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Three Brain Circuits Worth Knowing More About

If you want to sharpen the precision with which you influence, it pays to know a little about how brain circuits work. Of course it's not just the other's brain. Yours is also involved.

1. Knowing even a little about the role of the brain's **emotional register** can be of huge benefit. All decisions require access to emotions. Fear is the highest priority emotion and when it's present it draws processing capacity away from other brain circuits. Minimise fear.
2. The **short term memory** is vital for higher order thinking. But, it's limited data processing capacity means that it can be a potentially weak link. When short term memory is overwhelmed, there is a high risk that important data is not recognised or processed. Control information flow carefully.
3. The **conflict centre** is a circuit that checks for congruence of data flowing in from the many sources. When the conflict centre perceives that things don't stack up it puts a brake on decision making and action. Identify and deal with incongruences.

YOUR INFLUENCE IMPERATIVE

Influence matters

A little over a year ago UGM conducted a large study on personal influence in the Australian workplace – surveying over 900 respondents. Our research continues and we're regularly adding to the data. We're also regularly delivering client programs on the topic for various groups. These include modules in leadership development programs, programs for women at various levels and, more generally, how influencing contributes to more inclusive cultures at work. All programs offer rich opportunities to further test and corroborate our research outcomes.

The new data is confirming our initial conclusions. Importantly, we continue to find that people who self-report high understanding of influence (HUI) appear generally to be more attuned with the other 27 'influence at work' dimensions we test.

In some areas, such as dealing with workplace blockers, perceived visibility and having skills to work with conflict, the difference between the high understanding and low understanding groups (LUI) is profound. For example, while 75% with HUI felt they had skills to deal with people who block their ideas for no reason, only 28% of the LUI group felt that they had those skills!

Anecdotal evidence from our influence related work with various client groups suggests that people who use influence more effectively at work are indeed more likely to get ahead. Unsurprisingly, more in this HUI group also report a strong sense of emotional balance and purpose. Yet, these are vital elements of having a happy and fulfilled working life which everyone should be able to enjoy.

The link to personal and social awareness

One factor that seems to affect ability to influence is level of personal awareness. When discussing 'low understanding of influence', quite a number of those included in this grouping make a connection with also having lower self- and social-awareness than they'd like. This means that when it comes to influencing others, they're not too sure what they need to do to exert influence. They wonder how, exactly, they go about 'doing' influence. Like many, they're also especially concerned that they're not perceived as nasty manipulators!

Closely linked is their sense of lower self-awareness in important contexts, particularly where there is pressure. Having limited time for processing responses on-the-fly is an example. They mention a lower awareness of how they're coming across to others than they'd like. Consequently, they're unable to nuance their behaviour based on others' responses. Of course, becoming alert to these gaps is a vital first step in making suitable changes.

Not knowing what to do!

However, simply knowing about personal limitations around awareness is obviously not enough to deliver changed behaviour. Being urged to be more self-aware or more alert to others is also only of limited value. Very often they are aware of their particular shortcomings! What they really want (and need) to know is what specifically they can do that will help them become more self- and socially-aware.

A vital insight is that the end goal of influencing is that you affect the way the other party behaves. To achieve changes in their behaviour (to deliver the outcomes you're seeking), you need to influence the other person's thinking. Ultimately, it is only through impacting their thinking processes— whether at a conscious or unconscious level— that you impact their behaviour. Essentially, when you're influencing someone you are affecting the working of their brain in relation to the outcomes you're seeking! And, don't forget, you're own brain circuits are also involved.

Directing influencing at specific brain circuits

One great benefit of the recent surge in brain science is that the inner, previously rather obscure, workings of the brain are being revealed. While the discoveries have barely scratched the surface of this complex field, we can usefully harness findings to make our own influencing actions more precise and therefore more effective.

Of particular interest is the growing understanding of key brain circuits that control decision-making, including the follow-through to action. Without at least a basic understanding of how particular brain circuits work, attempts to influence are likely to be only broad brush and trial-and-error in nature. It's hard then to determine exactly what it was that worked for you and, more importantly, why! Knowing what, specifically, to avoid is also not particularly clear.

Using a trial-and-error approach is especially unhelpful where colleagues are less self- and socially-aware. Because generally decoding behaviour is already a challenge, deducing specific mechanics of successful or failed influencing is near impossible! On the other hand, self- and socially-aware counterparts use their perceptiveness of situations and human behaviour to influence more effectively, even if they don't know the actual science behind their choices.

Intentionally using behaviours that take careful account of how brains work is likely to deliver improvements in influence effectiveness, even if you are one of those who are more self- and socially aware. Knowing just a little about these circuits will allow your influencing to be more nuanced.