

## Leadership in Turbulent Times, Neurosciences and Evolutionary Psychology

By Katharine McLennan

*"I shall be telling this with a sigh  
somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I ...  
I took the one less travelled by,  
and that has made all the difference"*

*Robert Frost, 1915*

### **Fearless Leadership: Can we overcome our brain's hardwiring?**

Amidst financial crises, tsunamis and earthquakes, fear prevails and plays havoc with our daily lives. Those leaders in the workplace who can recognise fear for what it is - False Evidence Appearing Real - are able to transform the negative energy of fear into courage and make choices in their decisions that concentrate on moving forward despite the obstacles. Those who cannot accept and convert their fear into courage will instead resort to hunkering down, conserving cash, and disposing of assets - and these assets are often some of the organisation's best talent or resources.

But is it possible to challenge and change our natural predisposition for fear? On the one hand, we do know that the brain's hard wiring will naturally translate major negative events as life-or-death situations to which cannot be rationally or courageously responded. On the other hand, we have found that the brain is malleable and that we can build new pathways and choose to respond differently, especially if we have awareness around the way our hardwiring works. Understanding both "hands" is essential in choosing the path less travelled by — i.e. the conscious choice of leadership.

#### **On the one-hand, our brains are hardwired to react in a certain way**

Research tells us that our brains have not fundamentally changed over the last 10,000 years. Being aware of the parts of our behaviour that are apparently hardwired in response to stress becomes even more important in these challenging economic times. Nigel Nicholson, evolutionary psychologist from the London Business School, writes about these hardwired behaviours that we all have in response to "FEAR" in the workplace:

1. Emotion before reason: The fear in the environment means that our people will use emotions first to screen information. They will hear the bad news first and loudest, and the bad news will stick to them the longest. Leaders must constantly be aware of this and ensure that emotional reactions are being attended to very carefully.

2. Avoiding loss when threatened: In a “survival” environment, human beings focus their strategy on avoiding loss. A cost-cutting environment is classic to creating fear conditions. When there are impending layoffs, people tend to put their heads down, do their job, but certainly do not take any risk. When specific layoffs are identified, some of the affected people then convert this conservatism to panic and aggression as their body is signalling to them that this is a ‘life or death’ situation. A leader understanding this will know how to respond to the tendency to loss aversion, creating a culture that rewards well-managed risk and prudent optimism.
3. Confidence before realism: The reason we exist today is because our ancestors were simply self-confident. Similarly, the leaders who will succeed in this recession environment outwardly radiate confidence to their people, comprehensively plan their contingencies, and push forward with their gut instinct, thus taking the path less travelled by.
4. Classification before calculus: We learned 10,000 years ago to make snap decisions about who was friend and who was foe to ensure we would have food from friends and would not be swindled by foes. Sitting around and doing social calculus was not a recipe for a long and lasting life. We have inherited this notion to create our self-defined groups, which can lead us to miss our most innovative thinker, who simply does not look or act like us. Therefore, leaders must constantly look for the potential in employees and catch them doing things that are right and prudently innovative.
5. Contest before collaboration: Status in tribes was usually given to men and won through competitions ending in the successor proudly displaying his status with elaborate public rituals. We see this in our culture as inordinate amounts of time and energy being spent in one-upmanship for status, regardless whether we are male or female. When we are unconscious, the contests and victory displays may consume precious resources from the necessary collaboration the organisation needs in response to the crisis.

## On the other hand, we also have the power to override these hardwired circuits

The very awareness of the hardwired circuits that we have inherited from our ancestors allows us to choose the creation of new ones with conscious intention. Research now tells us that we have the ability to use the more rational and most recently evolved parts of our brain to use reason in order to intervene and thereby carefully and optimistically take the road less travelled by. A simple four step model can be applied to achieve this:

1. Know what triggers you

Become aware of the hardwiring our brain has inherited from our ancestors, which is reflected in our tendency to see False Evidence Appearing Real when we are exposed to a perceived reduction of five key human needs including Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness . Constantly be vigilant against these conditions for fear in the workplace.

2. Know how you respond when you get stressed from the triggers

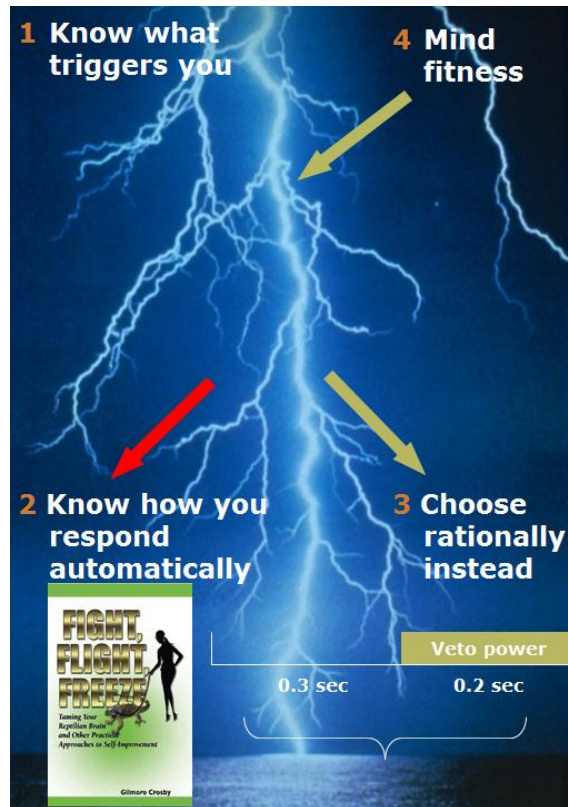
Educate yourself about how you and the people you lead specifically respond to various stresses, catching yourselves in the act of fighting, fleeing, or freezing.

3. Know how to respond rationally before "FEAR" is triggered

Practice reappraising situations and find ways to develop optimism. This can definitely be learned and wired into your brain's circuits. Your people will take your cue; optimism is contagious. You can also help them to reappraise situations, instead of simply ignoring stress, suppressing fear and keeping their head down. This is the last thing you need for your organisation and the last thing your employees need for their own physical health.

4. Keep your brain fit

Keep your mind and body fit through practising various versions of 'mindfulness'. There are hundreds of ways to develop mindfulness – from meditation to sport to gardening to simply being quiet and watching your thoughts as you ride the bus into town. Develop methods for your employees to find quiet or calm time in their day so that they can be inspired by intuition and insight. Encourage their senses of humour, which will support the optimism and actually inspire the insight even further.



**Conclusion: Effective leadership is a conscious act of choice in each moment**

At the end of the day, leadership is truly synonymous with conscious intent. The art of being aware of your brain's machinations and how you can control these machinations is quintessential in the art of leadership. "It is the brain that puts out the call, but it is the mind that decides what to listen to. We have no control over the messages the brain sends you - we only have veto power about what we act on."

## Step One of the Four Steps of Overcoming Fear in Leadership:

### Know what triggers you

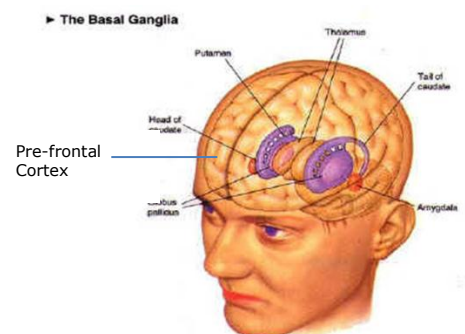
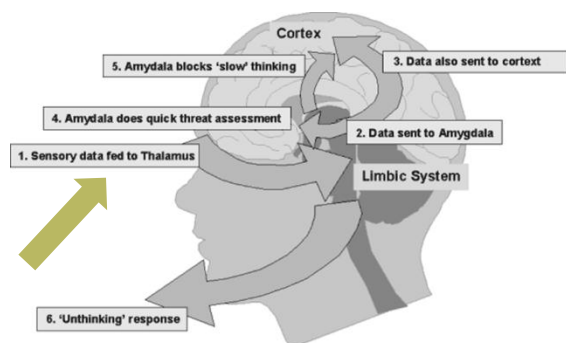
The four steps of overcoming **FEAR** ("False Evidence Appearing Real") in leadership:

1. Know what triggers you
2. Know how you respond when you get stressed from the triggers
3. Know how to respond rationally before **FEAR** is triggered
4. Keep your brain fit

The first step to working with this hardwiring lies in understanding the stressors themselves. David Rock, founder of the NeuroLeadership Institute, has integrated the research of hundreds of neuroscientists into a model of hardwiring that supports the evolutionary psychologists' model.

His SCARF model refers to the fact that we are hardwired to experience the life-or-death threat when we confront issues around a perceived loss of Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness. In the recession environment we are currently experiencing, these life-or-death threats become even more prominent. When we are triggered by such threats, our more ancestral part of our mind—the emotional limbic system often characterised by an overactive amygdala—consumes the resources (oxygen and glucose) of the brain, making fewer resources available for the overall executive functions we use in our prefrontal cortex, the source of our rational mind and our creative, working memory.

Daniel Goleman coined this process the "amygdala hijack" in his book Emotional Intelligence. Under threat, the brain is also "hyperactive," resulting in us missing the subtle clues of opportunities of an "aha" in the market. This hyperactivation makes us generalise more, which increases the likelihood of accidental connections that don't reflect what is truly happening in the market. All told, the result is that employees tend to err on the safe side, shrink from the opportunities that are perceived to be more dangerous, blow up small stressors into large stressors, and withdraw their participation in a team that may be threatening to their status. Essentially, what results is that all employees decide to take the road more travelled by and hunker down until they feel safe again.



## Status

Perceived status can be one of the most significant stressors we face. It is known to be one of the most influential determinants of human longevity and health. Our status is triggered all day long in the little conversations where someone might give us advice or suggest that our work could be improved. It flares when we are asked questions such as "Can I give you some feedback?" Status symbols such as titles, office sizes, having a secretary, or having a parking space also trigger status questions.

Now, imagine what happens to perceived status when an imminent job loss is present. For many of us, our job defines our status in life, which makes it a life or death situation in the current market. Leaders can combat this stressor by concentrating on watching status issues arise and quelling the issues before the noise in their people's minds gets too loud. They need to concentrate on giving positive feedback: catching their employees in the act of doing something right. Negative feedback only draws attention to circuits in people's minds that are not working and puts them into an even more survival mindset. Our people can't do anything with negative feedback, either; old habitual brain circuits don't disappear with more attention, particularly if it's threatening attention. It's like telling someone not to think of a pink elephant. Leaders can also reduce the competition that causes status games by getting their employees to reflect on how they each can better their own game rather than engage in one-upmanship.

## Certainty

The lack of perceived certainty will also trigger the fear response. Our brains crave certainty and operate only because of memorised patterns. Our fingers are able to open a car door not because of our conscious intent, but because of our memory of what a car door looks and feels like and our memorised patterns of arm, hand, and finger movement. Change the car door in any way, and the brain will sense an "error," which immediately triggers the automatic fear response. In contrast, the act of creating perceived certainty is rewarding in our brain. How soothing is it to enjoy the repeating patterns in music or doing something that comes naturally to us?

Now consider the complete lack of certainty in today's recession environment. It is absolutely essential that the leaders address this uncertainty both in their mind and in the minds of their followers. Regardless of whether they can truly see a clear way through the morass, they must work to define roles, lay out expectations, define the tactics, and provide the vision to their people, whose brains are not settling in the turmoil. There is no doubt that their tactics and visions will completely adjust day-in and day-out, but without that perceived certainty, employees will simply fritter their days away in anxiety, when they could have been calmly seeing the market opportunities and going after those.

We can create certainty in every hour in just little ways: being clear about the meeting's purpose and when it will end, being clear about when and how decisions about jobs will be made, or about when we will come back to a client. "Tell people what you are going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what you told them."

## Autonomy

Neuroscience also tells us that once we have the certainty, we then want the autonomy to go after our objective. People invading our autonomy by micro-managing take perceived control away from us, which also causes us to go into survival mode.

Interestingly enough, working in teams is difficult for many of us because we subconsciously perceive a decline in our autonomy. We can override this when we recognise that our status, our certainty and our relatedness can all increase in teams – as well as the most important organisational objective: the innovation that only comes from the diversity of thought processes that you get from teams. There is, indeed, a Wisdom of Crowds, as James Surowiecki writes in his book. Leaders need to set the boundaries and objectives in order to provide certainty, but then they need to trust their employees to deliver with autonomy. Allow employees to set their own ways of working, their own hours, their own workflow, and you will be amazed at the results that you get as a result of this trust. Control them like children and you will get their survival instinct kicking in immediately.

## Relatedness

Being part of the tribe is one of the critical ingredients to survival, and as soon as we feel that we are outside a group, our brain functioning will start to experience the fight or flight syndrome. Neuroscientists Matt Lieberman and Naomi Eisenberger work with functional MRI and a computerised simulation of a ball throwing game by several players. At a point in the game, the participant suddenly experiences not being thrown the ball, and the MRI picks up a response that is actually identical in strength and location in the brain to physical pain. Leaders need to watch the degree of relatedness in their people, as we all have different levels of need for it. When they begin to detect a person withdrawing from the group or the group creating an outcast, there will be serious performance declines in the work. Trust is the basis of relatedness, but it's not a warm and fuzzy trust for the sake of it. David Maister, noted expert on the "trusted advisor," has a formula for trusting someone which is based on four components: credibility of the person through their talent and skills; reliability of the person; intimacy that you have with the person and your own self-orientation towards the world in general. Each of these four components can be strengthened by leaders to ensure that relatedness in their workforce is strong, which will be particularly essential in the recession.

## Fairness

Lieberman has also shown that receiving 50 cents generated more of a reward response in the brain when it was out of a shared dollar between two people than getting \$10, when it was out of a shared \$50 between two people. Leaders need to watch the "rules" they set for some people over others such as the headcount decisions that may impair one division over others or the values that they talk about but then don't hold themselves accountable to displaying. Setting ground rules and sticking to them quiets our mind around fairness issues and lets us get on with our work. Not surprising, pay discrepancies cause enormous tensions around fairness. Even a slight reduction in senior executive salaries during times like this will go a long way to creating a sense of fairness that will calm the madding crowds. Perhaps Obama is not as crazy as we think around the fairness of senior executive pay. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) just reported last year that CEO pay at the 15 largest US companies was 521 times more than the average worker (this is up from 369 times in 2003). Across all public organisations, the US average is 183, and the Australian average is 135.

## Step Two of the Four Steps of Overcoming Fear in Leadership:

### Leadership and the Science of Stress

The second part of the model consists of understanding that we each have different methods of fighting, fleeing and/or freezing once we are triggered. Understanding what triggers us and our patterns of the survival syndrome allows us to catch ourselves in the act. Australian executive leadership expert Peter Burow has worked over the last 20 years to integrate neuroscience, philosophy, and psychology to develop an elegant model of the different “types” of survival responses, which he calls “Core Beliefs.” In his definition, core beliefs are deep-seated subconscious perceptions that we all have about the world in which we live, work and play.

Biologically, our Core Beliefs are there to help us in times of crisis, prompting instant decision-making and instant action when every second counts. Using them all the time, however, leads to burnout, stress, sickness and the feeling of being on constant alert. The adrenalin rush can be empowering for a day or so, but given that the recession is here to stay for a while, we are at risk of our minds and emotions beginning to run dry. Organisations and teams that are run by their survival patterns are stressed, tired, tactical and uncreative. Chemically, people feel unsupported and in a battle for their life.

Peter then talks about catching ourselves in our own Core Beliefs, and he identifies nine patterns of behaviour in response to crisis. Underneath of each of these nine is a basic belief about what we need in life for survival and satisfaction. When these beliefs are contradicted, especially in emotional times, the amygdala signals for some of us to become aggressive, some of us to withdraw, and some of us to put our heads down and do the job to the letter of the law. These are essentially fight, flight or freeze. We also respond emotionally from one of a possibility of three different needs: (i) acting out of approval from the need for attention (heart), (ii) acting out of anger from the need for autonomy (body), or (iii) acting out of fear/need for security (head).

When three types of responses and three types of needs are combined, the result is a possibility of nine patterns of core beliefs. Each of us has one predominant core belief we rely upon when we are triggered. These nine core beliefs are useful, as they form the patterns of what we will do in response to a hostile environment, particularly when we need to act in the immediate term. They are not useful when we pay attention to them to the extreme over our rational response.

We shouldn't just simply neglect core beliefs. The emotional energy created by our core beliefs can be used to get over our tendency to fight, withdraw, or comply. We can also use it to become incredibly powerful leaders once integration of emotion and rationality has taken place.

## The Nine Core Beliefs

Fight Flight Freeze	Heart Body Head	Gets core needs met by	Core Belief	How they are triggered	What they are like when triggered significantly
Fight	Heart	Outstanding Achievement – the Achiever	Must accomplish and succeed to be loved	When perceived as failing or not looking good or not getting credit	Inattentive to feelings of others, impatient and image driven
	Body	Being the strongest and keeping others in their place—the Protector	Must be strong to assure protection and regard in a tough world	When they perceive injustice; when others do not confront an issue; lack of candour; when other people do not take responsibility	Excessive, impulsive and suffer from too much lust
	Head	Being involved in lots of different things—the Epicure/the Entrepreneur	Must keep life up and open to assure a good life	Boredom; feeling that they are being taken seriously; receiving criticism they believe is unjust	Slothful and stubborn
Flight	Heart	Being special and unique, believing they must have the ideal relationship to be loved—the Romantic	Must obtain the longed for ideal relationship or situation to be loved	When they perceive any slight; or feeling like they are being ignored; or feeling envious or inferior	Quite moody, self-absorbed and envious
	Body	Seeing all points of view and keeping the peace at any cost—the Mediator	Must blend in and go along to get along	By anything that disrupts general peace and harmony; being confronted; others being rude or hostile	Feel incapable of facing problems: become obstinate, dissociating self from all conflicts. Neglectful and dangerous to others.
	Head	Having all the information that others need: the Observer	Must protect yourself from a world that demands too much and gives to little	By people sharing their information without permission; by receiving surprises; by situations not under control;	Uncommitted, self-serving and suffer from gluttony
Freeze	Heart	Meeting the needs of another: the Giver	Must give fully to others to be loved	By being taken for granted; being rejected; not having their efforts appreciated	Overly intrusive
	Body	Being perfect: the Perfectionist	Must be good and right to be worthy	By others not following through, another person not following the letter of an agreement; believing they have been deceived	Dominated by anger
	Head	By knowing where the danger is coming from; The Loyal Sceptic	Must protect themselves from a world they can't trust	By a lack of "truthful" communication; abusive authority; being under pressure; lack of commitment	Over-fearful and phobic

## Step Three of the Four Steps of Overcoming Fear in Leadership:

### Making the Conscious Choice

The third part of the model lies in realising that we indeed do have choice. We do not have to retreat automatically back into our Core Beliefs. Viktor Frankl, a surviving Jewish psychiatrist of the Holocaust concentration camps, taught us about this eloquently: "Everything can be taken from a man or a woman but one thing: the last of human freedoms to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way, to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one's predicament into a human achievement."

Neuroscientists argue that we can make this choice consciously, but that we have limited time after a stressor to do so. When confronted with a "perceived" threat to survival, the brain takes about 0.3 seconds to register it as a desire to fight, fly or freeze. It then has the following 0.2 seconds of "veto power" to decide consciously to create a new perception or a new story about the situation. Neuroscientists call this "reappraisal." Asking yourself whether it is really a life or death situation is the first step. This helps our brain label the situation as simply stress. Changing the story away from a stress story into an opportunity story is then a "reappraisal."

Reappraising or telling our brains another story of what it is perceiving is far more effective in terms of longevity and overall health outcomes than simply suppressing our anger or fear. The latter strategy simply forestalls the onset of disease, such as a bout with cancer or a heart attack. With suppression, there are still signals to release cortisol and adrenaline, which both signal our body to move nutrients to the extremities and away from our immune system, heart, and digestive systems. Suppression also decreases our memory functioning. Even if we attempt to distract ourselves away from the stress temporarily without reappraising the situation, the physical stress signals still return eventually.

That's not the end of the story. Our people feel the stress as well. The research shows that our people know when we are simply suppressing as opposed to reappraising the situation. Their bodies feel our stress in their own blood pressure, heart rate, and immune system functions, whether we express our suppression "out loud" or not.

Reappraising the situation through an optimistic lens is not as Pollyannish as it sounds. Renowned psychologist Martin Seligman has crunched millions of statistics to prove that optimistic organisations, sporting teams, and leaders succeed far more than their pessimistic counterparts. When pessimistic people run into obstacles in the workplace, in relationships, or in sports, they give up," he says. "When optimistic people encounter obstacles, they try harder. They go the extra mile." Seligman's research shows that businesses with the most optimistic environments also have the highest profit and customer satisfaction.

Neuroscientists can see optimism and pessimism at work in the brain through the functional MRI. When people are experiencing optimism, a part of the brain called the rostral anterior cingulate cortex, RACC, is activated, and it in turn moderates the fear response through the amygdala. Thanks to the RACC, our past may already be written, but our future is a blank slate where we can happily distance ourselves from negative experiences and move towards positive ones. Pessimism, on the other hand, monopolises the prefrontal cortex to focus on oneself and one's emotions to the exclusion of others and the external environment, inhibits motivation and inhibits our ability to make decisions.

## Step Four of the Four Steps of Overcoming Fear in Leadership:

### Keeping Your Mind Fit

The fourth part of the model lies in the fact that we can keep our mind and body fit in preparation for any stress, so that there is more chance for us to make conscious choice to reappraise the situation. If current trends continue, mental health issues, particularly anxiety and depression, are predicted to be the single major burden of disease within the next two decades, and will certainly rise significantly in this recession atmosphere. By 2030, it is predicted that depression will easily surpass the burden of heart disease.

One way to keep our mind fit is through developing a practice of “mindfulness.” The term mindfulness is being referred to more and more in leadership studies now. It is a term that was translated more than 100 years ago from the Pali word “sati” by the British scholar T.W. Rhys Davids. Psychologist William James was describing it when he wrote that:

“The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention over and over again is the very root of judgment, character and will. No one is *compos sui* [master of himself] if he have it not. An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence. But it is easier to define this ideal than to give practical directions for bringing it about.”

Mindfulness, simply defined, is nonjudgmental awareness and acceptance of the present. The mental process of mindfulness requires paying attention and self-regulation. Research is showing that long-term meditators are able to coordinate significantly more parts of their brain than non-meditators; they are able to take in more incoming data, able to make more conscious choices about their behaviour, and able to improve their mental abilities significantly. Even people that experienced meditation for the first time for just five days of training for twenty minutes per day showed higher abilities around attention. This means that they could select goal-relevant information and distinguish it from all the environmental noise. They also experienced less hostility, depression, fatigue, and tension and experienced a significant decrease in stress-related cortisol. They also experienced an increase in immunoreactivity.

The interesting reflection is that we actually all meditate. Many of us, however, meditate on resentment, anger, guilt about the past and anxiety about the future. Medicine is showing us beyond all doubt that this type of “guilt and anxiety rumination” meditation leads to increased inflammation, impaired immunity, hardening of the arteries, increase of type 2 diabetes, and an atrophying of nerve cells in the brain which are targeted by stress hormones. The specific places in the brain that appear to be affected most are areas that are important in learning, memory, decision making, reasoning, impulse control and emotional regulation. Stress and depression are risk factors for chronic illness, poor performance, cognitive decline and dementia.

Mindfulness training helps us work with our attention to more healthy thoughts which literally impact us in the moment we are having them. Mindfulness practice results in critical differences in brain function and combats many of the effects of ageing. It also prevents the classic “executive burnout” that we are seeing more and more often. This is associated with depersonalisation, emotional exhaustion, lack of motivation and little personal accomplishment.

Anxiety leads to smaller working memory spans. Mindfulness practice reduces this anxiety, allowing us to increase IQ and treat the new health crisis facing our executives: "attention deficit trait." "ADT" has now been coined as our tendency to multi-task, to not pay attention to anything very well, and to lose enjoyment of what we are doing. ADT-affected people find it difficult to prioritise, stay organised and manage time; they adopt very black-and white thinking, and they will definitely not be the ones to take us down the road less travelled by. Mindfulness therapies now abound and are teaching us that we don't have to control our thoughts, but that we don't have to be controlled by them, either. We can just observe them and let them go by without consequence.

The added benefit to mindfulness training is a greater ability for our minds to use intuition and insight. Intuition is the faint presence of a widespread unconscious that we know the answer somewhere in our mind (and for some of us, our gut). Insight is the "aha" moment that follows when we actually break through difficult problems. Neuroscientists have observed the moment of insight as it occurs. In the prior moment before the brain experiences the insight (seen as a very high-frequency "gamma" wave of activity), the brain experiences a very low-frequency "alpha" wave of quiet (a mindful state).

This isn't surprising. Anyone can tell you that they often solve problems best after sleep or after a shower or a run. At these times, the brain is in prime condition to experience the "aha" surge that must be preceded by the quieting.

Besides the required mindful state necessary, scientists are also showing that people who are in better moods are much more able to solve problems with insight. Even watching comedy films helps people solve problems more effectively. Teams that laugh together will solve problems more quickly and more insightfully. Mindfulness about the problem itself also promotes a faster "aha" moment. This means asking about the problem: "How long has this been a problem? How often does this enter your thinking?"

In a parallel world to the business world but one from which we can learn, Dr Craig Hassed, Senior Lecturer at Monash University's medical school, has become an ardent teacher of mindfulness to all of his medical students. He is seeing the same burnout in interns and residents as we are seeing in our executives. An Australian study found that eight months into their intern year, 75% of interns qualified as having burnout, characterised by depersonalisation, emotional exhaustion, lack of motivation and little personal accomplishment. Another study of American hospital paediatric residents found that depressed doctors were six times more likely to make drug prescribing errors than their non-depressed colleagues.

Craig teaches mindfulness to all the medical school students and has seen significant improvements across all kinds of physiological and psychological reactions. He calls his program ESSENCE, which stands for the combination of Education, Stress management, Spirituality, Exercise, Nutrition, Connectedness, and Environment. All executives should be aware about the profound implications of integrating these seven elements into the business workplace and into the lives of our employees in order to gain their best performance.

One needn't be new age to talk about spirituality. For most of us, spirituality can be more inclusively called our search for meaning, and we all yearn for that, as Nietzsche so elegantly argued, "He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how."

## Conclusion

Over the last four sections, we examined the four steps of overcoming **FEAR**, or “**F**alse **E**vidence **A**ppearing **R**eal”, that is:

1. Knowing what triggers you
2. Knowing how you respond when you get stressed from the triggers
3. Knowing how to respond rationally before **FEAR** is triggered
4. Keeping your brain fit

## Implications and Summary:

### What leaders need to do and even more important, who they need to be

To keep in mind above all is Viktor Frankl’s advice that we will always have the freedom to choose our attitude to any circumstance. Tell your mind to “remind” your brain constantly that this choice exists, even if it only does have 0.2 seconds to do so. Think about the four steps to seeing the world in a different way:

1. Become aware of the hardwiring our brain has inherited from our Stone Age ancestors, which is reflected in our tendency to see False Evidence Appearing Real when we are exposed to a perceived reduction of Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness, and Fairness (SCARF). Constantly be vigilant against these conditions for fear in the workplace.
2. Educate yourself about how you and your people specifically respond to various stresses, catching yourselves in the act of fighting, fleeing, or freezing.
3. Practice reappraising situations and find ways to develop optimism. This can definitely be learned and wired into your brain’s circuits. Your people will take your cue; optimism is contagious. You can also help them to reappraise situations, instead of simply ignoring stress, suppressing fear and keeping their head down. This is the last thing you need for your organisation and the last thing your employees need for their own physical health.
4. Keep your mind and body fit through practising various versions of mindfulness. There are hundreds of ways to develop mindfulness – from meditation to sport to gardening to simply being quiet and watching your thoughts as you ride the bus into town. Develop methods for your employees to find quiet time in their day so that they can be inspired by intuition and insight. Encourage their senses of humour, which will support the optimism and actually inspire the insight even further.

## Leadership is consciousness

At the end of the day, leadership is truly synonymous with conscious intent. The art of being aware of your brain's machinations and how you can control these machinations with your mind is quintessential in the art of leadership. "It is the brain that puts out the call, but it is the mind that decides what to listen to", as neuroscientist Jeffrey Schwartz argues. "We have no control over the messages the brain sends you—we only have veto power about what we act on." Perhaps we can draw comfort from one of the greatest leaders in times of difficulty, Winston Churchill, who reminds us from the past that "an optimist sees an opportunity in every calamity; a pessimist sees a calamity in every opportunity." Pulling us out of recession will require our leaders to choose optimism.

## Which road will you choose to travel by?

## Katharine McLennan



Katharine recently joined Johnson as a Partner in Leadership Advisory from the Commonwealth Bank, where she was Executive General Manager Talent and Business Unit Human Resources.

Katharine began her career as a strategy consultant with Booz Allen & Hamilton in Sydney after completing an MBA with top class honours from Stanford and a BS from Duke University, where she focused on psychoneuroendocrinology. Transforming strategy into execution became her next passion when she led the four years of operational planning and execution for the 40 competition venues of the Sydney Olympic Games between 1996 and 2000.

Since 2000, Katharine has run several leadership development practices in Australia, where she has been passionate about the neurosciences of leadership, the art of dialogue, the practice of slowing our minds to create innovation and the power of leadership development in situ—meaning development on the job, in real time, with everyday consciousness.

Katharine has a Bachelor of Science with honours from Duke University, a Masters of Arts from the University of New South Wales and an MBA from Stanford University. She is also a qualified psychotherapist.

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