



DEVELOPING THE BRAIN OF A LEADER

The theme for this issue (How the Brain Learns) really got us thinking (no pun intended)! What would you see inside the brain of a proven leader? Did their brain always operate that way? Do they think differently? Or do they simply spend more time thinking?

Amidst those musings, we were reminded of an exchange we had with a distinguished executive leader. She shared a memory from her early career as a people manager. She had just been promoted into her role and was in her office. There was a knock at her door and one of her direct reports asked if she had a minute.

Of course she had a minute: She was a new manager who was both enthusiastic and eager to demonstrate responsiveness and build trust. The employee entered and provided an emotional account of his frustration with a colleague from another department who was impeding him from doing his job and hitting his targets. The new manager listened, empathized and was moved to outrage herself. She committed (in the moment) to take care of this situation.

Not long after, she left her office “with her hair on fire” and confronted her management counterpart from the other department. She then heard a decidedly different version of the details contributing to the problem which, upon objective review, seemed far more plausible.

Now, we have both spent a significant portion of our careers talking with leaders from all different walks of life about the art (or science) of leadership.

And it seems like just about every one of them has similar tales to tell, which leads us to believe:

- Leaders were by no means born with special brains.
- However, leaders do in fact think differently.
- Leaders intentionally spend time developing their brains.

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Furthermore, these two elements seem to be consistent components of that development.

- **Experience:** Great leaders are attracted to the unknown and the difficult. They raise their hands to volunteer for opportunities that can be embedded with risk or, at a minimum, unavoidable conflict. In that regard, they epitomize the age-old distinction between leadership and management:
 - *Management* is the responsibility to influence others ... when you know “what good looks like.”
 - *Leadership* is the responsibility to influence others ... when you have no idea.

Leaders are drawn to these circumstances for many different reasons, and one of them most certainly is learning. They know when they dive into uncharted waters, they will discover new things. They trust themselves and those around

them to effectively navigate those events and learn as they go.

- **Discipline:** Consequential experiences provide leaders with a template to develop discernment. When you find yourself in the middle of “uncharted waters,” your survival depends upon your ability to make good decisions.

In our estimation, no one has more relevant advice on this matter than Daniel Kahneman. In his book “Thinking, Fast and Slow,” he describes the brain as having two systems:

- **System 1** is reactionary, impulsive and effortless. It’s what causes our *hair to catch on fire* without even considering we might not have all the information we need to make a quality decision.
- **System 2** is by its very nature inherently lazy, but it is the part of the brain that produces quality decisions from complex and incomplete inputs.

Suffice to say good leaders welcome experiences that wake up and engage the part of their brain that is reluctantly energized by making complicated things simple. This is why leadership is often referred to as “common sense,” but is by no means “common practice.” When it comes right down to it, it is really, really, difficult. 🔄

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