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## **Help Your Brain Make The Tough Leap to New Supervisor**

**By Terry Gilbert**

One of the most challenging workplace transitions is the one from independent contributor to front-line supervisor. Supervisors new to their roles frequently report feeling overwhelmed by the demands on their time and attention, a problem exacerbated by the struggle many have in letting go of their individual contributor roles. This paper proposes that organizations would be well served by helping these soon-to-be supervisors understand the neurological underpinnings of these transition challenges as a way of helping them move, with fewer mis-steps, into their leadership positions.

Many companies tap the best and brightest from the individual contributor ranks for leadership roles. The best engineer becomes a senior engineer, the top mechanic moves up to supervise a crew of trades-people. While it is widely acknowledged that supervisory skills are quite different than the ones required to trouble shoot an equipment failure, what is perhaps less well-understood is that, from a neurological perspective, being at the top of one's game as an individual contributor could make the transition to leadership all the more challenging.

We often speak of the brain as having distinct regions, and while it is true that some regions are more involved in certain activities than others, it is also true that everything in the brain is connected to everything. The brain is composed of billions of neurons and everything we do — from thinking about what work is the highest priority for the day to picking up a wrench to loosen a bolt — involves a series of neurons firing and connecting to one another. The more often we repeat a task or think a thought, the stronger the connection between those neurons becomes; a process called hardwiring. Once something is hardwired, we do it almost automatically, without conscious awareness of it. Those things we do automatically are our habits.

But the first time we do something new, when those neurons are firing together for the first time, is the opposite of automatic. Learning something new requires conscious thought, effort and attention. Most of the thinking activities required of leaders — deciding, planning, recalling, understanding, inhibiting and predicting — take place in an area of the brain called the prefrontal cortex. While the prefrontal cortex performs our highest-level cognitive work, it is also easily taxed. To ease the burden on the prefrontal cortex, the brain likes to hardwire everything it can, creating habits of thought, behavior, and emotional responses.

The irony is that the hardwiring that enabled the mechanic to be the best on the shop floor — by allowing him to tackle routine tasks with ease, leaving the

prefrontal cortex available to deal with the new and novel — may cause him to stumble in his new role. The supervisor's job is to help others develop the hardwiring to perform their roles successfully. Too often when a new supervisor sees a worker struggle with a task, the hardwiring of habit propels the supervisor to step in and do the job himself, producing the buzz of satisfaction (a release of the neurochemical dopamine, which further reinforces the hardwiring) of a job well done. The problem is, what the supervisor's hardwiring is compelling him to do is no longer his job.

What then is the state of the brain of a new supervisor? The hardwiring needed to be successful in his new role isn't yet in place; his existing hardwiring is compelling him to do things that are no longer his job. The dopamine boost that accompanies achievement is occurring less often than the former top performer is accustomed to; following the pull of old hardwiring is a sure path to a quick hit. The easily taxed prefrontal cortex is working overtime to meet the demands of his new role. To top it off, the supervisor's attention is being pulled from one thing to another — and task switching always comes at a cost.

Sometimes we are in control of what we pay attention to — we might decide to work on the budget — but often our attention wanders because our brain has spotted something new or novel or been distracted by some other stimuli, like the flash of a text message, or anxiety about an upcoming performance review. For a brand new supervisor, almost everything is new or novel.

It would be helpful for a new supervisor to understand that, to quote neurologist Dan Radecki, “your brain changes its wiring based on what it pays attention to.” We are most able to focus when two systems — the system directing our attention to work on the budget and the system that shields us from distractions — are working together. Simply deciding to choose one thing to focus on at a time, limiting distractions such as email and interruptions, and being mindful of when attention wanders or when the prefrontal cortex needs a break, can help us better manage our attention.

Breaking challenges into small achievable chunks can help to limit the load on the prefrontal cortex and set the stage for the dopamine boost that comes with accomplishing a goal. Retention of new material — hardwiring it to ease the burden on the prefrontal cortex — is enhanced by working with a concept, figuring out how it is relevant and how to apply it, more so than by simply memorizing it. There's good evidence that our brains need sleep and rest in order to encode and retain new information, so supervisors should not expect to study something one day and be able to draw on it the next.

New supervisors might take comfort in knowing that their brains have more than one way of finding solutions to the new and complex problems they face. Most of us are aware when we're using logic to solve a problem, testing different options to see which will work. But our brains are often working on a problem at a sub-

conscious level and a solution may pop into one's head seemingly out of nowhere. Being unaware that the brain was working on the problem shouldn't cause one to discard the out-of-nowhere answer. These a-ha moments are the brain's way of drawing on numerous resources, memories and stimuli, converging it into an answer and presenting it as a complete solution for evaluation. Adequate rest, time for reflection and limiting distractions can set the stage for the brain to produce these insights.

Organizations that help supervisors understand how to help their brains make the transition to leadership – by resisting the pull of old hardwiring, focusing attention, accelerating learning and setting the stage for optimum problem solving — should reap a multiplied return on investment. A new supervisor who has truly grasped these concepts will, of course, also be using what they've learned to coach their employees to greater success.