CAN YOU TEACH AN OLD DOG NEW TRICKS?

BY COLLEEN LIGHTBODY AND EMMA WEBER

Intuitively we know that most of the time learning interventions fail to create real change and get the desired results.

The brain does not like to change. Findings in cognitive neuroscience cement the need for an ongoing support process after learning so that training really makes the difference we all strive for.

The brain is designed to homeostasis; to go back to what is familiar and what is comfortable. One of the primary reasons for this is that when we are required to do something differently, it takes a high degree of effort. Change stimulates an arousal state perceived as stressful, so people resist it. Change requires use of the prefrontal cortex, a very energy intensive area of the brain. It is small, limited in capacity and uses so many of your resources, so it is much easier to resist change and go back to old habits. As an example, if you fold your arms one way and then fold your arms the other way, for most that feels highly uncomfortable. Behavioural change takes consciousness, effort, and commitment.

Sometimes people in learning and development say 'oh, John, he's never going to change, don't worry about him.' So, can you teach an old dog new tricks?

Brain neuroplasticity tells us that the brain is not rigid. Despite the fact that it's difficult to change, it is also completely possible to change. There are certain ideal learning periods for critical skills, such as languages, but for most things we are actually able to learn anything newthroughout our lifetime. It is completely possible to change IQ, change motivation, take up musical instruments, and do university degrees even on older age. Everyone is capable of profound change but they must have the desire to change.

Preempting the change is also important. Often people leave the learning environment exhausted, with zero brain power remaining. To set learners up for success it's critical to make them aware that change is going to require effort and focus. To support them provide a transition stage to continue the momentum with an ongoing process that staggers the learning. This will make post-learning change more comfortable and manageable for the individual, rather than a totally overwhelming prospect.

Having a learner personally create an action plan about how they will apply their learning back in the work environment will create the right neurochemical balance in the brain. Most of our waking thoughts are about ourselves. By tapping into a person's sense of meaning and purpose, the brain is much more active than when talking about an arbitrary thing that the person can't really relate to. With a one-on-one, reflective style learning transfer process, when a person talks about themselves and connects to their own purpose and meaning, they get an increase in dopamine and an increase in serotonin. These are feel-good neurochemicals which facilitate learning and brain development.

With structured and facilitated reflection, learners can be supported to make new connections in their brains through insights, which in turn connects maps of learning and knowledge. This will change the brainwave state of the brain, causing an outpouring of catecholamines- feel good neurochemicals. This process also stimulates the basal ganglia - the habits section of the brain. There can be much deeper learning from that perspective, rather than the usual logical, linear kind of thinking that comes from the prefrontal cortex.

Make learning transfer follow up safe and confidential for learners. Human beings have a tendency to underestimate the importance of a safe relationship in any kind of development conversation. Recent research showed that the brain processes the emotional component of physical pain and social pain in exactly the same place. Humans have a very powerful evolutionary and physiological response to an unsafe

relationship. When people are told what to do, micromanaged or not treated fairly, there is serious consequences to the brain. When we experience physical pain, we go into an instinctive, defensive survival brain state. Providing a safe, confidential, and non-directive environment where someone can access their inner wisdom is incredibly powerful for people's development; much more powerful than a manager giving them feedback.

Online transfer of learning solutions are becoming increasingly popular. This may be necessary where learning initiatives need to be hugely scalable. However, online learning transfer has to be very carefully facilitated in order to engage the brain, because it's so easy for people to disconnect and multitask. When someone is having a confidential one-on-one transfer of learning conversation, about them, in a safe, open, curious environment, the person is much more likely to go deeper, and be more engaged. It is activating many more areas of the brain. In order to create learning you want to stimulate as many parts of the brain as you possibly can. The social brain is critical to learning. People learn much better in a social engagement than they do when they are just passively learning as individuals.

Focus on the relevance of how learning is important to a person, how they are going to use it, and what change is going to happen because of it. All the thinking in the world and the most wonderful neurochemical brain state is wasted, if the person doesn't actually go and do something to embed a new behaviour. Get people to experiment, be curious to do things differently, and reflect on that.

This article was curated from an interview on the neuroscience behind behavioural change with Colleen Lightbody and Emma Weber. The full interview is available at http://transferoflearning.com/cognitive-neuroscience-in-the-transfer-of-learning

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