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You and Your Brain: Partners in Learning

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By Merrick Rosenberg

I don't know about you, but ever since I can remember, I've been using my brain to learn new things. In fact, I can't think of anything that I've learned without using my brain. And yet, employee development processes are generally designed to promote short-term learning at best.

This is your brain...

We now know that the brain has a high level of neuroplasticity. That is, the ability for neurons to form new connections and assume new roles, even when faced with highly entrenched old connections. In other words, we can re-hardware our brains to alter our habits and behaviors.

There's good news and bad news about re-hardwareing our brains. First, the bad news: Old hardwareing does not go away. Once neurons form connections, these connections are relatively stable and enduring. However, the good news is that new hardwareing is easy to create and these connections can become more dominant than old hardwareing.

Repetitive thoughts and actions become hardwareed into our brains. If we do something enough times, it becomes a habit. Therefore, training cannot be an event, but rather, it must be a process of continual reinforcement. And by reinforcement, I don't just mean a follow-up session that takes place three months later.



Our brains require proper care and feeding to create new mental maps. Otherwise, all new learning and insights create only short-term behavioral adjustments instead of permanent behavioral change. And despite the best efforts of both the trainer and the learner, all new information is placed into the brain's

RAM instead of on the hard drive.

Re-hardwareing takes time and energy

In *The Power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy, Not Time, is the Key to High Performance and Personal Renewal*, Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz write, "A growing body of research suggests that as little as 5 percent of our behaviors are consciously directed. We are creatures of habit, and 95 percent of what we do appears automatically or is a reaction to a demand or an anxiety."

This suggests that learners must bring existing behaviors into conscious awareness so that they can develop automatic behaviors that are positive

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and constructive. This self-awareness process can be accomplished through a variety of methods, such as guided self-reflection, 360-degree feedback, behavioral style assessment or coaching.

Only after individuals are aware of their current behaviors and recognize the impact of these behaviors can they make the choice to change what they do to get better results. And make no mistake about it; re-hardwiring the brain is a commitment.

Case In Point

New behaviors require changing the innate trigger response to situations. Consider Patrick, who is trying to improve his listening skills. He has several bad listening habits, such as interrupting others, typing while people are talking with him and reading e-mails while engaging in phone conversation. He's never been a good listener, as he vividly recalls his parents repeatedly asking him, "Patrick, are you listening to me?" This is a long-standing pattern of behavior with significant hardwiring.

His recent 360-degree feedback results revealed deficiencies in his listening skills and behaviors. He realized that people are no longer sharing vital information with him because they feel that he doesn't listen anyway. He wants and needs to be a better listener.

So how can Patrick change his behavior? He's already taken the first step of bringing his existing behaviors into his conscious awareness. He's also taken the second step, as he's taken ownership of those behaviors and made the commitment to replace offending behaviors with new positive ones.

Now, Patrick needs to re-hardwire his brain to replace the trigger response of interrupting others with active focused attention. Sure, Patrick can attend a listening skills training program. As a trainer who has taught communication and listening skills, I know that he can learn much about listening in a good training program. However, this is only a part of what Patrick needs to do.

The classroom time isn't changing hardwiring at all, it's just storing information in the brain. It's like hanging a light fixture, but not connecting it to the light switch. The fixture exists, but it cannot be accessed when needed.

Patrick may cognitively grasp that these behaviors do not serve him well, but he cannot stop his instinctive reaction to interrupt as soon as he has a thought or idea of his own. There is often a gap between what people know and what they do...and this gap is the lack of proper hardwiring.

There is a faulty assumption about training that a great trainer + a great training program + an open and committed learner + a supportive manager = new skills applied on the job. The equation doesn't always add up because the brain is not engaged in a way that develops the hardwiring to translate new insights into new behaviors.

Ensuring Permanent Change

If Patrick is to transfer his newly acquired skills that he gained in the classroom into on-the-job behaviors, he needs to implement the routine of daily practice into his day. Patrick needs to visualize himself exhibiting the new positive behaviors and continually reaffirm that he is a good listener. Visualization will enable him to see himself performing his new skills in his "mind's eye," just like a professional golfer sees the perfect swing and desired result before swinging the club.

Researchers have used brain-scanning techniques and found that the same areas of the brain that light up while performing a specific behavior also do so when visualizing the performance of that same behavior. Visualization re-hardwires the brain. Visualization helps bridge the gap between what we know and what we do by creating the neural pathways around a given behavior or skill.

But seeing himself listening effectively for a day or so isn't going to create lasting change. For about a month, each day before going to work, Patrick needs to spend about two minutes visualizing himself listening attentively and respectfully to others. He needs to see himself turning away from his computer and facing the person who enters his office. He needs to see himself actually stop typing and stay focused on the individual at the other end of the telephone. He needs to visualize himself listening fully to the speaker before he shares his thoughts.

In addition to this two-minute morning practice, several times throughout the

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day, just prior to speaking with someone, Patrick needs to affirm that he is a good listener. He needs to visualize himself listening well to that person.

Finally, at the end of each day at a preset and consistent time, Patrick needs to reflect, preferably in writing, on how he listened throughout the day. During that reflection time he should praise himself for his accomplishments and make a commitment to listen even better the next day.

Does this take time? Yes. Does this take energy? Yes. Does this create lasting behavioral change? You bet it does!

The Accountability Shift

Most people agree that individuals need to take personal responsibility to apply what they have learned in training programs. However, research clearly has demonstrated that managers play a more important role in transfer of learning than even the learners themselves. In their landmark book, *Transfer of Training: Action-Packed Strategies to Ensure High Payoff from Training Investments*, Mary Broad and John Newstrom found that manager involvement pre- and post training played the most significant role in ensuring that new skills and insights are applied on the job. In other words, the degree to which managers provide reinforcement, create a supportive environment and hold people accountable for changing behavior directly impacts the degree to which individuals use what they learn.

An external performance coach guiding an employee can produce the same result. Executive coach Marshall Goldsmith found that managers who provided consistent follow-up during and after these kinds of coaching interventions generated the greatest level of leadership growth in the individuals being coached. In Goldsmith's study, when managers provided no follow up, 34 percent of people said there was no perceptible change in the leadership effectiveness of the person being coached, and only 6 percent said that the person being coached was more effective. When managers provided consistent, periodic follow up, only 4 percent noticed no perceptible change in leadership effectiveness, while 55 percent observed that the person being coached was a more effective leader.

As we've just seen, the individual's manager plays the key role in the success of both training programs and coaching processes. On one level, we can attribute the power of the manager to their ability to hold individuals accountable to adopt new behaviors. But something else must be going on here. Perhaps it's the manager's continued involvement that provides a constant reminder to apply new skills. Or, maybe individuals keep thinking about utilizing new behaviors because they know that they will be measured on their success. Either way, the continued focus on new skills ultimately translates into new behaviors.

Individuals who consistently think about and apply their new skills will establish new behavioral patterns that lead to greater levels of success. People who consciously and deliberately take steps to re-hardwire their brains will see tremendous personal growth, whether the manager is involved or not.

Brain-Friendly Employee Development

Organizations spend thousands to millions of dollars investing in employee development. To maximize this investment, trainers, coaches and managers can take several critical steps to help people learn new skills that last forever.

These steps include:

- Teaching people how the brain learns and promoting the use of visualization and affirmation to establish new hardwiring
- Providing coaching after training programs to direct learning into patterns of new behaviors
- Offering online learning to follow up classroom-based training sessions to reinforce new behaviors.
- Encouraging managers to provide feedback to create positive emotions around new hardwiring, which reinforces and solidifies the behaviors.
- Holding people accountable to apply new skills, as this causes individuals to remain conscious of behavioral expectations and to using the new skills. This reinforces new hardwiring.

Organizations that create brain-friendly learning are most likely to implement training initiatives that generate lasting results. Instead of spending a full day in the classroom teaching new skills, spend a half day. Then, spread the remaining half?which the individual would have spent in the classroom?over the next month in 30-second to two-minute visualizations, affirmations and self-reflections. Only then will individuals truly be using their brains as partners in learning.

Merrick Rosenberg is the co-founder and chief learning officer of Team Builders Plus in Cherry Hill, N.J. Merrick has served as a facilitator, performance coach and management consultant for more than 15 years.

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