



The Neuroscience of **Business**

# ENGAGED

THE NEUROSCIENCE BEHIND  
CREATING PRODUCTIVE PEOPLE IN  
SUCCESSFUL ORGANIZATIONS



**AMY BRANN**

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"Mix timeless wisdom with modern neuroscience and you get *Engaged*, a terrific new book from Amy Brann. Upon immersing yourself in this evidence-based approach, you'll see and understand organizational behavior in an entirely new light and you'll be well equipped to elevate your people, your team and your bottom line. Both insightful and practical, this is a very relevant book!"

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"*Engaged* takes contemporary neuroscience theory and applies insights that will equip organizations to be both productive and fulfilling places to work. Engaged brains can make all the difference."

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"*Engaged* tackles with ease some of the most uncomfortably complex topics facing many modern organizations and business leaders. Drawing on a wealth of experience from people in the know, this book weaves a story using neuroscience as the thread, systematically demystifying difficult concepts. What I love about it is that you can take exactly what you need from it – whether it is something for the here and now from the 'What Can I do Today' feature, or a more detailed insight for example into the role of neurotransmitters in healthy brain function. *Engaged* is an invaluable companion for business champions of change."

— **Paul Carter**, *Behavioral Neuropsychologist*

"Amy & Synaptic Potential have some really interesting ideas and approaches to organizational culture and engagement – I look forward to watching them develop even further with practical implementation."

— **Cathy Brown**, *Exec Director, Engage for Success*

"*Engaged* is as inspiring as it is insightful. It's a fact that an organization's culture and strategy dictate business success and it is always the people within organizations that determine the level of that success. *Engaged* is one of those great books that brings all of that together in such a meaningful way. The book is underpinned with science and practical examples, which can be applied in your organization right now. It's time to change the game and bring more meaning back to the workplace. You can start that process today by applying the insights from this fantastic book!"

— **Ben Whitter**, *Organisation and People Development Manager*,  
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"In *Engaged*, Amy Brann writes in her natural, accessible style, allowing Learning & Development professionals to understand and access concepts of neuroscience clearly and with relevance. In our time strapped world, it is so important to have full engagement in the workplace. In a profession which is often perceived to take people's engagement away from 'the work,' L&D can benefit with knowing more about creating engaging, less disruptive learning interventions. *Engaged* talks through how to do that, plus covers the all-important why too, and adds real stories from professionals in the L&D field.

Amy demonstrates, in *Engaged*, her experience and value to the study and research of neuroscience in a way which relates clearly to a business focus, particularly company cultures and environs. As L&D heads more towards consultative partnering within business rather than transactional course booking, having a better understanding of how to engage with business units and operational managers is of immense benefit. Just as L&D is going through a mind-set shift itself, the ideas in this book are pushing the whole of business to evolve better environments and philosophies; that cannot come soon enough, in my opinion."

— **Michelle Parry-Slater**, *LeD Director,*  
*Kairos Modern Learning*

"ENGAGEMENT starts with capital 'E' — it is EVERYONE'S responsibility to keep self and others engaged and motivated. Using this book raises the awareness that it is not a manager's or an organization's duty – it is each single person in an organization to drive engagement in order to achieve better results. No excuses anymore: this book gives the reader evidence and practical tools to make engagement finally happen."

— **Dr. Tobias Kiefer**, *Global Learning Leader,*  
*EY & Chairman, Q595 GmbH*

"With businesses under pressure to perform, they often overlook one of the most critical elements for their success: the correct utilization of human resources. Achieving optimization and performance requires understanding the underpinning of human cognition and using it to shape businesses. This book understands that most businesses today actually work against the nature of human performance, and that taking insights from neuroscience can really improve their performance. Read this book to gain understanding of these issues and how to move forward."

— **Dr. Itiel Dror**, *University College London and*  
*Cognitive Consultants International*



### The Neuroscience of Business series

Neuroscience is changing our understanding of how the human brain works and how and why people behave the way they do. Properly understood, many of these insights could lead to profound changes in the way businesses interact with their employees and customers. The problem is that, until now, most of this research has been published in specialist journals and has not made its way to managers' desks. At the same time, however, business leaders and managers are faced with a plethora of extravagant claims based on misunderstood, or exaggerated, neuroscientific research.

Palgrave's The Neuroscience of Business series seeks to bridge the gap between rigorous science and the practical needs of business. For the first time this series will describe the practical managerial applications of this science in an accessible, but in-depth, way that is firmly underpinned by a clear explanation of the science behind the management actions proposed.

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Creating Productive  
People in Successful  
Organizations

# Engaged

Amy Brann

*Director, Synaptic Potential Ltd, UK*

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# About the Author

Amy Brann studied medicine at UCL before moving into the developing field of neuroscience and becoming a pioneer in the application of this cutting edge science to the art of developing people. She is an experienced executive coach (with over 12,000 hours of coaching behind her), a regular speaker on the application of neuroscience to leadership & HR, and is the director of Synaptic Potential, a consultancy offering neuroscience-based people management and leadership development services. She is the author of *Make Your Brain Work* and *Neuroscience for Coaches*.

# Thanks

This book would not have been possible without the hard work, time, and willingness to share of so many people. I am very grateful to the scientists in labs around the world doing cutting-edge research and sharing this with us. I am also inspired and thankful to the people and organizations that are doing things with their people at the center of their focus.

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## **Further Resources**

Please visit this book's website for further resources:

[www.engagedbrains.com](http://www.engagedbrains.com)

# Introduction

For the field of human resources a huge opportunity lies ahead: To reconnect with what being human means and to shape organizations to best work with this human nature.

Organizations should be more like preparing for parties.

There is normally a lot to do to set a party up to be fun, run smoothly and for people to enjoy themselves, in short, for it to be a success. People like their parties to be remembered for a long time. People love parties; they look forward to going, to meeting old friends, and making new ones. We could even say we are wired to party.

Don't get me wrong – all parties are different. There are the crazy ones where the music is loud and people dance a lot. There are the sophisticated dinner parties where everything is a little more cerebral. There are even the children's parties where the games are quite different and there are normally at least some tears. Preparing for each party is a little different; however, they do all tend to share some common traits.

The preparing-for-a-party bit can be quite a surreal experience. One of my favorite party preparation encounters lasted a long time. The intensive bit was for the five days before the party. Around 50 people came together to enjoy each other's company and carry out the final preparations. Some

people knew each other from before, but many did not. Everyone came together with the big picture in mind: On Saturday there would be a big party with lots of guests. Everyone who came had different skills. Team players included a qualified electrician, great cooks, physically strong people, a couple with *lots* of energy, someone who was always happy to vacuum, another great at taking care of dogs, a couple of lovely beauticians, people who could drive, people who could make things look good, and many more.

There were some plans, certain things needed to happen, once people knew the overarching vision, though, they were quite self-sufficient. People seem to choose jobs that they were good at and enjoyed. Then they got on with it. There was no need for performance reviews. If people had a problem, they asked someone else for help.

Now, preparing for parties can be hard work for sure. Blowing up 30 balloons can take it out of you. Carrying heavy pieces of furniture, decorating four-tiered cakes, or working out solutions to problems that have just arisen can be taxing. However, some central themes, underpinned by neuroscience, seem to pull people through.

It feels great to step back during a party and know that you helped make this happen. Knowing that your contribution made a difference; being able to see the fruits of your hard work; hearing your friend thank you for showing up and being you – it all makes you feel good.

When you're preparing for a party, the very experience changes the chemicals that flood your brain and body. It is likely oxytocin, serotonin, and dopamine along with many more flow through you. The neural pathways you activate make it easier for them to be activated again. You strengthen your ability to do the things you do and be the way you are being for next time.

You connect with people. You feel more engaged because of this connection. The culture, or vibe perhaps in party-speak, shapes how things unfold. Certain ambiances and environments make the desirable vibe more likely. The way people connect is then affected and how they feel and are able to contribute is impacted.

People turn up *engaged*. They are self-motivated and the management creates itself. The “objectives” are met while at the same time people enjoy themselves. In this instance, they were excited on Monday and felt fulfilled on Friday. (The party also went wonderfully on Saturday.)

*They are self-motivated  
and the management  
creates itself*

## ／ The Approach

Although it is likely we have just met, I have a favor to ask of you. That is to set aside your previous models of human resources and learning and development (henceforth HR and L&D). They were created before we understood what we do now about the brain. They could be holding you back. The paradigms, the rules, the systems, the processes – set them side – if you have a blank slate then after reading this book you might design things differently. In order to get the most out of your brain as you enjoy dancing with new ideas, you’ll benefit from setting aside “what is” so you can fully play with “what could be.”

Before I started writing books, whenever I bought one I would skip the introduction and jump right into the “juicy content.” Now I’m tuned into the priming potential of an introduction.

I am driven by a deep desire to see people be happy. There is a lot to do in this lifetime, and feeling miserable every Sunday through to Wednesday because of work seems like a waste to me. I want to see people with a positive anticipation about Monday morning and feeling fulfilled on Friday afternoons. Positive psychology tells us that many good things come when people are in positive states. It doesn’t make sense then for us to accept the current reality where so many people are unhappy about their work experience.

This book isn’t designed or written to make anyone sound clever, it is to stimulate ideas and give you scientific backing to take those ideas to people who, together with, you can transform what exists already into something even better. Most HR and L&D professionals, leaders, and managers don’t have the capacity to go through hundreds of scientific



papers to evaluate their current ways of shaping their organization. This resource has started the hard work for you, good luck in the next stage of your journey.

### Why Is Neuroscience so Exciting?

Neuroscience is providing insights into how we work. Organizations have their own agendas and goals. They also have their own ways of trying to advance towards those goals. Neuroscience challenges some of the basic ethos that are still being taught in business schools.

Neuroscience, the scientific study of the brain, has experts around the world uncovering new information about how the brain works. To scale up the applications from neuroscience often takes some reflection and translation. The challenges some people make to the practice of applying neuroscience, in particular, suggesting neuroscience is concerned with the micro, carry weight, but the firmer understanding of the micro enables us to better understand and place the macro behaviors.

At Synaptic Potential, our belief is that neuroscience adds another layer of valuable information. We use it in combination with insights from other disciplines, such as psychology, behavioral science, positive psychology, neuroeconomics, and more. This approach enables us to see more clearly than relying on only one lens. In the past, disciplines were much more segregated, like in organizations where departments work in silos. Thankfully we're seeing much more interdisciplinary collaboration. This is accelerating our understanding of people and ability to work more effectively with them.

### Why Is Neuroscience Fundamental to HR and L&D?

As often happens, asking why neuroscience is fundamental to HR and L&D, which happens frequently, misdirects our attention. The reality is that neuroscience is fundamental to the *whole* organization. Many believe one of the challenges HR has faced is that it has been relegated to an administrative function rather than a strategic one.<sup>1</sup> The ideal is for HR to work synergistically with and for the organization. This makes logical sense and has been correlated with better business results. What form that

needs to take practically is not prescribed by neuroscience. The aim of the business partner model developed by Ulrich is “to help HR professionals integrate more thoroughly into business processes and to align their day-to-day work with business outcomes.”<sup>2</sup> That sounds like a good aim. It is possible there may be more creative ways of achieving that goal. I know this may sound crazy but some organizations do not even have a “HR function.”

## Back to the (Imperfect) Question...

Imagine you are driving along a long road. You have a destination you planned to reach and wanted a smooth journey with minimal discomfort. Your car breaks down. Luckily, two people stop to help you out. The first person had watched a program on pistons last night. He starts saying some things that indicate he knows what he is talking about – but only in relation to pistons. The second person, on the other hand, is a mechanic. She spends her days with the whole engine, she knows all the components well and how they interact. Who would you rather help fix your car? Now, it may just be that you’ve run out of oil and your warning light has broken. It may however be more complex.

With humans it is often more complex. An individual is just that. One problem in organizations is that we are often trying to systemize things and end up treating people as if they are someone they are not. Motivation, how we make decisions, what is rewarding to us, how to get the best out of us, how we learn – these are all topics that can show variation between individuals. In this book, we will look at some themes. We will turn to the scientific disciplines that can inform us about how fundamentally people are motivated, how they make decisions, and how to get the best out of them. Suggestions will be made that can be applied at the global level.

However, often a challenge we see is that organizations bring individuals in to try to fix the pistons without addressing the fact that you’re out of fuel.

What we have seen clearly through speaking to and working with a range of organizations, is that HR and L&D work best when they are not a function, a department, in other words, separate. If you value your workforce then there is an awful lot that most organizations need to overhaul to really get that message across and put in place to enable them to do their best work. What constitutes HR varies a lot from organization to organization. As does what is the responsibility of HR, versus say the responsibility of a manager or the leadership team. It seems ludicrous to relegate all people matters to HR. People are often the core of an organization and subsequently everyone needs to understand and be responsible for creating optimal environments for them.

Here are some typical areas that normally come under the HR banner and some comments:

- Organization design: Any type of change management involved in redesigning an organization to be more fit for purpose will involve people and therefore it is useful to know what are some core behavioral and motivational drivers. It is also great to know how individuals could be supported in strengthening themselves so they can respond positively to change.
- Organization development: Anything that involves culture, values, enhancing performance, adaptability, and so on, benefits from understanding people. Helping to shape a workforce that is fit for the future can be done more efficiently and effectively when we understand how people change and what helps make them mentally fit. Something even as seemingly detached from people as strategy benefits from a deeper awareness of how people work, so the strategy can be going with the grain of people rather than against. It can also reduce the likelihood of undesirable side effects. If a strategy neglects some core human truths then it can cost an organization months or years in wasted efforts and outgoings.
- Resourcing and talent planning: Clearly identifying and attracting the right people for your organization is better done through understanding people. Similarly, strategizing and implementing ways to develop these people is enhanced through an understanding of neuroscience.

- Learning and development: Understanding how the brain learns impacts everything in L&D from strategy to implementation to evaluation. Previously we could only reverse engineer things, now with an enhanced understanding we can be more sophisticated in how we do things.
- Performance and reward: Reward is a big area of research in neuroscience and many of the insights are useful when we consider how we recognize and reward people. Working out how best to handle complex practices and having confidence in your decisions is easier if you know the science behind it.
- Employee engagement: Engaging people can be complex; however, neuroscience gives us insights into what is likely to produce better results. Our brain is where our emotional connection with work stems from. We can also learn from science how to communicate new ideas in a compelling way.
- Employee relations: Clarity, transparency, and certainty are things we know people benefit from, from a neuroscience perspective. Most organizations offer this through lots of policies and strategies. There may be another, more effective way.

Throughout this book several options are indirectly presented. The first is for you to keep things exactly as they are. You will have this additional information, process it, and may choose not to change a thing. The second option is to try to make some small changes. This is what most readers are likely to do. Many people feel constrained by their existing organizational set up, what the leaders do or don't buy into, and how things have always been done. The third option is to be bold.

Buurtzorg, the health care organization in the Netherlands, has a revolutionary approach now. Their teams of 10–12 nurses do their own planning, they do holiday scheduling, administration, decide how many patients they will serve, their training needs and plans, whether to grow or split their team, how to monitor their performance, and what to do if productivity drops. They don't have an HR function. It is said that they give up economies of scale and gain unbridled motivation. EY examined

give up economies of  
scale and gain unbridled  
motivation

Buurtzong and found they require on average 40 percent fewer hours of care per client than other nursing organizations. (This is ironic when you learn about their approach, which involves them spending as much time with patients as they need, rather than having only 10 minutes allocated to bath someone.) Buurtzong patients stay in care only half as long, heal faster, and become more autonomous. The estimated savings for the Dutch social security system if all home care organizations achieved Buurtzong's results are close to 2 billion euros every year.

The numbers speak volumes. However, they don't tell of the restored joy a nurse gets from doing her job properly, from giving to her community in the way she knows is best. They don't mention the fact that the nurses are excited on Monday mornings and feel fulfilled on Friday afternoons. However, the fact that absenteeism for sickness is 60 percent lower and staff turnover is 33 percent lower than traditional nursing organizations does make most people sit up and take notice.<sup>3</sup>

**A N D R E A   C A R T W R I G H T   –   H R  
D I R E C T O R ,   S U P E R G R O U P**

Do I have to justify what I think will make an impact? Yes and no, if I want to go and spend some serious money on something then I'm going to have to justify it. But you know what? You can do an awful lot quite cheaply, what I call below the radar. [...] This is not a business that really instinctively gets HR [...] the chief exec certainly wouldn't. I remember sitting down with him at one point, taking him through my beautiful strategy that I'd written and he basically said, "I haven't got a clue what you are talking about," and I realized that we were going to need to approach this in a different way. So there is an element of [taking what] I call baby steps towards a vision that my team are already clear of but we don't ever talk about in the business because it's just too much to take people on board. What they can see is us getting stuff done and doing stuff to help them work more effectively, so that you get the definition and the reward in that respect, and of course the more you do that the more people are

willing to go with the flow. Sometimes I do things and I beg for forgiveness afterwards.

## Do HR Professionals Know This?

If the premise of this book is that neuroscience is important to HR and indeed the whole organization (which it is), then it makes sense to assess where the profession is at in terms of the perceived importance. I asked almost everyone I interviewed two final questions. The second, you will read about at the end of this book. The first was around whether they believed they were shaping people's brains. The responses were fascinating.

NEIL MORRISON – HR DIRECTOR,  
RANDOM HOUSE GROUP

So we have a mission that we want to help people to do the best work of their lives and that's what we are about. What that means is providing them with the security in the environment where they can really express themselves and perform. This doesn't mean that we drive their performance; it means we allow them to perform by not getting in the way of their performance. What I think we can do is we can help people to shape their own brains. If we are shaping their brains I think we've got a bit of a problem going on, but I think if we can create a place that stimulates, engages, and empowers them, then I think they will naturally grow and hopefully that will be them shaping their brains. Your expectations are driven by your experience; I think there will be times when we will get it wrong and we will create an experience that isn't wholly great for people and will maybe in some way damage their expectations in the future. In the same way that we say that we expect people to be able to make mistakes and learn, we've got to be able to make mistakes and learn as well, and sometimes we will get stuff wrong. [...] I would say that we are allowing them the space to shape it rather than we are doing it to [them].

DAVID JAMES - FORMER L&D  
DIRECTOR, DISNEY, FOUNDER OF  
WECOMMEND.COM

I think that we had loads of opportunities and tools to help shape people's brains. I personally think a 360 experience could be just ludicrously powerful. When you think, what a gift, that pretty much everybody who's got a decision in your career at one point is offering you feedback in such a positive light. The two verbatim "Please identify the strengths that help..." I don't remember the exact wording but then the developer one was: What if I change one thing? What would have the biggest impact on my performance? There was such wonderfully worded questions that the responses... I just thought it was absolute gold to provide somebody then with the opportunity to explore that, you've got two hours session, you'd explore it with them, immerse yourself into their world, you'd understand their context so that you could help them to have some real insights, so I think that is incredibly powerful. In that respect I'd say that we had opportunities to impact people.

I think that at a more junior level as well when people have first experience, communication models, that first point in which you realize, "Oh, wait a minute, I shouldn't speak to people how I wish to be spoken to; I should speak to them how *they* wish to be spoken to," and that is the first time that you recognize that you have a preference within a framework. I'm saying that any framework is better than no framework when you are first learning, so I think that exposure to all these wonderful models and tools [...] I think it's incredibly powerful and therefore I'm just a loud speaker for incredible content and that helps to shape people.

# part I

## The Foundations

Part I is a series of introductions. You will meet the “Beautifully Simple Model that gets RESULTS,” encounter the “Winning Scientific Formula,” and learn how change really happens. We are laying foundations here. Ultimately you need a fundamental understanding of how people work and how the environment (internal and external) shapes how we work so you can make informed decisions. This may mean a transformational approach to your organization, or it may just mean making some tweaks.

You will learn that:

- Most organizations are just scratching the surface of what is possible
- Our brains are constantly being shaped
- You can change people’s behaviors

If you are new to the brain then some of the terminology used in the book may sound alien. You have two choices: either head over to the book’s website ([www.engagedbrains.com](http://www.engagedbrains.com)) and take a quick crash course; alternatively replace any neuroscientific jargon with “the brain” as you read. This book is written specifically for people in organizations who are seeking a different lens that may help them experiment with looking at new and better ways forward; it isn’t written for neuroscientists, but nor will the content be watered down.