



David Rock is the founder and CEO of Results Coaching Systems, and has authored two books, *Personal Best*, and *Quiet Leadership*. Contact David Rock at davidrock@workplacecoaching.com.



Ruth Donde (ACC, MBA, B.Pharm) is a global consultant and New Zealand Manager for Results Coaching Systems. Contact Ruth Donde at ruthdonde@resultscoaches.com.

sustaining WORK

how a brain-based approach to coaching can also impact training

There is no universal definition of coaching, or widely accepted framework for how and why coaching works. Coaching has developed from a blend of disciplines from as early as Socrates (with Socratic questioning) through various psychology bases (e.g. positive psychology, CBT), management theories (e.g. change and systems theories, adult learning, training and more recently neuroscience (brain-based approach)).

The schools of thought in coaching agree that coaching works but without identifying a strong theoretical foundation, finding evidence to support coaching can pose problems when implementing wide-scale coaching programmes. Basing coaching on the brain may provide an answer.

Every coaching event can be linked to brain functioning. By linking coaching to mental activity, we make coaching more tangible.

So why is this important in linking a brain-based coaching approach to training? We know that by adding coaching to training we can increase the chances of sustainable change through physiological change over time. By applying a brain-based approach to training, we can also design highly effective programmes – knowing how we best create change.

In brain-based terminology, we increase connections (through new insights), embed the learning further by re-enforcing new mental maps, and hardwire this through repetition,

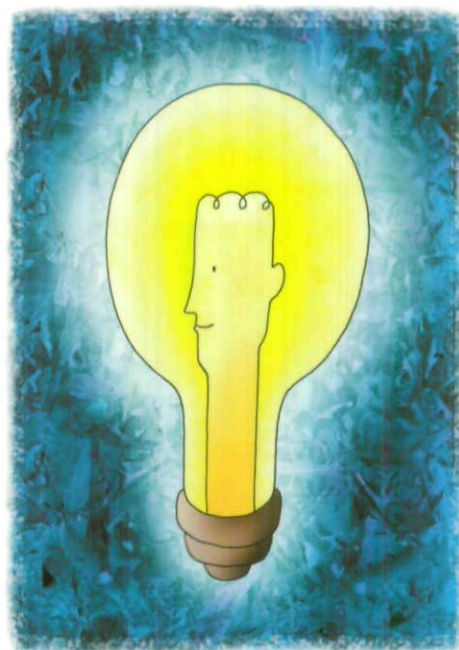
over time creating changes in habits/behaviours. This then leads to sustainable positive change (personal impacts and business outcomes).

Zenger, in the January 2005 paper *'The Promise of Phase Three'* showed how at least 50 percent of the value of training was a function of the follow-up.

Change is hard

We know that change is hard. Training is meant to develop new skills, which is change in itself. Changing habits is hard because it brings about fear, requires significant effort, and the brain naturally resists wide-scale change, a principle of homeostasis. Coaching is largely about creating new habits. Having the support of a coach increases the likelihood of success by reducing fear, reinforcing new positive mental maps, and by keeping people focused where they might have given up.

The brain has significant limitations when processing new ideas. Our working memory overloads easily. It is useful to simplify complex challenges. When training



it is important to put more attention on fewer ideas and keep it simple.

Attention changes the brain

The focus of our attention itself creates changes in the brain. Focus on solutions, and you start to create them. Focus on problems, and you become more aware of them. Coaches help coaches or new trainees to create the most useful new circuits. Coaches also help deepen new circuits; if the client knows their coach will follow up on an action they set, they will pay more attention to the action

during the week.

Taking this into account when designing a training programme it is useful to:

- Stretch people for short bursts
- Chunk learning into small bits
- Get people to do assignments regularly
- Spread out a focus on new skills over an extended time
- Allow for repetition and actions using creative methods

All of this increases the quality and quantity of attention that aids specific new ideas across a period of time.

To make training effective we must keep people paying attention.

Change requires insight

Wide-scale change requires creating new circuits in the brain. This usually happens as a moment of insight, a very energetic and pleasurable experience. The energy of insight increases motivation which helps mitigate the fear and resistance to change. During new learning, there would be many moments of insight. A coach would be able to identify these with the client in order to maximise motivation following the insight and create new actions, habits and sustainable change.

We can increase the likelihood of insight

Insight involves the creation of complex new circuits all at once. It is similar to the 'aha' experience of solving a puzzle, but on a larger scale. To bring about insight we need to help the brain stop thinking on the same paths, by quietening the mind, helping the brain simplify issues so they can be seen from other perspectives. While insight is chaotic

and unpredictable, the likelihood of insight can be dramatically increased. Through understanding the science and a few techniques, insights in coaching dialogues can be brought about more readily. Besides including creativity, it is also useful to include time for reflection when designing training interventions – to generate the insights and then maximise motivation to create new actions.

Visioning activities create real change

When we visualise an activity we activate the same circuits involved in doing the activity. If we put enough attention onto this visualisation we create new circuits that can be embedded in the brain, changing how information is processed. Without visualising a new way of doing something, the brain will go back to the circuits already embedded.

We have a strong influence on each other

Through mirror neurons and other systems, scientists are finding that people's brains resonate with one another. The strongest emotion that two people feel will tend to be the dominant emotion across both. Also believing in other people helps them believe in themselves. Coaches can use this knowledge to impact clients, and to assist clients to reframe. This can also be taken into account when trainees work together using a buddy system.

Emotional state

When conversations don't work it is often because a coachee feels defensive. The brain research points to the importance

of rapport, trust and clarity as essential components of good coaching, though these are not enough to drive change on their own. The same may be said of the learning environment – it is important that trainers create conditions that stimulate a favourable response to trust, openness and sharing. This can be done by understanding the impact of emotional stimuli on the brain e.g. status, certainty and autonomy.

A brain is like a machine, but it is not only a machine. Having an understanding of the machine-like nature of our brain, provides us access to the other aspects of brain, allowing us to operate more effectively and maximise our impact on others.

A brain-based approach to coaching provides a sound theory base. By linking coaching to brain function we are closer to understanding the 'active ingredient' in coaching (and training and leadership). This approach points to ways of improving the impact and efficiency of everyday coaching conversations, human interactions and progress and can be used to improve the design, delivery and impact of training and leadership development programmes too.

The ARIA model® of Awareness, Reflection, Insight, Action, is a common way in which the brain change occurs in coaching. Whatever coaching model you use, change occurs when we stop and focus on a particular circuit (awareness), shift our perspective (reflection), see the situation in another way (insight), then take action to embed the new connections.

By understanding the phases that the brain moves through as we try on a new idea and then take action, we can improve our capacity to drive change. ■

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