HR Strategy and Neuroscience in the Socially Sensitive Worker Era: How will HR Adapt?

Neuroscience has had a profound impact on thinking in personal and organizational development over the past two decades.[i] Many past development theories upon which we grew (or were obligated or expected) to rely have been shown through neuroscience research to have been at best misguided or at worst outright wrong, explaining, in major part, why they have been so demonstrably ineffective in creating leaders.[ii] Unfortunately, reluctance to adopt those research findings coupled with seemingly inherent organizational resistance to change has restricted their benefits to an enlightened few, although competition will certainly make such resistance more costly going forward.[iii] Many in HR who are open to and intrigued by neuroscience often hedge their expectations through continued reliance on traditional classroom-based teaching and learning paradigms for content delivery, significantly inhibiting its usefulness and personal development potential. Similarly, hiring and promotion decision criteria remain mired in the old Knowledge Worker Era thinking of the past, all the while new technology is pulling us rapidly into the new Socially Sensitive Worker Era of the present and future where interpersonal, as opposed to technical, skills are rapidly becoming the most advantageous to both the individual and the organizations they serve. In this specific regard and with reference to HR Strategies, the Socially Sensitive Worker Era has far greater need of neuroscience and its insights into human behavior than was the case in the Knowledge Worker Era.

The somewhat surprising resiliency of old HR Strategies based on Knowledge Worker Era decision making criteria can be attributed to several factors. Of course, first and foremost the movement away from those criteria and toward decision criteria based in neuroscience involves dramatic change, a universal constraint to anything "new and exciting" but untested and seemingly experimental. Secondly, Knowledge Worker Era criteria have several characteristics supporting their incumbency, including being both familiar to those who grew up and were educated in the Knowledge Worker Era and relatively easy to observe and measure (making them very amenable to “checking the box” approaches to human resource management). By contrast, Socially Sensitive Worker Era competencies are often slower both to develop and to show results (and may even require retraining, even firing, seemingly our most productive workers), which in organizations with a "short-term" time horizon raises an illusion of risk for HR and thus are likely to be avoided or ignored. As to the neuroscience research itself, much of the relevant research is coming out in disconnected pieces from disperse scientists without an underlying, organized, systematic development approach or system to both buttress and explain its significance. Organizational theorists and management scholars who would seem to be the natural source of such thought and information have been remarkedly slow to embrace its teachings. While consultants have attempted to fill this void by creating materials for classroom or on-line usage, associated terms as "brain–friendly " this or "brain–based” that headlining such information are oftentimes anything but, leading to unnecessary confusion and, worse, skepticism. In such an environment, it is understandable for those in HR to maintain a relatively safe haven in Knowledge Worker Era standards and to take a decidedly wait and see attitude out of concern that neuroscience may simply be another “flavor of the month” in a long line of such flavors over the years.

Still, through neuroscience research we now have a far better understanding of the brain's wants and needs with regard to the structure of goals, feedback, regulation of emotions, the management of stress, the need to be social, cognitive biases, and much, much more. Even old notions that leaders should be positive has given way to neuroscience research showing that the most effective leaders are more likely to be slightly negative (and, thus, ask more questions). Perhaps most importantly, the advent of brain imaging technology that has led to these insights could not have come at a more opportune time. Technology in general is pushing us rapidly away from the Knowledge Worker Era[iv] of the past to the Socially Sensitive Worker Era of the present and future. Knowledge Worker Era personnel decision criteria focused almost exclusively on technical prowess and expertise – “empathy, rapport, and interpersonal skills” were seen as not needed[v], even detrimental.[vi] In the Socially Sensitive Worker Era with its growing reliance on teams and team performance those same skills are now being seen in a far different, far more positive, light.[vii] Further compounding the distinction in needs between the two eras, robots, computers, and machines are rapidly taking over many of the technical jobs that dominated the workplace in the

Knowledge Worker Era.[viii] With neuroscience and its emphasis on the brain and behavior beginning to command greater attention within HR circles, two fundamental questions remain: (1) Which training and development strategies are most likely to provide a measurable competitive advantage to both the worker and the organization in this, the Socially Sensitive Worker, Era? and, (2) How can we move away from the use of Knowledge Worker Era decision criteria in HR hiring and promotion strategies and toward decision criteria more relevant for use in today's Socially Sensitive Worker Era?

Neuroscience-Based Training and Development Strategies

As to HR training and development strategies, too many organizations are still attached to Knowledge Worker Era technical criteria in their personnel decisions — work experience, technical productivity, technical expertise, all of which are objective, observable, countable, and thus easily measurable and comparable. The typical organizational response to deficiencies in technical skills has been to send the errant employee to a course for rejuvenation and reformation. While such classroom-based approaches are often less costly due to scalability (and thus less risky), it is also the learning paradigm to which business schools and traditional consultants hold fast, assuring a ready supply of this "new and exciting" neuroscience dressed up and delivered in old, familiar clothing. Such training methods almost universally deliver a description of neuroscience and the brain, but, constrained by the delivery method, not a useful, or even a practical, prescription for effectively implementing the concepts. Knowing, unfortunately, does not readily equate to doing, and particularly as it relates to the brain and behavior. Further complicating the situation, the blame for the lack of observable performance improvement from the course often gets placed on the perceived ineffectiveness of the subject matter, here neuroscience, rather than on the way in which the "medicine" is administered.

In terms of content, the overwhelming majority of such courses in the Knowledge Worker Era had at their core some axiom, theorem, formula, or principle expected to guide the person toward better performance in processing words, numbers, or symbols or in performing some specific task in a systematic way. Arguably, the HR strategy to maximize worker technical skills served us well during the Knowledge Worker Era. But technology in the form of robots, computers, and machines is greatly reducing the need for humans in many technical positions. Hundreds of thousands of jobs have been lost just in the last few years with far more likely at risk in the very near future. In sharp contrast to the Knowledge Worker Era, the Socially Sensitive Worker Era places a much higher premium on deeply, essentially human abilities – social effectiveness, empathy, forming relationships, working together in teams – adaptive or behavioral traits and attributes where humans have a distinct advantage over robots, computers, and machines. An expectation that performance improvement requiring adaptive or behavioral change will flow from a classroom-based learning environment is, at best, wishful thinking.

For example, consider a person with observed difficulties in managing conflict. The Knowledge Worker Era expectation is that performance improvement will somehow flow from being instructed on the axioms, theorems, formulas, and principles of conflict management – a technical solution applied to an adaptive emotion/behavior issue. Knowing all about conflict management, however, is not the same as being able to manage the emotions involved in actually doing it. Or, put differently, understanding the content of conflict management does not carry with it by default the emotional wherewithal to be able to apply it effectively. The workshop course content will breed false confidence, temporarily covering up the dysfunctional emotion that evoked the unproductive action or behavior issue in the first place. This reality will become very evident at the person's very first emotion/behavior encounter after such a course, very likely with the very same results as before the course (now, with the (useful?) ability to explain it), destroying that false confidence, and very likely deepening the issue even further: "What good am I? They can send me to a course and I still cannot perform any better." Moving directly to the point: adaptive emotion/behavior issues addressed through technical solutions are far more likely to make you worse than better. Ask yourself if after such an encounter whether this person is likely to become your star employee or to quit (likely out of fear he or she is going to be fired anyway)?

To this end, HR training and development strategies need, even demand, increased focus on adaptive solutions; a person with a conflict or any other adaptive emotion/behavior issue has a far greater need for a coach than he or she does of a teacher or a trainer in a classroom. Live, active learning environments where participants have the opportunity to feel or to experience an emotional competency are far, far more effective in bringing about behavioral change than any traditional course, workshop, seminar, or reading material based on definitions and anecdotes (And, consequently, often evaluated more on entertain than productive value). The most effective tools in confronting unproductive, unhealthy actions and behaviors revolve around coaching; effective, purposeful mindfulness practice; quantified–self experiments; and, structured experiential learning environments (e.g., such as the CIMBA LIFE program). Initial responses to such a strong suggestion typically evoke questions of scalability and cost. But ask yourself: What is the accumulated cost of a continuous flow of inexpensive but ineffective development programs over time?

Unfortunately, HR also needs to be prepared to fill a “generational gap” in skill acquisition. While technological advancements are largely responsible for engendering the social effectiveness, empathy, rapport, and team skill training and development needs of the Socially Sensitive Worker Era, their "natural" development has been significantly encumbered by technology. Technology has radically reduced the necessity for face-to-face interactions fundamental for social development, logistical and other enhancements that have fostered impatience by providing nearly instant self-gratification to our wants and needs (e.eg., Amazon), and overly protective parenting that has unwittingly served to buffer young people from important, even necessary, personal growth opportunities essential for maturation and the development of functional coping strategies. Development efforts need to focus on building what we label as fundamental character skills – defined as that crucial combination of critical thinking and behavioral skills, and particularly those skills associate with getting along with others. In this Socially Sensitive Worker Era, the need for character skills competencies far exceed any technical skill need. The components of trust, mutual trust, vulnerability, and psychological safety define productive, creative, and healthy work environments fully supported by neuroscience research.

Neuroscience-Based Hiring and Promotion Strategies

So how can we move away from the use of Knowledge Worker Era decision criteria in HR hiring and promotion strategies and toward decision criteria more relevant for use in today’s Socially Sensitive Worker Era? Neuroscience–based research makes it clear that we need to move away from promotion strategies based on technical prowess and it seemingly assumed "Halo Effect." Under the Halo Effect, if a person is good at a technical skill then it is “rationally” assumed that he or she must obviously be good at everything and anything else. In reality, experience across virtually every business sector has decidedly shown this to be an enormously costly assumption. Surveys of HR personnel worldwide found that in 82% of the cases they felt as though they had hired the wrong person for particular position. Not only is such a technically competent person not prepared with the requisite skill set for success at a management or leadership position, a negative experience often makes them very reluctant to make such a move in the future when they might actually have them. Imagine the difference if we would prepare them appropriately for the transition – and we are not talking about a 2-week technical training program at the company headquarters on the functional aspects of management and leadership.

In actual fact, we have reason to be even more concerned about that percentage of unsuccessful promotions when we couple it with survey data showing a similar percentage of workers who leave the company asserting that he or she did not "… quit the company, I quit my boss." While we can only imagine that HR has asked themselves why the selection process seems to be so flawed, linking various pieces of neuroscience research together gives us some interesting insights. Some of those insights are quite surprising. At the base, we have found that high functioning, technically competent individuals are often surprisingly low in self-regulation. While the impulsivity associated with low self-regulation would arguably lead to unpredictable outcomes and failures, an abhorrence to such failure seems to compel them to avoid such System 1 Challenges with highly structured routines. The insistence on routines to control their impulsivity makes them highly dependable, less error-prone, and, interestingly, seemingly more trustworthy. However, their central focus on achieving results (and the

elevated status associated with it) makes them more likely to use personal information obtained in trust to their benefit if it increases the likelihood of a task, project, or report being delivered on time (e.g., told of someone's concern for their job, he or she may find it in their interest to insist that the person work late or on weekends by using such information to manipulate them).

The highly structured nature of those routines makes them highly resistant to change. Being highly and openly expressive of their emotions, they can often be heard to say, "What is wrong with the old way of doing things?" as they resist change. Why? Because change is in contradiction to their finely tuned routines and thus exposes them to a risk of failure. Additionally, neuroscience research has shown that such a disposition to outwardly express themselves (typically through naysaying and negativity) unfortunately serves to promote initial power establishment and leadership endorsement from others less vocal in the first place.[ix] Coupled with focused technical competency and expertise, this is a person who will undoubtedly be promoted under Knowledge Worker Era decision criteria. But in the Socially Sensitive Worker Era with its emphasis on teams and team performance, what is the likelihood of their success? To the extent they are in a profession heavily dominated by routine (most), they personally may be quite successful, providing them with a degree of immunity both from training requests and from being fired. But they will demoralize the team, stifle initiative, and dampen creativity, leading to staff burnout and significant rates of staff turnover. They are miserable to work for/with, resistant to change, unreceptive to training (for both themselves and their subordinates unless it directly relates to the technical aspects of the job at hand — i.e., it delivers an immediate, observable return in productivity), but their personal performance makes them almost bulletproof to being fired or dismissed. In the longer term, they arguably are the most likely group to be eliminated by robots, computers, and machines but how much damage will they do to their organizations in the interim? The most obvious question at this point is why do we continue to promote them?

At the opposite end of the promotion candidate pool are the high self-regulatory individuals, who tend to dominate in terms of numbers if you combined together both the medium and high self-regulatory categories. Their elevated degree of adaptability and flexibility makes them sensitive and responsive to the outward expressions of the high functioning, low self-regulatory individual (thus allowing him/her to be a company culture-killer as change becomes very difficult to implement with the high self-regulatory individuals more likely to be willing to be flexible in response to his/her expressions against any suggestion for change). In sharp contrast, they are easily bored with routine, which makes them less reliable, more prone to error, and more likely to deliver lower quality work relative to their high-functioning, low self-regulatory counterpart. Not surprisingly given these characteristics, they are more comfortable managing setbacks and failures, which makes them higher in GRIT. Somewhat oddly, while they are seemingly less trustworthy because of perceptions drawn from their reliability and dependability, they are far more likely to be genuinely compassionate and empathetic with information gained in such trust. Additionally, being spontaneous as opposed to impulsive makes for far better decision quality overall, and particularly in social decision making. In other words, although they are considerably better at working in and creating effective teams — empathy, rapport, and interpersonal skills - they are far less likely to meet the Knowledge Worker Era technically focused decision criteria for promotion. How many HR directors are willing to take the risk in promoting such a person? It is far easier to explain a failed promotion decision when the technical competence is there to serve as a failsafe explanation. In addition, it is not difficult to bring to mind a likely scenario involving a highly technically competent employee who finds themselves being stepped over in favor of another less technically competent and asks, "Why him and not me?".

So how do we pull ourselves out of this unproductive pattern of behavior that seems to define, at least implicitly, current HR strategy regarding personal decisions?

(1) As an initial starting point clearly define the Socially Sensitive Worker Era decision criteria, the adaptive, character skill competencies which are far more difficult to measure than technical skill prowess and thus demand such clarity.

(2) Give competencies reflective of team performance, as opposed to individual performance, a greater weight in the promotion decision analysis.

(3) Make the decision criteria more followership-oriented, rather than assuming it through the "Halo Effect" forming the fundamental, unspoken, basis of the Knowledge Worker Era decision criteria (It is a fundamentally indispensable learning experience to know what it feels like to be a good follower, not just what it is or, worse, to have it assumed. In most cases, low self-regulation, highly technically competent individuals have never truly been a follower).

(4) Deliver experiential development programs that focus on the adaptive side of management and leadership, such as the important processes of building trust, mutual trust, vulnerability, and psychological safety, and then provide support in the form of coaching to achieve the intended results to the extent an individual's personal barriers prevent their acquisition.

(5) Build unity of direction and intent through common language, common guidelines, with those guidelines being derived and based upon neuroscience research (Cost will likely prohibit an experiential learning investment for all employees. To those subordinates not provided the deeper training, a base *experiential* course on brain basics will serve to explaining the what, why, and how of neuroscience concepts as they relate to workers in Socially Sensitive Worker Era, assisting those in management charged with the responsibility for implementation. At CIMBA, such a course is called *Genesis*, and incorporates the use of our "Backwards Bike", EGG brain assessments, and hormonal assessments).

(6) Make management/leadership promotions less hierarchical and more facilitative (For example, by teaching and making use of such tools and techniques as After Action Reviews[x] to promote team productivity, an effective tool used by Google, Microsoft, and others. At CIMBA, we incorporate neuroscience principles deeply into this process and refer to it as a LIFE Circle).

(7) Build an understanding of the developmental challenges facing today's young people. It is not their fault that they were born into this period in history. That said, the larger challenge is getting them to appreciate how much they need social effectiveness, empathy, rapport, and interpersonal skills in all domains for a successful, joyful life.

(8) As to external constituencies, work to persuade academia to more fully embrace the importance of developing critical thinking and behavior skills necessary for the Socially Sensitive Worker Era.

Let's make it our New Year's resolution to work together to develop more productive, creative, healthy work environments in our organizations.

Happy Holidays!

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