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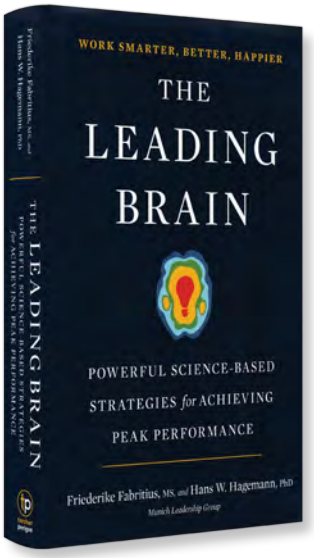
The Leading Brain

Powerful Science-Based Strategies *for* Achieving Peak Performance



By Friederike Fabritius, MS and Hans W. Hagemann, PhD

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Our understanding of how the brain works has radically shifted, exploding long-held myths and fundamentally changing the way we interact and succeed in the workplace. In *The Leading Brain*, neuropsychologist Friederike Fabritius and leadership expert Dr. Hans W. Hagemann present simple yet powerful strategies for sharpening focus, learning and retaining information more efficiently, improving complex decision-making, cultivating trust and building strong teams.

Based on the authors' popular leadership programs, which have been delivered to tens of thousands of leaders all over the word, this clear, insightful and informed guide will help both individuals and teams perform at their maximum potential, delivering extraordinary results.

Effective leadership is a science, which shouldn't be dependent on buzzwords or slogans. It should be based on a bedrock foundation of our understanding of the brain. Thanks to breakthroughs in neuroscience, we no longer have to merely speculate on the behavior of our brains. What we've learned from rigorous scientific studies has the potential to radically change the way we lead and succeed.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How understanding neurochemistry can help you achieve peak performance.
- How to retrain your brain to sharpen your focus and regulate your emotions.
- How to develop new and better habits.
- How to harness the power of unconscious decision-making.
- How to improve the learning process for yourself and your team.

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: **THE LEADING BRAIN**

by Friederike Fabritius, MS, and Hans W. Hagemann, PhD

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The Leading Brain: Powerful Science-Based Strategies for Achieving Peak Performance by Friederike Fabritius, MS, and Hans W. Hagemann, PhD, copyright © 2017 by Friederike Fabritius and Hans W. Hagemann, has been summarized with permission of the publisher, TarcherPerigee, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC. 324 pages, $26, ISBN 9780143129356.

PART I: REACHING YOUR PEAK

Find Your Sweet Spot

All of us strive to find our sweet spot of performance, that zone where we're at our most productive and most effective. Peak performance comes at the spot where the level of arousal is sufficient to provide optimal focus and attention. Without knowledge about the brain and the ability to use this knowledge, opportunities to perform our best are squandered, and the potential for great achievements remains unfulfilled. The good news: The skills it takes to improve one's mental game in business and in life can be learned, trained and improved.

The wiring in your brain isn't really wiring at all but a series of signals that hop from one cell to another. Working together, these microscopic messengers are responsible for every action, reaction and emotion that you experience, including what psychologists Robert Yerkes and John Dillingham Dodson called *arousal* in 1908, referring to the mild electric shocks they subjected rats to in order to improve their performance in navigating a maze. Yerkes and Dodson determined that peak performance happens when the level of arousal is sufficient to provide optimal focus and attention. Without it, we're likely to feel bored or apathetic. When arousal's too high, our focus deteriorates into a situation of stress — or even worse, panic.

The DNA of Peak Performance

Although more than 100 neurotransmitters have been identified, from the standpoint of peak performance, only three are truly important: dopamine, noradrenaline and acetylcholine. These are the "DNA of Peak Performance."

Dopamine is involved in your ability to update information in memory, and it also affects your ability to focus on the task at hand. Dopamine is known as a novelty neurotransmitter because its effects are strongest when the stimulus that generates it is new. This explains in part the enthusiasm you may feel when you start a new project and why the thrill isn't usually as strong after you've been working on it for a while.

Noradrenaline was evolutionarily designed to help you respond quickly to any threat, real or perceived. It does so by regulating your attention and alertness. Noradrenaline is at an optimal level when you feel slightly overchallenged. It is also released when you push yourself to perform a difficult task better, faster or with fewer resources.

Acetylcholine is the chemical driving the mechanism you use to achieve the extraordinary focus required for peak performance. Babies release acetylcholine without even trying, but adults are not so lucky. The automatic mechanism for extraordinary focus shuts down when we're still quite young. As adults, there are only a handful of ways we can flip the switch that turns on acetylcholine: when we make a conscious effort to pay attention, when we get physical exercise or when we are exposed to something important, surprising or novel — in other words, when our brain releases dopamine.

Finding Your Home on the Range

When it comes to achieving peak performance, the same stimulation that invigorates one person may be overwhelming for another. Seen as a normal distribution curve, some of us are "right-side performers" — those who find it easier to access a state of peak performance

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under pressure but may lag or become bored with too little stimulation — while others are "left-side performers" — those who perform highly without requiring a lot of external stimulation but may fall apart under pressure. Still others lie somewhere in between. One type of peak performer isn't better or worse than an other, they just require different conditions to reach their peak.

When it comes to peak performance, self-awareness is essential. Pinpointing your position on the curve from time to time and from task to task can be critical to your success. Once you're aware of the situations in which you're at your best, you can adjust to your environment to play to your strengths and then fine tune conditions so you can reach your peak when you need to.

Although achieving peak performance should be your goal, staying at the top of the curve for an extended period is neither desirable nor beneficial. You should rise to the occasion when it's needed most. Attempting to maintain the optimum mix of dopamine, noradrenaline and acetylcholine for a prolonged period would likely overtax the system and deplete the neurotransmitters, resulting in burnout and exhaustion.

Find a daily, weekly and monthly rhythm that leads to optimal energy management. If you're a leader, try to adapt the workplace environment to allow people to operate more in line with their individual performance profiles. Aim for enough flexibility in working conditions so that everyone can more readily reach his or her peak.

Regulate Your Emotions

As humans, we are capable of displaying a remarkable array of emotions. Yet, most of them grow out of just two very basic and very primitive networks in our brains: the threat circuit and the reward circuit.

The Threat Circuit: When we see something that we perceive as putting our survival in danger, we react quickly and often unconsciously.

The ability to instantly avoid dangers, such as an oncoming car, can literally save our lives. In contrast, our response to a social snub is rarely lifesaving. That's not because it isn't as quick as our reaction to a car. It's just that our lives were probably never in jeopardy when a colleague questioned our performance. Our executive brain almost certainly realizes this, but by the time it does, our threat circuit has already kicked in, responding to the co-worker almost exactly the same way it would if he or she were an oncoming car.

These days, most stress no longer protects you as it was originally designed to do. Ironically, it is more likely to put you at risk. When our threat response reacts to sudden and genuine danger, it can literally be a lifesaver. But this fight-or-flight reaction was designed to be acute, not chronic. If your body remains on constant alert, it leads to a physiological and neurological state that is damaging to your health and cognitive performance.

The Reward Circuit: Luckily, the fight-or-flight response isn't the only primitive system that we inherited from an older version of our brains. A second set of circuitry, the reward response, plays a role that's nearly as important — although not quite — as our threat mechanism. Unlike fight-or-flight, which operates according to fear, the reward response deals in gratification. When the brain is in the reward state, dopamine, so important to peak performance, is released, which leads to positive sensations.

Train Your Brain

In a sense, the story of the brain is the story of warring brains. The midbrain and the cerebral cortex are often at odds, and this dynamic is at the crux of emotional regulation. Protect yourself by strengthening your ability to handle stress, and train your brain by teaching its weaker but more sophisticated conscious regions how to outsmart the stronger but more primitive unconscious parts.

You can bolster your resistance to emotional imbalance by creating overall life conditions that promote balance. The tried-and-true recommendations of exercising, eating well and getting plenty of sleep may sound like tired clichés, but they are cited again and again for good reason: They work. Few things can better build your resilience in facing oncoming stress than this trio.

There's nothing inevitable about the way your brain responds to a particular situation. Your brain may be smart and powerful, but it's also surprisingly naïve and impressionable.

Lead with Your Body: Changing your body can change your brain. Hundreds of peer-reviewed studies support this powerful conclusion: By consciously focusing on relaxing your body or by directing your attention to a simple sound or object, you can cause your brain to switch off its stress response. By assuming the expression and posture of a happy and successful person, you can often trick your brain into believing you are one. Let your body lead the way, and your brain will usually follow.

Use Cognitive Jiu-Jitsu: Strictly speaking, stress is not the enemy. What matters is the way in which you respond to that stress. It is possible to take what would normally be

considered negative, corrosive stress and transform it into something positive and energizing.

Rather than operating as one continuous response, stress plays out in two discrete phases, each handled by a different brain function. Although our powerful and primitive limbic system is automatically activated in response to an arousal, it is the more civilized part of our brain that has the job of analyzing the data. Making use of the delay between when our instinctive subconscious responds and when the more deliberate region of our brain interprets that response may hold the key to effective emotional regulation and taking the sting out of stress.

The two secret weapons of cognitive jiu-jitsu are *labeling* and *reappraisal*.

Labeling involves giving a name or explanation to your emotional response. When you're feeling stressed or emotional, you're allowing your primitive brain to run the show. Labeling helps you to regain control. Research has shown that labeling the source of your stress actually lessens the activation of the amygdala, the primary source of your fight-or-flight reaction.

Your limbic system responds instinctively, unconsciously and remarkably quickly to anything that it perceives as a potential threat. By the time this threat response is activated, there is nothing you can do about it — at least not directly. What you *can* do is influence how you *interpret* that response. That's the essence of cognitive reappraisal.

Sharpen Your Focus

The prefrontal cortex (PFC) is responsible for rational processing. It handles what are often referred to as the brain's "executive functions," such as reasoning, strategizing and problem solving. It's also home to the working memory, the staging area where new information rests while you decide what to do with it. The PFC is responsible for higher-order thinking like planning and decision-making as well as focus, or what psychologists commonly call *attention*.

Attention occurs when the PFC has the right mix of neurotransmitters, hormones and other chemicals released by the body. The DNA of Peak Performance, not coincidentally, is also the recipe for attention. Noradrenaline is constantly on the lookout for any unusual activities. When something catches your attention, acetylcholine zeros in on its location and identity, and finally, dopamine helps you determine what to do about it. Unfortunately, dopamine and noradrenaline can both strengthen and sabotage your attention.

When your dopamine levels rise, the reward feeling drives you to keep doing more of what you're doing in order to get even more dopamine. The result is often focus. But as your attention flags, your fickle brain starts seeking out new experiences that will trigger another burst of the neurochemical.

Noradrenaline suffers from a similar capriciousness. You can count on it to attract your attention, but you can't rely on it to maintain your focus. Unless you take action, both dopamine and noradrenaline will keep you searching for the next distraction.

The best ways to avoid succumbing to distractions are pretty straightforward:

- **Eliminate potential distractions at the outset:** Don't waste thinking power by stacking the deck against yourself. It's easier and more energy efficient to simply clear distractions out of the way.
- **Establish concentration time:** Make time during the course of the day when your door is closed, your phone is turned off and everyone who works with you is aware that you are unavailable.
- **Try to find some fun and interest in what you're doing:** If your task is novel and fun, you're less likely to look elsewhere for stimulation.
- **Work in manageable blocks of time:** Rather than rapidly switching back and forth between multiple tasks, devote 20 minutes exclusively to one before shifting to another. The satisfaction of completing each time block should give you a dose of dopamine, as will the prospect of facing the next "new" task.

The single most tenacious source of distraction is your own wandering mind. Mind wandering not only occupies roughly half our waking life, but it's also associated with lower levels of happiness.

A wandering mind is the domain of neuronal circuitry known as the default mode network. It is associated with planning, pondering and daydreaming. It's active when you think about yourself as well as about other people. But it falls short in focusing on the here and now, which can be a bit of a problem if you're supposed to be paying attention. Two things can help you keep your mind from straying: happiness and cognitive control.

In a study by Harvard University psychologists, subjects were found to be happier when they focused on what they were doing instead of on extraneous thoughts. Actually, whether or not their minds wandered was a greater predictor of overall happiness than the activity itself. And when we're happy, our brains release a number of neurochemicals, including dopamine, which greatly increases our ability to learn and remember. What's more, when

the mind ceases to wander, we tend to feel better because we're no longer on high alert for the next potential threat.

Make Mindfulness a Habit

Mindfulness is the antidote for a wandering mind. It involves observing your thoughts and feelings from moment to moment nonjudgmentally. By doing so, you learn to become an outside observer of your own thinking process, a skill that gives you greater control over those times when your thoughts are focused and prevents you from constantly heading down the path of each new distraction.

What's truly astounding about mindfulness is that it not only changes your thoughts, but it also physically changes your brain. Mindfulness has been shown to physically change several regions of the brain in as little as eight weeks. Overall, mindfulness enhances the brain's capability to dynamically rewire itself, a phenomenon commonly known as neuroplasticity.

The best way to employ mindfulness over the long term is to dedicate some time every day to mindfulness practice. Periodically during your day, just call a quick time out and take a deep breath. Observe what you were doing at that moment, and think about how it makes you feel as well as how it might make others feel. This basic act of reflection — psychologists call it "metacognitive awareness" — can lead to potent, positive and often permanent changes in your thinking patterns and physical responses.

From Focus to Flow

The most satisfying and productive form of focus is called "flow." Flow is a subjective state in which you are completely involved in something to the exclusion of everything else. To achieve flow, you need a well-defined goal, an optimal challenge and clear, immediate feedback. The goal supplies acetylcholine to help maintain your focus, the challenge triggers noradrenaline and the feedback provides you with a rewarding burst of dopamine.

PART II: CHANGING YOUR BRAIN

Manage Habits

Habits of one sort or another account for roughly 45 percent of daily life. During these times, rather than relying on reason or motivation, we shift into automatic pilot and depend instead on context, automated actions, time pressure and yes, even low self-control to provide the engine for our behavior.

There's a good reason for this: Our brains would quickly become overloaded if everything we did had to be done consciously. Good habits make life easier by using our brains more efficiently. Bad habits make life harder and in some cases can be harmful or even deadly. The automatic nature of habits is what makes them hard to control or change.

The basal ganglia region is the part of the brain that handles the things we've committed to long-term memory and can engage in with relative ease. Our brains may be smart, but they're also kind of lazy. Each habit in our basal ganglia functions like a labor-saving device.

A typical habit has three components: a cue, a routine and a reward. The cue is a specific stimulus or combination of stimuli that triggers the routine. The routine is the habit itself. Initially, it is the anticipation of a reward that drives the routine and ensures its storage in the basal ganglia.

Establishing good habits or getting rid of bad ones involves the same basic skills:

- **Goal setting and motivation:** Most successful goals share two key qualities: (1) there is an emotional basis for the motivation, and (2) the goal setter is able to visualize not only reaching that goal but also, and more importantly, the process involved in achieving it.
- **Getting started:** Getting started is one of the most difficult parts of changing. Procrastination is the principal impediment to initiating a habit change. Large goals can seem intimidating unless broken into manageable steps. From the standpoint of your brain, threats aren't simply things that put your life in danger. They can be anything that the brain perceives as a misallocation of resources. Changing almost any routine requires additional conscious effort and, with it, additional energy. Aroused from its comfortable complacency, your brain sounds the alarm by awakening the watchdog of your limbic system, the amygdala, which triggers your threat response. Focus on small steps to avoid the threat response that frequently drives procrastination.
- **Staying on track:** Habits can rarely be stopped — or started — with brute force. A more successful long-term strategy is working *with* your unconscious instead of against it. In this case, it involves consciously manipulating the cue, routine and reward that provide the habitual framework.

A strategy called "implementation intentions" can help you stay on track by artificially reproducing the three elements of most habits. Change an old habit by attaching a new routine to an existing cue, or create a new habit by linking some sort of cue to a desired routine. When commitments of personal change are supported by concrete implementation intentions, the probability of achieving specific objectives doubles.

There are three simple but powerful processes that can aid in kicking deeply ingrained habits:

- **Describe**: Recognize and acknowledge a trigger when it occurs. Like labeling, describing your habit trigger leads to *metacognition*, or "thinking about thinking." This takes a normally unconscious process and shifts it into the realm of your conscious.
- **Distract**: Develop a competing ritual that will momentarily divert your attention from your original compulsion. The most effective distractions are pleasant ones. They put you in a reward state, triggering a burst of dopamine, which makes your brain more receptive to change. Distracting has a lot in common with cognitive reappraisal.
- **Delay**: Once you've found an effective alternative to your old bad habit behavior, the key is to sustain it. The longer you can last without "giving in," the more ingrained the new neuronal pathway will become.

Unleash Your Unconscious

Our unconscious accounts for a major part of our decision-making activity. Unlike the working memory, which typically has room for just four pieces of information at a time, the capacity of the unconscious is practically limitless. In fact, it's next to impossible to make a complex conscious decision using just your working memory; it simply doesn't have enough room or resources to accommodate all the variables.

While beginners benefit from thinking more, experts can actually be hampered by it. Thinking about what you're doing can actually become disruptive. Reduce the burden on your PFC whenever possible by relying more heavily on the brain's secret weapon, unconscious intuition.

What is meant by "intuition" here is, in fact, "expert intuition," a speedier way of analyzing information using accumulated expertise. But, the expertise needs to be there, or intuition won't work. Intuitive decisions are often the product of years of experience and thousands of hours of practice. Expert intuition isn't an exclusively unconscious affair. It draws heavily from your bank of experience. It begins with consciously assembling all the data you'll need to make your decision and then keeping your conscious mind distracted while your unconscious rolls up its sleeves and gets to work.

Why We Don't Trust Intuition

One of the chief characteristics of intuition is that we can't always articulate what led us to make a particular decision. Our gut reaction and subsequent decision are the only elements of a complicated process that come into the consciousness. You can imagine why this would create problems for our conscious brain, which, rather than being about feeling, is more about explaining.

While it's true that lightning-fast, intuitive decision making is occasionally susceptible to manipulation, it's equally true that time-consuming (and often budget-busting), rational decision-making can be prone to massive misjudgment as well.

The optimum way to use your brain in many decision-making scenarios is to delegate the lion's share of the work to your unconscious brain and rely on your conscious primarily to monitor and vet the unconscious decision-making process. The unconscious excels at getting the job done quickly and efficiently. The conscious is best at double-checking to make sure that it has been done right. There's a reason why the key activities inside the PFC are commonly called executive functions!

Foster Learning

Studies show that we can continue to acquire new skills well into adulthood. Long-lasting neuroplasticity depends on noradrenaline to keep you alert while the rewards that come from learning lead to secretion of dopamine and acetylcholine, which help to ensure that any rewiring endures.

Learn with Your Heart, Not with Your Head

The key to learning is that it is a fundamentally emotional process driven by the threat and reward circuits that reside in the limbic system. It's no surprise that an unpleasant experience, such as burning your hand on a hot stove, leads to immediate learning.

Teaching that triggers the threat response can be highly effective — when used sparingly and responsibly. Negative learning is good at inhibiting behavior, but it's terrible at teaching you to find creative solutions. That's because it activates a threat state, which means your PFC is temporarily shut down and with it your executive functions. Your reaction may be speedy and instinctive, but it isn't nuanced and thoughtful.

Although they aren't as powerful as threat responses, reward responses are the more common and much-preferred driver to successful learning. In general, when information moves us, scares us, pleases us or otherwise makes a powerful impression, we are more likely to remember it. But even this rule has its pitfalls and limitations.

Don't confuse emotional relevance with sheer novelty. Because the size of working memory is limited and the stimuli that bombard your brain are practically relentless, your PFC is often forced to make some pretty tough choices. Dopamine is a primary decider. It asks, "Is it

new?" And if the answer is yes, there's a good chance that your PFC will zero in on the information, and your working memory will begin the process of retaining it. But, if the information that is merely new is at odds with the information that is truly important, the latter is likely to get crowded out, leaving you with little or no recollection of the stuff that really matters.

The lesson for leaders is clear: If you seek to increase the interest in the information you convey, be sure that the embellishments you add to liven up your lesson support your core message instead of competing with it.

Learn with a friend: It pays to learn in groups instead of individually. The social interaction that comes from learning with someone else releases oxytocin, which enhances neuroplasticity and the possibility for change.

Use multimodal learning: The capacity of your working memory is surprisingly small, but it can handle words and pictures simultaneously. What's more, other senses, like our sense of smell, bypass the working memory entirely and yet can serve as an additional trigger for recall. The more parts of the brain that are involved when you learn something new, the more likely you are to remember it.

Sleep on it: Getting sufficient sleep not only aids in emotional regulation, but it also improves your ability to learn. It reduces the levels of stress hormones, such as cortisol, in your bloodstream while encouraging the growth of new nerve cells that are necessary for learning and memory. And finally, it assists the hippocampus in determining which information you've recently learned will be stored in long-term memory for future use and which will be discarded.

PART III: BUILDING DREAM TEAMS

Thrive on Diversity

The most useful, neuroscientifically based insights into differing personality traits come from the work of Rutgers University biological anthropologist Helen Fisher. Dr. Fisher identified four basic personality styles.

The Explorer: Explorers are sensation seekers. Thanks to greater activity of the dopamine system in the brain and an extra burst of noradrenaline, Explorers require a higher level of arousal to achieve peak performance. Explorers tend to get bored easily. Since they always need a new challenge, you shouldn't weigh them down with run-of-the-mill activities. They can be highly creative and quick thinkers, so give them a chance to engage in these kinds of activities.

The Builder: The personality of a Builder is largely defined by the stabilizing influence of serotonin. The serotonin that Builders express makes them the inverse of high-risk Explorers. You can always count on them to follow through with their tasks and responsibilities. Builders are very structured, loyal and future focused but can be thrown by unanticipated changes in their schedules and agreements.

The Negotiator: Influence from the hormone estrogen is what differentiates Negotiators from their colleagues. Negotiators are very empathetic and see the big picture. They are highly sensitive to unresolved conflicts, and their performance will suffer if you don't create a trust-based, appreciative climate. Negotiators' strengths are their talent in handling people, their verbal fluency and their ability to draw connections between seemingly unconnected topics.

The Director: With the Director, the defining hormone is testosterone. Directors are tough minded and highly analytical. They thrive in competitive environments where they can excel at their skills in problem solving and structuring. Due to their high testosterone levels, Directors can be pretty rough and undiplomatic in their communication. They work well only when the hierarchy is clearly defined; otherwise, the risk for openly displayed conflict is high.

Each of the personality styles can contribute certain skill sets that are complementary to each other. As an example, the fast-paced, curious Explorer will enhance the team with creativity and drive and make working together fun. The Negotiator will be very sensitive to the human touch of collaboration and be particularly skilled at anything that has to do with verbal expression and communication. The Builder will add stability and the persistence to follow through with a task until the end. The Builder is the one who will make sure the timeline is respected and commitments are taken seriously. The Director, on the other hand, will reduce complexity and use logical skills to cut through any seemingly confusing problems, keeping the team up to speed and on track.

Cultivate Trust

As humans, we are fundamentally social creatures. Most of the behavior that constitutes group dynamics hinges on our assessment of the people around us as either enemies or friends. Reward and threat, the two key circuits in our limbic system, largely dictate our behavior around others.

For the sake of our survival, our default response is to treat the people around us as threats until we learn otherwise. This prompts what psychologists call "avoidance

behavior." The flip side of avoidance behavior is approach behavior, an equally primitive response that places people in the "us" camp and is based on a feeling of trust.

SCARF is a model for social interaction that reflects the latest findings in social cognitive neurosciences. This acronym represents the five major factors that determine whether groups are characterized by approach or avoidance behavior.

Status: Status refers to how people feel after they've interacted with you. Treat the members of your team in a way that makes them truly feel valued; it will lead them to believe they can make a genuine difference.

Certainty: Uncertainty makes us uneasy and can lead to a threat response while the perception of certainty is likely to trigger a sense of reward. You can't always take the mystery out of situations, but what you can do is try to shed some reassuring light on the process.

Autonomy: When people have a sense that they are masters of their own fate, their moods improve and their stress levels go down. Provide your teams with a greater sense of autonomy by granting them the freedom to work according to their own style as long as they are willing and able to meet agreed-upon goals.

Relatedness: People perform better when they feel connected. Devote some time to building good relations between you and your group by fostering an environment of caring and inclusiveness.

Fairness: Our brains don't maximize profit, they maximize relationships and fairness. Our brains can even trigger a reward response when we see others being treated fairly. However, any perception that we're getting a raw deal could set off the threat alarm. If you work to foster a climate of fairness, everyone and everything will likely benefit — including your bottom line.

Develop the Team of the Future

Fielding a Strength-Based Team

When it comes to building top-performing teams, hiring always trumps training. Although training is important, it has its limitations. It makes far more sense to invest time and money into spotting talented people and hiring them than it does to spend it on training to cultivate talent that may not even exist.

We all have strengths and weaknesses. Doing something we're good at focuses our attention, triggers a burst of dopamine and often puts us into a rewarding state of flow. Working on something we're not so good at tends to lead to discouragement, frustration and a dissipation of energy.

Instead of building on the unique strengths of their employees, far too many companies are trying to iron out their weaknesses. The valleys may get shallower, but the peaks get lower in the process as well. Employees neglect the skills they're good at in order to improve the areas where they've never done well.

Obviously, if an employee is failing to meet certain standards, then something definitely needs to be done about it. If any of an employee's skills are ranked as "not acceptable," we definitely need to improve those specific areas. The goal is not to transform an area where the employee is struggling into one of his greatest strengths but simply to lift that skill out of the hole of "not acceptable" and onto the firmer footing of "acceptable standard."

Once we've raised any unacceptable skills up to an acceptable standard, we can focus the majority of the time on improving the employee's strengths. And unlike reviews that put weakness under a microscope, strength-based appraisals capitalize on the pride and motivation that most employees already feel for areas they are good at and inspire them to aim for the stars.

The lesson for teams and team building is simple: Not everyone needs to do everything. Strive to find a mix of people with each excelling in a different area. In the event that the highest team ranking in a particular area is "acceptable standard," seek out and add someone to the team who is "best in class" in that area.

Keeping the Brain in Mind

We now know about the neurochemistry of reaching our personal best, we've learned about how neuronal pathways can be wired and rewired to our advantage throughout our lives, and we've gained revolutionary insights into what really matters in building a happy and successful team. Far from being a leadership fad, this knowledge is supported by a mountain of data.

Combining these principles provides us with an opportunity to thrive both in our businesses and in our personal lives and to truly become leading brains!