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Bring Out The Best In Others By Showing A Little Love

By Terry Gilbert

Leaders, take a look around your office. See that employee, the one in the third cubicle over, studying a spreadsheet? Inside, he's seething because instead of being asked to present at tomorrow's meeting to senior management, the new data analyst has been assigned the task. Notice the woman who leads the R & D function — your peer at the leadership table — gesturing in your direction? She's rather pleased that the GM took you down a notch at the meeting this morning; she hasn't trusted you since you got all the praise for the technical solution that saved a key client, and her team got barely a mention. And see the long-term employee staring intently at his computer screen? He's checking his bank statements — again. He hasn't slept well since he heard a rumor that there's a reorganization coming.

And you thought everyone was working, didn't you?

The challenging reality is that leadership is, by definition, a people sport, and a complex one at that. Machines are easy. Systems and processes are easy. Budgets and spreadsheets are easy. Humans are complicated, easily threatened, and highly sensitive creatures. And if, as a leader, you aren't paying attention and actively working to keep your employees and colleagues feeling safe and loved at work, their minds will be focused on all sorts of things other than what they're paid to do.

Herewith, a primer on the neuroscience of social interaction and a few strategies for leaders who get that helping people thrive in the social jungle of the workplace makes good business sense.

First and foremost, understand that the human brain is a social organ, and people are social beings. We need human connectedness to thrive. We evolved as members of small social groups — belonging to a group was essential for survival, and anything that threatened our membership in that group was a threat to life itself. Think of the workplace as the modern-day equivalent of the social groups of our evolutionary past, with all the same needs and dynamics at play. While not being invited for coffee with the “in” group isn't fatal, the amygdala might well respond as though it were a mortal blow. Research shows that social pain — things like being rejected, left out, not valued, hurt — is every bit as real as physical pain, and largely activates the same neural networks. (A recent study revealed the surprising finding that the pain-killer Tylenol also reduces social pain, as measured by self reports and observed in reduced activation of pain networks in fMRI studies.) Not only is social pain real, many would argue

that it is worse than physical pain in that thinking or talking about a past experience of social pain causes us to relive that pain — something that doesn't happen when we recall physical pain. Both physical and social pain take a toll on cognitive functioning, but of the two, social pain causes significantly greater deterioration. That's a problem — workplaces need employees to be at their cognitive best and brightest.

But keeping people at their cognitive best is tricky. For all that we are social beings, the brain is deeply wary in social situations. The brain's automatic react system, also called the X-system or reflexive system, makes snap judgments about situations and about people, and is more likely to decide that something is a cause for alarm than a cause for confidence. Snap judgments can be helpful when they are accurate, and cause problems when they are not. For instance, if your X-system tells you that your colleague is up to no good and investigation reveals he's pilfering from the company coffers, that's helpful. But if your X-system tells you that your colleague is up to no good and the reality is that he hasn't been getting enough sleep because his wife is battling cancer, that's not helpful. It takes a fair bit of cognitive effort (what's known as the C-system or reflective system) to recognize, evaluate and, if necessary, correct those automatically-generated views.

The brain's social skittishness kicks into overdrive in a few specific areas: the brain is a junkie for certainty, and hypersensitive to anything that resembles an assault on autonomy or status, or reeks of unfairness.

- Not knowing what is going to happen next, any sort of ambiguity, is problematic for the brain, which devotes considerable cognitive resources and entire systems of mirror neurons to figuring out others' intentions and what they are going to do next. The amygdala reads uncertainty as threatening.
- Having no control over one's situation is a threat with significant health implications. Studies show that patients who get to self-administer the pain-killer morphine take less than doctors would give them, because they have certainty they can get it when they need it. A sense of perceived helplessness is associated with health risks like hypertension.
- Knowing that you're well regarded by others in your social group (a sign of status) activates the reward circuitry in the brain. Feeling that your status is at risk, puts us in threat state.
- Being treated fairly fires up the reward circuitry; feeling unfairly treated activates the disgust circuitry. Seeing someone who has treated others unfairly suffer in some way triggers our reward circuitry.

Where does this leave the leader who just wants his or her employees and colleagues to feel safe and loved and get back to work?

Leaders need to be acutely aware of their own snap judgments and how they affect their interactions with others. Equally, leaders need to gently challenge the assumptions held by others and help correct them if necessary. Leaders should

view one of their roles as feeding employee and colleague C-systems with information about what's happening in the business, the reasoning behind decisions, and road maps of what's coming — so those C-systems are well armed to help regulate twitchy and anxious X-systems. Your long-time employee will be able to stop checking his bank balance once he knows the reorg rumor is true and that his role will be expanded.

Let people know you value them. Figure out what fuels their fears and feeds their perception of having status, then find ways to honor that. While status symbols like corner offices and titles are in short supply — that's what makes them status symbols — not everyone aspires to the same things. Your data analyst might not mind that the new hire is presenting at the senior management meeting once he learns that he will be the lead author of the report to head office this year.

Be fair, and be seen to be fair. Distribute the perks as equally as you can. Explain the reasons for your decisions so that when those workplace X-systems start thinking “that's not fair” the C-systems will be able to say, “get over it.” Give credit where credit is due; shine the light on your team, and on your worthy colleagues. Do that, and the next time you need support at the management table, the head of R & D will have your back.

Finally, set expectations for being good citizens of the workplace social system. Ban gossiping and backstabbing, and nip it in the bud when you hear it. Create opportunities for people get to know one another at a more meaningful level than just their workplace roles. Make it a job expectation that employees help other employees to be successful (bonus: research shows that altruism provides a nice hit of dopamine for the generator of the good deed, and likely causes the recipient to feel cared for by the social group.) Pay attention to who is in and who is out, and then take steps to ensure everyone feels in. Take a personal interest in each employee. Be deliberate about welcoming newcomers into the fold — assign mentors and buddies as much to help newcomers learn the ropes as to give them immediate points of social contact. Require employees to get to know people in other departments, especially those they depend upon for success or who depend on them. Do everything you can to help your people view those they work with as friends rather than foes.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, be a role model in all these matters. While you may have days when being at the top of the food chain feels more like punishment than reward, you should assume you're being watched. Status matters, and people devote more neural activity to watching those above them in the hierarchy, presumably so they can learn how to join (or surpass) you at the top of the org chart.

And the next time you scan the office, everyone might actually be working.