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## Want to Be a Truly Exceptional Leader? Neuroscience Says Do These 5 Simple Things Right Now

By Bill Murphy Jr. May 29, 2020, Inc.com

**People's brains react to extreme stress in predictable ways. Here's how to make that work positively as a leader.**



About one-third of Americans have exhibited signs of anxiety or depression in the wake of Covid-19, according to the Census Bureau, and your employees are likely no exception.

They're looking to you as a business leader for guidance. But the context has never been more confusing, and the stakes have never been higher.

Looking for a road map, I talked recently with Dr. David Rock, who has a doctoral degree in neuroleadership and who teaches Fortune 100 companies to lead employees according to principles of neuroscience.

The number one thing leaders need to understand right now, Rock said, is that so many people are reacting neurologically to high levels of threat perception, which leads them to process everything else differently than they normally would.

So, there are five things he says to do as a leader to turn these kinds of fears into a real, positive advantage:

### **1. Offer positive feedback and encouragement**

Frame your messages to employees in a positive light whenever possible. At the least, try to avoid negativity and discouragement. The reason is that our brains automatically track our perception of status, and people are especially sensitive right now to cues that their status has gone up or down. There's a biological basis, Rock said: "Status, controlling for income and education, correlates to length of life, and so any potential drop in status becomes an alert, even in the best of times."

So, what do you do, practically speaking? Rock gave the example of a boss checking in on an overdue project. When an employee is already at a high threat level, a boss saying something like, "Have you finished that project?" can seem like a personal attack.

To overcome this, Rock said, shift your language slightly: "Instead of, 'Have you finished that project?' you ask, 'How's that project going?'"

It's not about lowering expectations. It's about leveraging neurological responses to help people succeed--and help your business survive and even thrive.

## **2. Strive to create certainty**

The more variables you can remove from employees' lives right now, the better. So share information. Try to create certainty for them.

"When you give people any information at all," Rock said, "it activates the reward networks in the brain because the brain craves information. Any kind of ambiguity, on the flipside, creates a threat response."

Even small, seemingly insignificant things like scheduling can make a big difference.

As an example, Rock said, "If you don't know if a meeting is happening or not, it creates an alert signal in the brain that keeps getting attention. In some studies, ambiguity creates a stronger threat response in the brain than an actual threat."

Oh, and don't keep unwelcome news to yourself. The fact of being uncertain about things, especially if people's imaginations take charge in these circumstances, might be worse than the reality.

"Ambiguity and uncertainty is debilitating right now," Rock said. "So you're better to assume people can handle it, and share bad news early."

## **3. Offer unexpected autonomy and flexibility**

Many companies are embracing flexibility out of necessity right now.

Rock suggests going a step further, and offering unexpected autonomy and flexibility, because "the brain craves a sense of control, and when we feel like we have no control or no choices, even a small stress becomes overwhelming."

Be creative if you can. This is a time to think about processes that perhaps can be suspended during unusual times. Indeed, the fact that you're clearly trying to come up with solutions for your people, and offering them flexibility they had never imagined you would give, can have as much positive effect as the flexibility itself.

"It's all about the perception, so suddenly having an unexpected amount of control is really powerful," Rock said. "If your people had to report every day, and you say, 'Hey, we trust you; check in if you need help, but don't report,' they'll be like, 'Wow, that's great.' Unexpected rewards are the strongest--much like the opposite of an unexpected threat."

## **4. Model empathy**

Next up: empathy. Human brains naturally sort everybody they interact with into one of two categories, according to neuroscience.

Everyone else is considered either:

- "Ingroup," which encompasses people who you believe are similar to you, have similar goals, and should be trusted; and
- "Outgroup," which suggests a concern that people will be exploitative: they're dissimilar and have competing goals, and should not be trusted.

You want your people to perceive you, your leadership, and their colleagues as "ingroup." The trick to making that happen is to strive for empathetic relationships. Again, this is especially true now, when so many other factors are leading their brains to perceive threatening signals.

"Most of your employees, unless they survived a war, this is the toughest moment of their life," Rock told me. "Their brains are on fire and you have to stop. You have to have deep empathy."

### **5. Emphasize shared goals, fairness, and cooperation**

Covid-19 and the business and economic fallout are affecting people in different ways. So, after empathy, the next goal is to establish cooperation and fairness.

Perhaps you have some employees who are "at 130 percent," as Rock put it, meaning they're actually more productive and happy working at home. But you might have others in the exact opposition situation: working at "30 percent."

As Rock put it: "Are you expecting the same output from people homeschooling three kids from home, as someone in an apartment?"

So, watch out for a "crisis of fairness." One solution might be to ask the "130s" to help out the "30s" for a period of time. Not everyone will react well to that, but many will, Rock suggests.

"In a crisis, in plain English, feeling like you're being helpful to other people--especially if they're in your 'ingroup,' like colleagues--is intrinsically rewarding," he advised. "It turns down your stress level. So, it's a win-win."

### **Now is the time**

Of course, it's difficult to give blanket leadership advice in times like these. Companies differ, and leadership styles differ. You know your people and your business.

But brain science is remarkably constant. That provides an opportunity, and the way you choose to lead will likely become "part of the folklore in your company" for years to come.

"There are two types of leaders right now," Rock said. "There are those who are really exhibiting empathy, making sure that people feel heard and taken care of. And there are leaders who are just trying to lead through goal setting and stretching people. I think the ones that will succeed are the ones who take care of people best, because this is a deeply human crisis."

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