

Pain and Reward at work

10th November 2016

What is it costing you to work well?

We spend a lot of time at work, and of course thinking about work when we are not actually there. In fact, these days when we are digitally "always on" we can easily continue to be at work, even when we are not - at least emotionally, if not physically. And we know that a good day at work will have a significant effect on our mood and general well-being - a bad day having the opposite effect. The more we understand about the brain, the more we see a relationship between our psychological state and our physical state. Positive feelings cause a rush of positive neurotransmitters flooding the brain and rewarding us with a great improvement in our mood. Negative emotions trigger the stress hormones that propel us towards depression, misery and pain. So when a friend says ruefully, I really think my work is killing me, they may be speaking more accurately than they or we realise.

So should we focus on living well in order to work well? or does working well enable us to live well?

Until fairly recently, it was assumed that brain development peaked in our early 20s and that it was all downhill from there as brain cells dropped away. Whilst its true that information processing peaks in our late teens (something to do with all those exams?), and short term memory capacity peaks in our mid-20s, our brains continue to change such that emotional intelligence will peak in our 40s or 50s, and what is called crystallised intelligence (measured by vocabulary skills) in our 60s or 70s. Our brains are constantly changing and developing - being shaped by and shaping the patterns that we create - patterns in our thinking, in our feeling and in our acting. And we are learning that our brain, and therefore our behaviour, is a lot more flexible, or pliable, than we first thought - which in turn opens up a lot more possibilities for change.

Changing the way we have difficult conversations

Changing how we approach that big presentation

Changing the way we lead and the way we work

By increasing our awareness of how we typically approach, create and react to situations, we can actually change the way we think, feel and behave - and that will change the physical structure of our brain and determine the extent to which we experience pain or pleasure at work. Much of the time, we are simply acting and reacting, without much thought or awareness. Whilst the results are good and whilst the outcomes we see are the ones that we want, we are unlikely to seek out or even consider a change. But when we do begin to notice our dissatisfaction with how things are - when we find we are counting the cost of continuing as we are - we are more motivated to find new patterns and seek a better reward.

Or at least we would be if we believed it was possible to change.

the SCARF model

David Rock first published the SCARF model in 2008. He suggests that our brains will make us behave in ways that minimise perceived threats, and maximise rewards - and that this primarily happens in 5 different domains. In other words, these are currencies that we value and that we are hard wired to pursue.

Status – this is our sense of worth, it's where we fit into the hierarchy at work both socially and organizationally. Status is a significant driver of workplace behaviour. If your boss has had his status threatened, it may help you to understand his behaviour, when you find that he's taking it out on you.

Certainty – clarity and certainty are important. A person's brain uses fewer resources in familiar situations than unfamiliar ones. And working with a lack of clarity can increase a person's stress levels and impair their ability to make effective balanced decisions.

Autonomy – gives a person a sense of control over what they do. A person's brain will process the lack of autonomy as a threat situation (and this will lead to more stress), whereas being promised more autonomy actually activates the reward system in the brain.

Relatedness – we're social animals, and we naturally form social groups and build relationships. These groups build mutual trust and form a barrier against the unknown. This leads to the production of oxytocin, which increases the positive feeling of trust and stabilizes these relationships. It helps build the team.

Fairness – if a person thinks something is unfair, their brain automatically goes into defence mode. A strong response from a person that removes the unfairness can activate the reward centre of the brain

Want to read more?

<https://hbr.org/2010/04/leadership-on-the-brain>

Do we need good leaders, or great ones or both?

<https://hbr.org/2016/09/the-difference-between-good-leaders-and-great-ones>

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