

Neuroscience needs to tell people what to do

Josh Davis, director of research at the NeuroLeadership Institute in New York City, delivered to SCN an enjoyable 90 minutes about neuroscience and leadership: What exactly is going on in your brain while you do the things you're supposed to do as a leader?

Davis — in an entertaining style that was simultaneously laconic and passionate — regaled the audience at the SCNetwork event with plenty of information and anecdotes.

But wait — did we actually learn anything new?

Surely — considering the accumulated human resources experience in the room — we already know what to do with the four domains of neuroleadership:

- making decisions and solving problems
- regulating our emotions
- collaborating with others
- facilitating positive change.

Surely we already know to focus on behaviour, not the person; that



Michael Clark
ORGANIZATIONAL
EFFECTIVENESS

too much stimulation is just as bad as not enough; that social exclusion is bad for collaboration; that it makes sense to curb your emotions; and that connecting the “why” to the “what” is important in change.

I emerged from the session entertained and informed, but at a loss for what I might now do differently.

It seems neuroscience tells us what is happening “under the

hood” (as it were) but not what to do nor, more importantly, any new ways to do it (unless you happen to be standing around with a glint in your eye and a syringe full of dopamine or norepinephrine).

Here's why, in my opinion, a room full of senior human resources practitioners came away enjoying the neuroscience session so much: The information provided our prefrontal cortex with proof that something is actually happening when people lead effectively.

We can now loudly proclaim, “Look, this stuff is real — it's scientific!”

Our prefrontal cortex can now wrestle to the ground our limbic hand-wringing fear response, which can only stem from a lack of confidence in what it is we teach, promote and coach.

We can now point to neuroscience and not to ourselves as experts.

And how sad is that? Do we still

have to justify ourselves in promoting the so-called soft skills of leadership?

How many white papers, reports and, indeed, how much neuroscience will it take before our customers — and ourselves — believe what we know to be true? Accountants don't justify themselves; nor do lawyers, teachers or chief executive officers.

My hope is that neuroscience will get past justifying what we already know is right, and move on to explain what is happening when we don't do the things we know we should be doing, like diagnosing and resolving why some leaders — perhaps even you and I — don't actually do the leading we should.

Michael Clark is director of business development at Forrest & Company in Toronto, an organizational transformation firm, with over 25 years experience in developing the organizational and leadership capacity in organizations.