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TEDxPadova

Wired to be Social:
Finding the "We" in an iWorld
by Dr. Al Ringleb

[Watch the presentation here!](#)

In lieu of the May book review, below is the transcript from the TEDxPadova presentation “Wired to be Social: Finding the ‘We’ in an iWorld” by Dr. Al Ringleb.

My life has been much about numbers and statistics. I have multiple degrees in mathematics, statistics, econometrics, and economics. I even threw in a law degree just for fun. My father was absolutely convinced I was going to be a professional student. But I surprised him a little and became both a professor and an entrepreneur.

As an entrepreneur, I learned the hard way that people matter far more than numbers. As a mathematician, I was curious as to whether we could use numbers and statistics to better understand people skills — particularly the skills that allow us to lead and to be led.

So we put together a team, created a lab, and started to work with leading anthropologists, biologists, psychologists, and neuroscientists. Our goal was to see if we could find a better way to measure, assess, and develop those people skills. I am here to share with you what I learned on that incredible journey.

The first thing I learned — something that most of you already know:

A course on leadership does not make you a leader.

It clearly takes something more. In looking for that something more, we learned that:

A person’s barriers to leadership are typically the very same barriers they face in being the person they would truly like to be – amongst friends, in the family, community, and in other social groups.

Let me give you a sense of what I mean:

How many of you believe you are below average in terms of your ability to drive a car?

As you can see, there are only a few hands. Studies show that about 97 percent of us believe we are above average. Of course, this contradicts what I learned from statistics.

Studies also show that:

- 10 percent of accidents are actually due to an inability to drive the car (e.g., poor directional control); things that might actually be taught in a course on driving;
- 80 percent are due to Mental Lapses.

What do we mean by Mental Lapses: Poor decisions, distractions, inattention, misinterpretation of other's actions, or an inability to manage emotions — mental lapses, things that are not taught in the classroom but are clearly critical to effectiveness.

But guess what? This list of character lapses differs little from a list we might draw up explaining deficiencies in leadership, or in marriages, or in friendships, or in our other social groups.

After some thought and reflection, we began to refer to this **combination** of critical thinking, decision-making, and behavior, and particularly the ability to get along with others, as **Character**. We began to focus on ways to measure it.

We realized that if we could not measure it objectively, people were more likely to over-estimate their ability with confidence.

In the process, we learned:

We are wired to be Social.

Anthropologists took us back 2 million years, arguing persuasively that our ancestors learned very quickly there were distinct survival advantages to living in communities. Those unfortunate individuals unable to manage the social relations found themselves rejected and then pushed out of the social structure, where death was all but a certainty.

In response to these survival needs, the brain developed four specific circuitries to deal with these social demands.

Circuitries devoted to:

1. **Self-awareness**, to allow us to better understand our feelings and emotions, to be able to be aware of those situations or people that make us angry or anxious or fearful or happy.
2. **Social awareness**, to provide us with the means to read the emotions of others and to appreciate their perspective; our ability to read and interpret social signals and cues.

3. **Threat detection**, to understand and interpret our mind's signals that our survival might be in jeopardy, both in terms of lions, tigers, and bears, and in interactions with others in our social group.
4. **Self-regulation**, to stay calm under pressure; to recover quickly from upsets; to move us away from needless rumination and brooding on the one hand and away from panic on the other; to make sure that we do not consume more than a fair share of group resources.

The failure of any one of these circuitries meant your behavior would likely come into conflict with social norms, lead to your rejection from the social group, and ultimately seriously threaten your survival. In this very sense, our brains are wired to be social. *This is what we refer to as our Social Brain, our "We" brain.*

Importantly, our Social Brain develops through experience. We get better at self-awareness, social awareness, and self-regulation because of meaningful social interactions.

Let's move forward in time to the university classroom of some 250 years ago to get a sense of how our social brain was developed. The typical professor was in possession of the two or three books that basically defined the topic.

Students listened intently to their professors and then went out to discuss among themselves what they had learned. Through this process, they learned to be persuasive in articulating their arguments. Again, we need social interactions to provide the experiences that wire our Social Brains, to *build character*.

But technology, while undoubtedly improving our quality of life, now begins slowly, almost imperceptively, to erode our ability to develop our social brains [much like the frog placed in water that is slowly brought to a boil].

Beginning some 200 years ago, with advances in transportation students were able to live further apart, and thus began to have fewer opportunities to interact.

Then around 100 years ago advances in communications reduced the need to meet physically to interact and communicate.

Starting around 50 years ago, advances in information technology reduced the need to communicate with each other at all. All of the knowledge in the world sits right on top of our desks in the form of a computer. With a smartphone, we essentially have a supercomputer in our pockets! In contrast to 250 years ago, we find ourselves with an abundance of knowledge; meaningful social interactions are now in short supply.

Not surprisingly, technology quietly caused us to place greater emphasis on ourselves individually, on our "I" world. In fact, Google digitized the vast majority of the world's literature and found a steady increase in the use of the word "I" over the past several decades, and particularly in the last 15 years.

So what are the consequences of this movement from "We" to "I" we have been experiencing?

We were not surprised to find a decline in followership and a resulting decline in leadership talent.

What did surprise us was the clear impact on other social interactions. Research shows that over the last 15 years we have experienced:

- Increase in Loneliness
- Decrease in Intimacy (*defined as the number of close friends not Facebook friends, which lights up an entirely different part of the Brain*)
- Decrease in Trust [*and as a consequence the next two*]
- Decrease in Marriage Rates
- Increases in rates of Divorce
- Decline in Empathy (*down 40 percent; significant to leadership*)
- Decrease in Happiness [*because the above are all social constructs*]
- Increase in the use of prescription drugs to treat depression
- Increase in teenage drinking and teen suicide
- And others ...

Importantly, all of these concerns involve a social interaction or a need for social interaction. The technology encourages us to hide behind devices in our social interactions or to outright avoid them.

But are we destined to be an “I” world?

Will the “I” brain overtake the “We” brain, our social brain?

The statistical trends certainly indicate this, but I am far more optimistic. We are beginning to believe and to learn that:

We are at the very beginning of an era of Technology as an Awareness Multiplier — an era that will revolutionize education and revolutionize the way we interact with each other.

Some of these very same i-technologies can assist us in developing the circuitry necessary for the functioning of our social brain, our “We” brain.

This latest era began with the advent of brain-imaging technology. Neuroscientists are now able to actually see brain functioning in real time.

For the first time in history, we can actually measure the physiology of emotion.

Among other important findings, we are seeing that the brain does not differentiate between physical pain and social pain — a broken heart or a broken leg is very much the same to the brain.

But to make this knowledge useful, we needed to move this remarkable technology outside of the laboratory and make it available for everyday use.

Let me give you some examples of this remarkable technology:

- Mobile technology makes it possible to collect personal data almost any time and almost any place. Advances in biosensor technology now collect data that approaches medical quality at prices that are affordable for users. This technology particularly boosts our self-awareness circuitry by assisting us in defining those situations (or people) where we have a noticeable physiological response.
- Computer-based brain exercises have been specifically engineered to cultivate our Social Brain circuitries, particularly in the development of our social awareness circuitry and empathy.
- The practice of mindfulness, assisted by technology, along with computer-based brain exercises are giving us renewed ability to develop our self-regulatory circuitry and slow our brains down in response to social stimuli and allow us the choice to follow an unproductive or unhealthy habit, or a more beneficial one.
- The use of health tracking technology monitors exercise, diet, and sleep, guiding us in understanding when we are at our best and how we can prepare ourselves to be at our best.

So will our “We” world disappear? By properly using technology we can significantly enhance all of our worlds. Technology as an awareness multiplier will assist us in reviving our “We” World.

We need to bring this technology into our schools, our workplaces, and our homes and practice, practice, and practice our self-awareness, social awareness, and self-regulation skills to assist in building character, to pull ourselves from virtual isolation and return our socially-dependent happiness: We need to use the technology to assist us in wiring and rewiring our social brains, our “We” brains.

Through this revival of our “We” brains we can all expect better quality relationships, and from ourselves, better leaders, parents, and friends.

THANK YOU!