared vision for transformation are without precedent in the NHS.

The shared aim that emerged from this consultative process is likely to be an immensely powerful individual motivator in the challenging times ahead. Hinchingbrooke staff agreed to work to make it one of the UK's top 10 hospitals within two years.

This level of buy-in and commitment is likely to have a hugely positive impact on individuals' emotional states. It will no doubt also reduce individual anxiety, freeing up brain circuitry for positive change action instead. Contrast this with other organisational changes of this magnitude where staff are left virtually paralysed with fear and filled with negativity.

Another unprecedented development, and massive motivational force, is the 49.9% ownership stake divided among all employees. Parsa pointed out to staff that ownership was not intended to make them rich but rather to give them control. He reinforced the need for urgent commitment to action, pointing out that control meant staff could sack him if they weren't satisfied with his performance. What a contrast to working in the NHS!

Consistent with the gesture of sharing power, Parsa has embraced distributed leadership. Responsibility and accountability is devolved to smaller, grassroots teams that are in direct contact with their customers (patients). Led by a doctor, nurse and administrator, the teams of 50-100 are accountable for their budget, financial performance and patient care outcomes.

Early change already delivering dividends

And this approach has already generated positive change. For example, staff have developed a way to keep women who test positive in the breast cancer screening at the hospital for treatment. They've also devised a pilot program accommodating 60 more patients in the screening service. This significant increase in patient numbers renders the service sustainable. The changes meet all 4 key priorities: patient safety, patient experience, staff engagement and value for money.

Many other 'innovations' have been developed by teams across the hospital. And an optimistic mindset is undoubtedly contributing in a major way to the innovation and change already occurring. In a story by Hunts Post 24, all of the grassroots team members interviewed expressed optimism about the future. Their changed state is not just management spin for the media. Optimism, as a brain-state, is highly valuable in taking and sustaining change action.

Time will tell whether expectations are realised. However, initial action and early results suggest they have a formula that promotes change success.