



Neuroscience for Organizational Communication

A Guide for Communicators and Leaders

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Every brilliant experiment, like every great work of art, starts with an act of imagination.

—Jonah Lehrer, *Proust Was a Neuroscientist* (2007)

The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.

—credited to George Bernard Shaw (n.d.)

*For my amazing brother, Captain Anthony McHale of the Ventura
County Fire Department, the most gifted communicator I know*

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INTRODUCTION

My purpose in writing this book is to show how neuroscience might just be a game-changer for organizational communication. As you will learn in the coming pages, the promise of neuroscience is that it facilitates an unlocking of energy in organizations, tapping into new discoveries about human cognition, emotional regulation, collaboration, and behavior. I believe that using neuroscience to change how we communicate in organizations will help transform them for the better.

I am in a unique position to help translate neuroscience to communicators. Prior to becoming a psychologist, I had a long career in corporate communications and executive speechwriting—mainly working for big European investment banks, in New York, Europe, and most recently in Asia. I enjoyed my career in Comms, and genuinely liked working for big, global organizations with juicy challenges and awesome colleagues. But I had always thought about getting a doctorate, and in 2015, I went back to school to pursue one in the new field of leadership psychology.

My decision to study leadership sprang from a desire to go deeper in terms of understanding what organizational behavior is all about. The catalyst was my work as a speechwriter working for a CEO in Hong Kong. I deeply respected and admired my boss, and I grew curious about how my colleagues, at all levels of the organization, interacted with him. I was also fascinated by how clients and external people interacted with him—and how those interactions were different. I was surprised by how group behavior changed when he entered a room, and then again when

he exited. I noted how people curried favor, attempted (both covertly and not so covertly) to manipulate him, and how a few gravitated toward becoming a strange kind of corporate groupie in his entourage, basking in the glow of his authority. I also noticed, from numerous instances in my own career, how the relationship with a boss could make or break the experience of working for an organization—how great leaders could be immensely inspiring, and how poor leaders could utterly demotivate and dishearten. I noticed how conflicts between leaders impacted morale and created a sense of tribal identity in teams.

I found a remarkable program, that punches well above its weight, at a small school in Boston called William James College. Leadership Psychology is a highly interdisciplinary field. It is not officially recognized as a specialty or subspecialty by the American Psychological Association—though perhaps one day it will be. It is a singular combination of leadership and followership theory, systems theory, adult developmental psychology, coaching psychology, and neuroscience. And it's completely wonderful.

I still remember looking up the program online and feeling my energy shift when I started reading about it. I would love to know what neural pathways were activated at that moment. (Well actually, since I was reading, it started with the visual cortex, which activated the orbitofrontal cortex, which is involved in the cognitive aspects of decision-making. My emotional experience suggests that the amygdala, anterior insula, and ventral occipito-temporal regions were also activated, as these are associated with the sense of intuition (Pillay, 2011). But I digress...). The important thing, in this long story, is that it was in my doctoral program that I discovered one of the great loves of my life, and that is neuroscience.

The neuroscience of leadership (also known as *neuroleadership*) is an interdisciplinary field that explores the neural basis of leadership and management practices (Rock & Ringleb, 2013). Neuroleadership is touted for its ability to use empirically-proven brain research as a basis for understanding and promoting more effective leadership behaviors, particularly for business people, who are more inclined toward “hard” science. I took my first neuroscience class (taught by the amazing Dr. Kathryn Stanley), and it changed the arc of my academic journey as well as my career. I jumped at the chance to be in the first cohort that could choose an area of emphasis in neuroscience. Soon I was dissecting sheep brains and learning about the differences between qEEGs and fMRIs.

My concentration in neuroleadership provided an extraordinary opportunity to survey this emerging field. Neuroleadership is being researched through a variety of lenses, including leadership development (Boyatzis, 2014; Pillay, 2011); human needs and consistency theory (Ghadiri et al., 2014); organizational change (Coe, 2010); behavior change (Berkman, 2018); employee motivation and organizational growth (Swart et al., 2015); decision-making, problem-solving, emotional regulation, collaboration (Ringleb & Rock, 2013); and executive coaching (Habermacher et al., 2014; Boyatzis & Jack, 2018; Pillay, 2011). There is also a growing field studying the cross-cultural applications of neuroscience to organizations, including cross-cultural training (Glazer et al., 2016) and intercultural competency development (McHale, 2019).

But I noticed a gap in the literature when it came to the ever-critical issue of *communication*—not in terms of the individual mechanics of human communication (which has been well studied)—but communication on the organizational and system level, in the corporate, governmental, and non-profit spheres. With this book, I am hoping to remedy that gap and extend the field of enquiry.

This book is not intended to be the definitive guide to the topic, nor does it include any original research. What it does do is synthesize the work of others—phenomenal researchers in neuroscience, neuroleadership, and psychology—and translate them to the practice of organizational communication. Although it is an academic book, I have written it primarily for communications practitioners, organizational leaders, HR specialists, and others who have an interest in communication. I have also written it for graduate students studying communication, psychology, and management. And I hope it will also be of interest to those in the neuroleadership field more broadly.

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