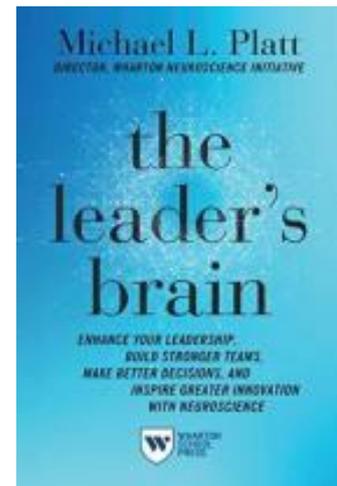


The Leader's Brain

Enhance Your Leadership, Build Stronger Teams,
Make Better Decisions, Inspire Greater Innovation
with Neuroscience

Michael Platt



Recommendation

Neuroscientist Michael L. Platt's brief overview of the field of applied neuroscience focuses on current and near-future uses of the science in society and at work. Platt argues that enhanced understanding of the brain – combined with wearable technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) – will revolutionise health and human performance. Readers can test Platt's tips on employees at work, making this quick read potentially valuable. The book provides leaders and workers who are unfamiliar with the advances in the field with plenty of practical – if somewhat scattered – advice.

Take-Aways

- Human beings evolved to be social animals who need community, especially in times of crisis.
- The expanding field of neuroscience – which psychology, economics, biology and behavioural science informs and data powers – offers insights into human needs, desires and motivations.
- In the office, leaders can use neuroscience to promote team synchrony.
- Neuroscience reveals that everyone has creative capacity.
- Neuroscience offers leaders a process for stronger decision-making.
- Use neuroscience to drive better workplace learning.
- In the near future, neuroscience will reveal opportunities to enhance life and performance.

Summary

Human beings evolved to be social animals who need community, especially in times of crisis.

People with strong social connections lead longer, healthier lives, earn more money and prove better leaders. When Google sought to learn what traits made the best managers, they found programming expertise and technical acumen mattered little compared to coaching ability and helping others navigate their careers.

“Advances in neurotechnology, combined with sophisticated analytics, offer the potential to know ourselves better and use this knowledge to radically enhance the way we live and the way we work.”

The COVID-19 pandemic frustrates people’s coming together for mutual support, making this an especially stressful time. In experiments, monkeys grew more socially connected and inclusive following crises; perhaps post-COVID-19 humans will too. Recovery from the pandemic will require leaders who understand universal and individual social needs.

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The field of neuroscience helps us understand what motivates people, how they learn and what drives top performance. These insights reveal new paths to higher performance physically and mentally – in the sports arena and at work. Though your DNA accounts for a stronger or weaker social brain at birth, you can grow yours and others’ social muscles.

To gain a rough gauge of where you stand, imagine the index finger on your dominant hand as a marker. Draw an imaginary capital ‘E’ on your forehead. Which way do your three horizontal lines point? If you drew your E toward the left, you did so with other people’s perspectives in mind, so they can easily read it. If you drew it the opposite way – the self-oriented direction – you have work to do.

“To make a connection and develop your social brain, it’s critical to understand what’s going on during social interactions. The key to managing that connection in any interaction is simply to pay attention to the other person.”

Simply reaching out to people more often will nourish connections between the neurons in your brain that are responsible for social connection. During the COVID-19 pandemic, in the absence of physical meetings, web video calls can build the social connectivity muscle. On these calls, pay attention, observe people’s facial expressions, and listen. Try to take their perspective. Putting yourself in others’ shoes matters more if you lead because a position of power makes it difficult to consider those lower in the pecking order. Failure to listen to

employees makes them far less likely to share ideas. Watch, too, for group biases that cause groups to exclude others. Counter these effects by creating a more diverse, inclusive and transparent organization with a flatter hierarchical structure.

In the office, leaders can use neuroscience to promote team synchronicity.

The power of inclusive, bonded and synchronised teams can astonish. In the 1980 Winter Olympics, for example, experts considered the Russian hockey team the best in the world and one of the greatest of all time. Amateur college players, by contrast, comprised the US team. Coach Herb Brooks believed his only chance was to build a team of surpassing unity, mental toughness and self-confidence. In defeating the Soviets, the US team pulled off a miracle that Brooks's extraordinary leadership fuelled by creating profound team synchronicity and convincing team members of their shared destiny.

Encouraging two minutes of uninterrupted eye contact between two people, having a team work on the same puzzle or watching a movie together fires people's mirror neuron systems and nourishes synchronicity. When rowers achieve synchronicity physically, their brains do as well. Create conditions for physical and mental synchronicity among your teams by using biometric tools to determine which employees are in natural synch to engineer higher-performing teams.

"When team members feel connected to one another, they score in the top 20% for engagement and have 59% less turnover."

Immediately build connections between new teams or between existing teams with new members. People tend to sort strangers into "friend-or-foe" categories quickly upon meeting. Like Coach Brooks, create a shared vision and goals and celebrate every success. A person's performance measured against traditional outcomes might fall into the middle of the pack, but that individual's ability to connect and his or her impact on other people's performance could reveal a hidden superstar. Encourage team connectedness through meetings in which everyone gets a chance to talk, by regularly communicating shared goals, by volunteering together, or, if remote, by bringing team members together online to play games, or just to talk.

"Leaders should prime teams to think about something bigger than themselves before delivering difficult news that will require people to change their behaviour."

Neuroscience suggests that people open up to messages when a speaker uses the pronouns "you" and "your" frequently, when they speak confidently in the present tense, and deliver presentations that evoke emotions and senses using familiar images and simple constructs – for example, by referring to well-known smells like cinnamon, or describing how a team's work impacts customers.

“When you’re trying to maximize engagement with your verbal communication, keep in mind that neural similarity is hindered by complexity. In other words, keep it simple!”

Encourage people to seek specific feedback from their peers and leaders. Ask managers to schedule regular one-to-one meetings with their reports to discuss their performance and obstacles. Leaders should listen far more than they talk and ask for feedback themselves.

Neuroscience reveals that everyone has creative capacity.

Every person’s brain contains an “innovation circuit” that seeks novelty and triggers experimentation and creativity. To nudge it into action, get away from your desk.

“Creative output increase” (s) by an average of 60% when walking.

Try napping, daydreaming, meditation, doing the laundry or going for a short walk. For your teams, let people set work aside several times per year to experiment and prototype ideas.

Neuroscience offers leaders a process for stronger decision-making.

Your brain and everyone else’s thinks through decisions in the same way. First, you become aware of the options. For example, you feel hunger. You see a donut and an apple in the fridge – which should you eat? You weigh the pros and cons, make a choice and then gauge the results. Then you assess how you feel and draw conclusions, such as whether you would make the same choice again.

Complex decisions take longer. Sometimes you have the luxury of time; in other cases, you have to move fast and accept uncertainty – like deciding whether to hold or sell a volatile stock. This means balancing quickness and deliberation. Neuroscience suggests you should step away from the process briefly to meditate. Don’t focus too much on one option. Stay aware of your propensity, for example, to hate losses more than you like gains, as this biases your decisions.

“Neuroscience is making it possible to predict sales across the country by measuring the brain activity of a small number of people watching the same commercial.”

Everyone from advertisers to politicians may attempt to use your many biases to nudge you toward the decision they want you to make. In some cases, benign nudges help you make better decisions about diet, smoking and driving after drinking, for example. In other cases, bright colours, large fonts and product placement shift your focus toward certain products or choices.

Use neuroscience to drive better workplace learning.

Smart machines and animals, including humans, learn in much the same way, through the reinforcement learning algorithm. People and artificial intelligence (AI) learn by doing

things, seeing the results and comparing them to their expectations. Every experience provides more information and learning. When an action or experience results in better than expected outcomes, you have a propensity to do it again, like investing and holding stocks when they do well versus selling them.

“We can be happier by systematically lowering our expectations. Doing so makes it easier to create positive prediction errors, leading to the brief bursts of dopamine that make the world look just a little bit brighter than it did before.”

Leaders can use positive reinforcement and the chemical reward system it generates to recognize employees for doing the right things – for desired behaviours and outcomes – no matter how large or small. Regular and consistent praise boosts performance and lowers attrition significantly. When employees take risks and experiment, resulting in consistently positive reactions from a leader – even when they fail – that reinforces their willingness to innovate and create. The brain releases dopamine to make you feel good when you think about doing something that brought you consistent positive reinforcement. This powerful reward system works for destructive behaviours too, like taking amphetamines or gambling.

In addition to learning from the outcomes of every experience – reinforcement learning – humans tend to think about the path not taken. You make a choice and learn by reflecting on the outcomes but you also think about the choices you could have made but didn't. The more alternatives you can think of and ponder, the more you improve your capacity for better decisions in the future.

“The behaviour and decisions of our leaders, our employees, our teammates and our customers reflect not only what they learn from direct experience but also what they didn't choose and what they imagine might have happened if they did.”

People – and many animals – learn by watching others and considering how their choices worked out. This can cause damage when it generates a stampede, as in a massive stock buy or sell off, for example. Counter your propensity to jump on bandwagons by slowing down and thinking things through.

A great deal of difference exists from person to person. Some people have natural gifts for creativity, for example, while others may have a profound ability to focus on details. Leaders should recognize these differences and place people in roles that best leverage their natural skills and abilities.

In the near future, neuroscience will reveal opportunities to enhance life and performance.

The pace at which scientists discover more about brain function, well-being and performance – physical and mental – will, if anything, accelerate. Combine neuroscience advances with those in technology, including wearables, sensors, machine learning and data science, and the possibilities appear endless. Already, smart devices measure brain activity through electroencephalography (EEG). This grants insight into what motivates people, their emotional drivers, how they might react under pressure, and which colleagues they might work best with on teams, for example.

“As neuroscientists continue to develop new technologies, make new discoveries and consider new applications of their findings, we are on the cusp of revolutionary advances in using these tools to enhance performance at work and improve well-being at home.”

Insights from individual brain data might detect moods and help improve people’s mental health, and/or aid paralyzed patients control advanced prosthetics. A market for so-called “neuroenhancers” – drugs that claim to improve brain functioning – already exists, and physicians use the transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) technique to spark or suppress parts of the brain to treat conditions like depression or migraines. Home-based machines that operate along the same principles are also in common use.

“Our brains are made up of about 80 billion neurons that make more than 100 trillion connections with each other.”

With such techniques, of course, come important privacy concerns. The benefits include helping medical patients deal with debilitating conditions, stopping people who might harm themselves or others, hiring people for positions they fit, or tailoring training – as the US military does through experiments with advanced neuroscience that help its personnel reach peak performance. Whatever the gains, leaders must balance the benefits of knowing more about individuals against the morality of, for example, excluding people from opportunities based on their brain scan results, or manipulating people into buying things.

About the Author

University of Pennsylvania professor **Michael L. Platt** is former director of the Institute for Brain Sciences at Duke University and founder of the Wharton Neuroscience Initiative.