

# The Learning Challenge of Leadership

## Neuroscience of Influence

by M. Mohan Shukla, PMP

North American companies spent \$60 billion on training in 2002. However, several studies of training involving behavior change showed that skill improvement dropped to 10% or less three months later. [Academy of Management Journal 16, no. 2 and Journal of Applied Psychology 60, no. 4]

### Executive Summary

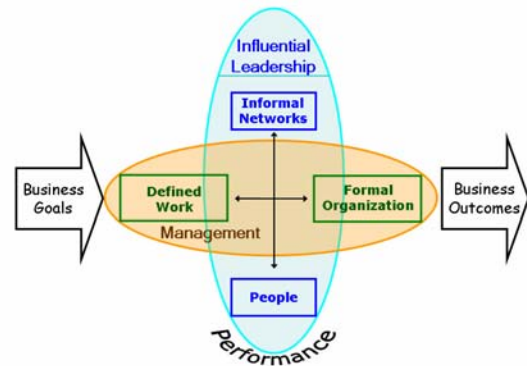
Companies invest significant resources in training employees to develop and improve leadership skills, often with few sustainable results. The challenge of acquiring and practicing behaviors that influence, motivate and energize others to align their actions with defined business goals is well understood. Recent research reveals that we deploy a different part of the brain to assimilate and apply leadership behaviors than we use to learn cognitive or technical skills. Brain functions that orchestrate memory and emotions, called "limbic", are the key to achieving lasting change in leadership behaviors, skills and competencies. Faculties dealing with technical and cognitive learning are related to the "neocortical" part of the brain. Studies show that traditional leadership training methods, that focus on neocortical learning, fail to touch the mental-emotional processes that need to be engaged for transformative change to occur. Teaching practices that incorporate limbic learning give participants a personal experience of the way these factors drive decision making and behavior. This provides insight into the dynamics of influence and helps master the techniques that drive motivation and alignment, through conscious experience.

### Skill differentiation and performance

Managers and those in positions of leadership in most organizations are high-IQ individuals. This is partly because of the challenging cognitive demands of the complex work environment and partly because they belong to a self-selected group. Individuals not possessing a keen edge for dealing with broad concepts rarely seek such responsibilities. So how does a leader differentiate himself from others? How does an aspiring executive demonstrate her unique capabilities, when the spread of managerial competencies is narrow? Even more importantly, how do organizations develop and leverage leadership talent that leapfrogs the competition?

The graphic here provides a context for such differentiation. The primary role of managers in an organization is to convert business goals into outcomes. To that end, they divide the requirements into defined work packages or activities and arrange a formal organizational structure to perform them. The knowledge area and skills required for this exercise come under the general purview of management. Planning, budgeting, production control, marketing and human resource management are examples of skills required to manage the enterprise.

Most organizations, however, have a complex and often hidden network of relationships that facilitates work that is required but is not formally defined. High performance organizations with influential leaders are able to achieve greater results by supplementing the formal structures with the passion, energy and effort of the people and the informal networks.



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### Engaging people and the organization

Influential leaders focus on two sources for this leverage. The first is "discretionary effort" which is the voluntary investment of time and attention by employees beyond their contractual or unspoken obligations. They generate strong feelings of ownership and alignment with business goals. The employees' attention, more than their time,

leads to creative solutions, higher quality work and often, exceeded expectations. That can make the difference between ordinary and extraordinary performance.

The second is tapping into the power of the informal networks to validate, inform, improve and reinforce actions and decisions made formally. In many organizations, a culture of exclusiveness creates silos that discourage alignment of goals across organizations. Influential leaders break through such barriers to collaboration and mobilize the hearts and minds of employees across organizational boundaries to a greater purpose.

## Critical leadership competencies

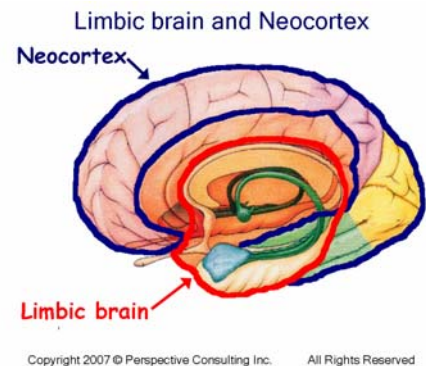
A 2001 study conducted at Siemens compared star leaders with average performers to identify unique skills that differentiated the stars. Not a single technical or purely cognitive competency emerged among the ones identified as differentiators. Achieving collaboration and teamwork, and ability to effectively lead teams were the two top skills identified.  
[*The Emotionally Intelligent Workplace* by Lyle Spencer]

## Traditional training is not the answer

Skills related to dealing with others are based in the limbic areas of the brain (seat of memory and emotions) and best learned through experience, practice and feedback. Analytical and technical skills target the neocortex (thinking part of the brain) which learns quickly. The problem is that most leadership training programs target the neocortex rather than the limbic brain.

[*Primal Leadership* by Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee]

A longitudinal study was conducted at Case Western Reserve University comparing MBA students given *limbic-brain* learning with a control group from six high-ranking programs with traditional learning. Two years after graduation, the limbic trained group retained 75% of the leadership skills learned, while the control group retained less than 4%.



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## How is limbic brain training different?

Effective leadership learning seeks to engage the limbic functions of the brain that activate the mental emotional processes, determining our effectiveness in understanding, working with and influencing others. Such workshops provide participants a personal experience of the thoughts, feelings and emotions involved in our association with others. The interaction of these factors over time creates filters which affect everything you do - not just actions and behaviors but the underlying decisions behind them. Processing of all information is filtered this way. This includes the way we understand others by their words and actions, the extent of objectivity we bring to our decisions while thinking about problems and the nature of how we communicate back with our words and actions.

First by identifying the presence of these filters and then by mapping how they affect your own effectiveness in dealing with other people, the learning sessions provide clear and tangible actions for you to take toward improvement. Consciously experiencing the mental-emotional factors in action facilitates teaching of the limbic brain. It requires the suspension of "neocortical noise," the distraction caused by the high-speed mental activity in the frontal brain, so that limbic functioning can be observed.

Specific techniques for improving your ability to connect with people, understand their motivational drivers and generating ownership can be developed using these self-mapping techniques. Results from this learning are twofold. Immediate and lasting improvement in your ability to lead and influence people is accompanied by a broadening of your own goals and potential. The latter results from the breaking through of filters that progressively shrink the scope of what you consider possible. Transformative change in your perspective begins to reveal possibilities and opportunity where none may have existed earlier.

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**Perspective Consulting Inc.** provides leadership development consulting and training including workshops on The Science of Influence for Leaders. For details on coaching support, workshops or the Nine tenets of Influence, please contact [Mohan.Shukla@withPerspective.com](mailto:Mohan.Shukla@withPerspective.com) or call (847) 372-2736.