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# It's all in the mind

**Catherine Fox**

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Neuroleadership has entered the vocabulary faster than you can say brain

wave. But is it a fad or a new way forward?

NO MATTER how many times you observe the phenomenon there's something intriguing about the metamorphosis of a new management trend. From relative obscurity or an unrelated field of expertise an idea is plucked, packaged and pitched to a business audience, buoyed by some media hype.

As science produces more fascinating details about the way the brain works, the prefix "neuro" is being attached to disciplines from marketing to economics and finance. Neuroleadership refers to a blend of certain findings from neuroscience with a set of leadership practices and principles designed to encourage more consultative, creative and empathetic corporate chiefs.

There's little doubt the topic is fast attracting plenty of fans as well as a few high-profile critics. So what is neuroleadership actually about? There are four elements of brain function that are deemed most applicable to business leadership: the ability to think more creatively and use intuition by improving attention and changing thinking habits; the ability to interconnect and empathise, which is enhanced when we have lower-frequency brain waves or slow down our thinking; the understanding of how the brain reacts to change and the need for positive feedback to help create and reinforce new ways of operating; the health effects on the entire body from the brain continually working under chronic stress and with excess adrenaline.

Neuroscience aficionados are particularly keen on evidence from magnetic resonance imaging of the brain which shows that, far from being born with a fully wired brain, we progress through life with our grey cells constantly making new connections.

At least some of the current interest in the topic has been fanned by Australian coach David Rock who (with co-author Jeffrey Schwartz) wrote "The Neuroscience of Leadership" for the US publication *strategy+business* last year.

"We have an incredible ability to change, an immense capacity for new connections," Rock writes in

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his book *Quiet Leadership* (HarperCollins, 2006). "If we want to hardwire a new behaviour we just need to give our new mental map enough attention over enough time to ensure it becomes embedded in our brain."

So if business management wants to improve people's performance, Rock says, their job is to support employees in finding different ways to approach situations, giving them time and plenty of positive feedback along the way.

More specifically, there are some core lessons for executives from the study of neuroscience, say Rock and Schwartz. It offers a deeper understanding of the reasons people find change so unsettling, and insight into the way people approach new tasks or manage upheaval. It also helps us understand how the human brain uses mental resources to deal with ambiguity, resolve conflict, or find creative solutions to complex problems.

That's the theory. In practice, there is still a long way to go before neuroleadership is part of mainstream organisational and leadership development. But interest is growing: the Consortium of Universities for International Studies, which runs an international MBA in Italy, hosted a conference on neuroleadership there in May this year. It was attended by corporate types from around the world including Siobhan McHale, head of the "breakout" and cultural transformation team at ANZ.

The bank has put 27,000 staff through workshops designed to give them tools for managing their reactions to change, learning and stress. Part of this is making them aware of how they can rewire their own brains during emotionally charged situations. "Instead of being immersed in upset, we teach them to press the pause button," McHale says. Staff are encouraged to take 10 seconds to choose whether they lose their temper and shout, or have a more creative response. The technique gives staff a common language: groups "get on the balcony" if they need to slow their thinking down collectively.

At NAB, the regional general manager, people and organisational development, Chris Blake, says his work as former chair of the Brain Research Institute - plus his wife's job in education - triggered an interest in applying some of the latest science to business leadership.

"Learning about the brain made me think about the focus in leadership on self-awareness and understanding your behaviour and the impact on others," says Blake. "Looking at that it occurred to me that in the future it will not be about the way you behave but the way you think. It's a natural extension of self-awareness."

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At this stage, Blake says the organisational application is limited because it is being applied individually rather than as an organisational program. Nonetheless he sees interest escalating in the future. "What's going to happen over the

next decade is a coming together of how people develop better behaviour and brain science, which will inform the tools and techniques to do that."

This is already happening in education, he points out, where the work on leadership by Harvard Graduate School of Education academic and author of the bestseller *Changing Minds* (Harvard Business School Press, 2006), Howard Gardner, has been highly influential.

What's worrying critics is just why any of the neuroleadership conclusions, albeit substantiated by recent brain studies, are different in reality from the main ideas promoted by writers such as Daniel Goleman and his book *Emotional Intelligence* (Bloomsbury, 1996). And in addition, why having a scientific case for change will actually result in shifting behaviour.

"Goleman's book was a neuroscience explanation, and that's why it was so successful," asserts Rock. "Business is interested because it provides answers in a way that leaders will pay attention to and there's a lot more room to grow in improving the quality of leadership."

Neuroleadership can transform the way we behave in business, Rock says, because it not only shows us how to manage others more effectively but also backs up its contentions with hard scientific data. And Chris Blake actually believes that increasing corporate interest in neuroscience findings will reduce the "psychobabble" that has been generated in leadership and management over recent years. "Where the science is useful is in reducing it down to something simpler, and there's enough evidence there to show there's something in this," Blake says. "In my view this is the most important innovation in leadership in the last decade."

A growing number of business school academics agree. Daniel Byrnes, a consultant and lecturer in leadership and change management at Australian School of Business in Sydney attended the recent neuroleadership talkfest in Italy. At the end of the conference, says Byrnes, there was a discussion about what neuroscience means for how we perceive the leader's role.

"A lot of people say this is the same as Daniel Goleman's emotional intelligence but for me it goes well beyond what Goleman did on EQ," Byrnes says. "It puts a lot of science behind it and it's a lot broader. Goleman said 'here's the amygdala' [the part of the brain involved in processing emotions] but it's not a one-off thing. What we want to know is an appropriate level of amygdala response to a

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situation. So this gives us the next step beyond EQ."

With many years' experience of talking to business people about topics such as emotions and spirituality, Byrnes says when the idea can be backed by science it is easier to accept. "We can measure this stuff," he adds.

However, neuroleadership sceptics sense a repackaging exercise and question some of the claims about how our new knowledge about brain function will actually translate to a business setting. In an article on the boom in neuroleadership in BusinessWeek ("The Business Brain in Close-Up", July 23, 2007), leadership academic Warren Bennis, of the University of Southern California, expressed concern at the potential for "people being taken in by the language of it and ending up with stuff we've known all along". The article Rock co-authored on the subject may have been the most downloaded from the strategy+business website last year, but Bennis thought it "was full of banalities".

The problem for the critics is not in the details of the science, nor even whether it is being correctly interpreted, but the degree to which business leaders can use such information to change how they behave. There are no shortage of examples showing that the best business advice, backed by extensive academic research, is often completely ignored by executives waylaid by short-term goals, norms of "strong" leadership and enormous commercial pressure.

While visiting Australia recently, Howard Gardner sounded a note of caution on neuroleadership. Given his theory of multiple intelligences laid the groundwork for much of Goleman's EQ work, and that Gardner's focus is cognition and learning, it is no surprise he believes neuroscience can provide many insights, including to those in the business sector, but that there are limits to its application.

"I'm a little dubious about neuroleadership at this point," he warns. "I think people are interested and management should monitor what is coming out of new science but people shouldn't do anything different because of neuroscience. It's in understanding of certain problems, such as dyslexia, that it is important. I can't think of anything a leader should do differently because of what we know about the brain. Daniel Goleman gives a scientific basis to things people who focus on leadership would do anyway. Neuroscience will come of age in non-neuroscience areas when knowledge of what you would do differently appears."

The only exception at this stage, Gardner says, is the impact neuroscience may have on marketing decisions and consumer practices. So what does he think is fanning the enthusiasm from business?

"I think that sometimes the very same business people who are extremely deliberate about their

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decisions in business become unduly euphoric and enthusiastic about stuff which in the cool light of reason shouldn't change them," Gardner says. For example, the skills of a good sportsman or sports coach don't actually tell you how to run a business.

"In order to be an effective person in business - which I certainly am not - you need to be able to think expansively and overcome your doubts," Gardner says. "But that's very different from getting some tips about how to manage your executives from watching a sports coach, for example. I

think people like Goleman tap into a natural enthusiasm and cater to those aspects."

Others warn about potential dangers in using neuroscience as more than a tool for understanding how and why people think and behave in certain ways. A posting on the blog [businesspundit.com](http://businesspundit.com) in July said: "It can be very useful in all fields of business. But it's a long, long way from the ability to be used as a screening tool or to provide any kind of roadmap for what leader brains should look like."

Still, proponents say they are not claiming miracles on behalf of neuroleadership but that it validates more effective ways of leading and behaving - something that is desperately needed in many organisations. "This is not saying things that are new but it is explaining it differently and validating existing things," says Rock. "I observed hundreds of interactions over five years of coaching and most of them didn't get anywhere. Every once in a while something useful would happen in a conversation and there was a pattern. I had no way of explaining that. I was teaching at NYU [New York University] for three years on coaching, and neuroscience leapt to the fore as having the best explanation."

CEOs and board directors are becoming more receptive to many of the ideas of neuroleadership, says consultant Katharine McLennan of the Mettle Group. She knows of many senior executives who are using meditation, for example, but the use of a new framework backed by scientific evidence will make a difference. "We've always known about it, but people hear the science," she says.

One thing's for sure: the articles, books, conferences and workshops on this topic are turning from a trickle into a torrent. Last month the Australian School of Business ran a seminar on neuroleadership and a major Australian conference is planned for next year. And with research on the brain only just scratching the surface, there will no doubt be plenty more information tailored for the business audience coming to a workplace near you. B

Resources

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Five Minds for the Future

Howard Gardner Harvard Business School Press, 2007

The Mind and the Brain

Jeffrey Schwartz HarperCollins, 2003

Quiet Leadership

David Rock HarperCollins, 2006

The neuroscience of leadership

David Rock & Jeffrey Schwartz strategy+business, summer, 2006

[www.neuroleadership.org](http://www.neuroleadership.org)

Emotional Intelligence

Daniel Goleman

Bantam, 1995

Research

Cerebral studies

The NeuroLeadership Institute, formed following the May summit at the Consortium of Universities for International Studies in Italy, is planning research in areas that include:

- \* Attention: exploring how attention itself creates change in one and many brains
- \* Innovation: understanding the physiology of insight and how to better solve complex challenges
- \* Critical thinking: understanding the physiology of problem solving and decision making

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\* Expectation research: how our expectations affect perception

\* The social brain: the science of how we influence each other

Cultural issues to be examined are:

\* Systemic application of all the areas mentioned above

\* The neuroscience of engagement and employee retention

\* The neuroscience of career development.

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