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Brain-Savvy Change
A guide for HR Leaders



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Introduction

+ Without question one of the core skills of leaders today is the ability to lead and manage change.

To thrive in the future organisation we must accept change is a feature of daily life. Some change will be incremental and small, some revolutionary and large. But whatever the change, if an organisation cannot embed and adapt to it then the chances are the organisation may not be around for long.

Leaders play a crucial role here. They must deal with change masterfully themselves. But they must also understand how to lead their business through change. They must know how to prepare for it, how to anticipate obstacles and how to ensure the best changes are made. They must also know how to embed change in an organisation through its people – so change can take root with the minimum of disruption for all concerned.

This guide takes you through the key components of the change process and explains the mindset and skill set required to be change leaders. It also explains how 21st-century social neuroscience is deepening our understanding of how human beings respond to change, and how leaders can use this science to their advantage in change leadership.

The role of social neuroscience

† So what is all the excitement about?

Social neuroscience is the study of how biological occurrences, primarily in the brain, influence social interactions and behaviour. While a long established strain of science, recent developments have shed a new and fascinating light on how people react to change, and therefore how the best leaders can manage people through it.

The first key development was in 2000, when Evian Gordon proposed a new theory that one of the primary organising principles governing social behaviour is a desire to maximise reward and minimise threat. Then in 2008, Lieberman and Eisenberger, writing for the NeuroLeadership Journal, found that in many situations the neural networks used to maximise reward and minimise threat are the same as those used for critical survival needs. This implies that the brain treats social needs in the same way as it treats the need for food and shelter.

In a change situation there is a tendency for the threat response to be activated according to Evian Gordon. But with careful management leaders can minimise this and even activate reward responses.

Using neuroscience in business

✦ There are many notable scientists in the field who have produced a mass of data relevant to leadership and change. Some of the challenge is sifting through all the information and drawing together the meaning for leaders. It's an ongoing process that we do at Head Heart + Brain. We then use the relevant information in our change leadership programmes, and we've used the positive results, we're beginning to see to develop a model to help leaders of change – our CORE model.

The CORE model

Our CORE model sheds light on how people react to change and why many find it so difficult. In particular it helps us identify the drivers of threat and reward responses in people. The model is based on the two neuro-scientific insights we mentioned above:

1. Motivation driving social behaviour is governed by a principle of minimising threat and maximising reward.
2. The brain networks we draw on to minimise threat and maximise reward are the same brain networks used for our primary survival needs.

In other words the brain treats social needs in the same way as it treats the need for food and water.

You will notice that 'threat' appears on our model much larger than 'reward'. This is because our brain is wired to look for threats rather than rewards. It's one of the reasons humans have survived so long. But it also means we need many more reward responses than you'd expect in order to feel good, and that one threat can override a number of rewards.

CORE elements

✚ The CORE model identifies the common factors that activate both reward and threat responses in social situations. These fall into four elements of human social experience:

Certainty the knowledge that we can predict the future

Options the extent to which we feel we have choice

Reputation our relative importance to others

Equity our sense that things are equitable

These four elements activate either the ‘primary reward’ or the ‘primary threat’ circuitry of the brain. For example, a perceived threat to one’s sense of equity activates similar brain networks to a threat to one’s life. In the same way, a perceived increase to your reputation activates the same reward circuitry as receiving a monetary reward. The reaction happens in a nanosecond and is automatic, driving behaviour before the individual has a chance to rationally consider their response.

How CORE works – an example

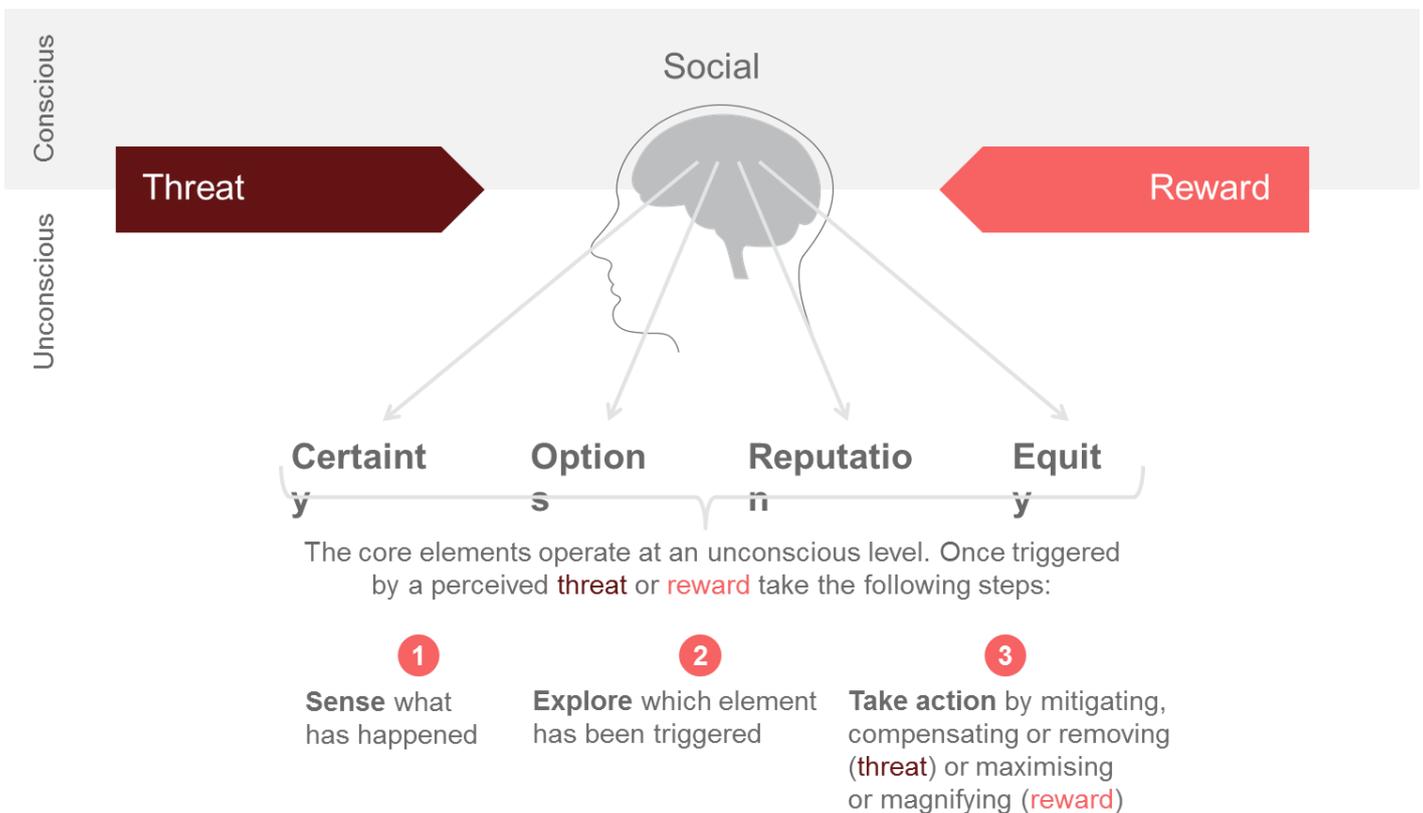
When we go through change we experience the change as a threat or reward to any or all of these four CORE elements.

So for example, consider a restructuring of a department where people have to apply for new job roles. Moving to a new job structure may create a threat to someone’s sense of certainty because they are less likely to predict what their new role will be like. On the other hand, if they were given the choice to state their role or location preferences, they might

perceive a reward to their options. Having got the job they may also experience a reward response to their reputation. Finally they may feel that, although not everyone got a job, in the end the process was robust and transparent – and so they experience this as a reward to their sense of equity.

Why so important?

✦ Whether people feel a threat or a reward will have significant impact on their problem solving, decision-making, stress-management, collaboration and motivation. Knowing the drivers that cause a threat response enables us to design initiatives to minimise threats. Knowing about the drivers that can activate a reward response enables us to motivate people more.



+

In a stable environment there is clearly great value in being able to recognise these many responses (using them to light up reward pathways in ways that don't just confer material rewards like money or promotion, for example). In times of change, understanding these responses is even more important. When the status quo is disrupted we are constantly and unconsciously scanning for ways in which we are threatened in all of these CORE elements. Our brains are wired to look for threats rather than rewards, and when a threat is found there is a significant decrease in the resources available to the prefrontal cortex: the part of the brain responsible for planning, decision making and moderating behaviour. Our focus is on dealing with the threat until it is resolved. Performance and productivity invariably suffer as a result – causing maximum disruption in a time of change. If we can take the sense of threat from an unconscious to a conscious level, we are able to deal with it. To do that, leaders must mitigate the threat by removing it or triggering a reward to compensate for it.

Mitigating threat triggers

† The table below shows some of the typical threat triggers in each of the CORE elements in a change context. It also shows actions that are more likely to trigger reward or mitigate the threat. Understanding

these responses in ourselves, being sensitive to them in others and equipping all leaders to consider them provides an enormously valuable tool in successfully implementing change:

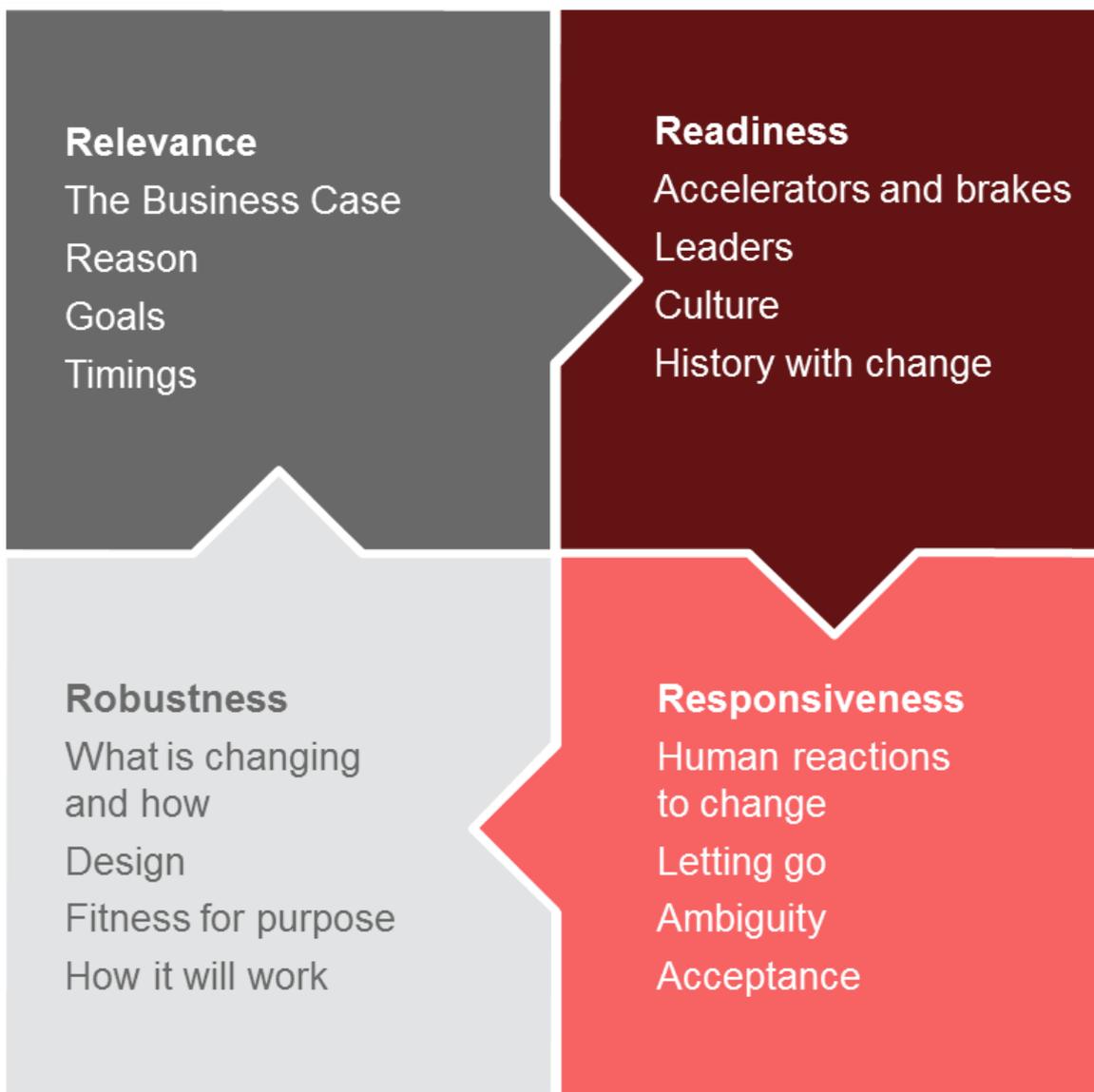
Area of human experience	Common threat triggers	Mitigating actions/increase reward
Certainty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of information about the future • Unpredictable behaviour, especially by those in power • Job insecurity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell people when they will know about changes • Create routines • Create agenda's and timetables • Lay out plans • Break large changes in to chunks • Help people see why the change is good for them personally
Options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Telling people what to do-command and control model • Micro-managing • Dictating detailed processes • Dictating the detail of change • Excluding people from shaping plans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give people choices • Create flexible work patterns • Set high-level policy that allows discretion and judgement • Set the overall direction, define the details as a team • Let people design the detailed changes to their own role •
Reputation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giving detailed instructions, especially in public • Leaving people out of activities • Reducing power of the role • Giving critical feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking for self assessment of performance • Giving positive feedback, especially publically • Providing opportunities to learn and grow
Equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceived favouritism • Uneven workload • Unclear expectations • Lack transparency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly explaining actions and context • Transparency of the decisions-making process • Adherence to clear policies

Using the brain to lead change

How can you use this
model in practice?

† No two changes are ever alike. They vary on every dimension from size and complexity to purpose and context. Yet there is a common architecture in all successful change. Understanding this architecture is the first important step to getting a clear picture of all the elements necessary for a sound process, built on a solid foundation.

✦ The four key components that must be in place for the change to have a meaningful and sustainable impact on the organisation and its performance are:



As we look at these components in a little more detail we can see how bringing together the mindset of great leaders and the insight from the CORE model at each stage of the change process creates a powerful roadmap for leading change.

Using neuroscience in the key components of change

Relevance phase

† As a leader you need to deeply understand the reasons behind and the business case for change – asking questions that test the soundness of the thought process that has led to the proposal of change at that particular point.

Do this at a personal level first. This applies whether you are leading a change of your own in the business or guiding a change as a sponsor or supervisor of the team. Define your purpose. Satisfy yourself that the change is relevant to the company and that now is the right time for it.

Engage the stakeholder group. If it is a change you are leading, encourage them to play devil's advocate, find the gaps in your logic, propose alternatives and come to their own understanding of why it is the right thing to do. Encourage them to ask the right questions: why are we undertaking this change? What do we want to achieve? What will happen if we don't? What current problems will it and won't it solve? What potential new problems could it create? Why is now the right time for this change?

✚ When people have been through the thought process for themselves and come to their own conclusions they begin to own the change in a way they never could by simply being told what is going to happen. This involvement confirms their reputation and gives them a greater sense of having options, both of which light up reward pathways. It may also lead them to experience 'aha moments' of insight about the change, leading to further positive chemical changes in the brain.

Likewise when working with stakeholders, if you sense resistance in someone you can use the CORE model to look for any threats that might have been triggered in them and find ways to eliminate the threat or help them feel rewarded.

The best change leaders help people to understand why the change is good for them personally. Done well, this deep inquiry leads to a shared understanding among key stakeholders of what the long term goals are, how important this is, what the potential benefits to the business are, realistic understanding of the limitations and a sense of urgency to act now not just for the benefit of the business but for personal benefit too. This later becomes the 'compelling story' that ultimately can become the motivating rallying cry to keep people engaged when times get hard ahead. Telling that story is an important part of what great leaders do.

Applying CORE in the relevance phase

When thinking about relevance on a personal level, assessing yourself against the CORE model will help you understand how your own hard-wiring works: is one element more easily threatened than another for you? Which element do you get your primary rewards from? How might the change trigger threats for you? What plans can you make to ensure that your own reward is maximised and threat minimised as the change progresses? What threats or rewards might the change represent for the key stakeholders? What can you do to make it as rewarding as possible for all concerned?

Readiness phase

✚ To assess how ready your organisation is for change, you need to understand what in the organisation's leadership thinking, culture and history of change will help or hinder the successful implementation of what is proposed.

Questions you need to ask here examine the accelerators and brakes on change. They also look at how similar or disparate these are across the organisation (since not all parts of the business may have the same levels of readiness at the same time). Questions you should be asking include:

- ✚ Do the leaders all share a common vision for the change and its full business potential?
- ✚ Do they have important personal gains to be made or conflicts of interest?
- ✚ How does our leadership model fit with the change?
- ✚ What aspects of our culture will help support the change and what will hinder it?
- ✚ What has our history of change been?
- ✚ Do we tend to embrace or resist it?
- ✚ Where or when does change tend to get stuck, and why?
- ✚ What are the major threats to success and how can we mitigate them?
- ✚ Do we have uniformity or do we need to adapt our approaches to take account of differences around the organisation?

✚ Where are their threats and where are their rewards for different groups?

Assessing the organisation's readiness for change enables the project planners to take account of foreseeable obstacles to successful implementation. If, for example, the leadership team are not all aligned to the change, one work stream can be specifically focused on creating alignment and personal incentive for each of them. If projects have typically lost momentum after six months' work, re-engagement interventions can be planned as that time approaches. If businesses or departments usually operate very independently, cross-functional teams can be established from the outset and given common and interdependent goals.

Applying CORE in the readiness phase

When considering readiness you will most often see differences across different populations impacted by the change. The senior team who have been designing and planning the change will have dealt with their CORE issues long before the bulk of the organisation has even heard about it. This may mean they underplay the need to help others. Using CORE as a diagnostic tool to assess people's readiness can help you to understand the reactions you see and to plan involvement that will positively impact the CORE elements for people.

Robustness phase

✦ You need to design strength into the nuts and bolts of the change and this usually attracts the most effort and energy in projects. It involves understanding the changes you are making to systems and processes, organisation and roles, and overall infrastructure. The questions to ask are:

- ✦ Have we got the structure right?
- ✦ Is our design fit for purpose?
- ✦ Do the systems deliver what's needed?
- ✦ Do our people understand what they and others have to do in the changed environment?
- ✦ Do people have the skills to work effectively after the change?
- ✦ How will it all work together?
- ✦ When implemented, will it achieve the goals of the change?

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Involve people in the process

Well thought-through physical changes that increase efficiency, productivity or ease of use will stick naturally, as people can see their worth. So getting things right on the technical front is very important and should be a central focus. Two things can be gained from productively involving as many people as possible in this process: first it increases the chances of creating the best design; second (and even more important) it provides many more opportunities for reward pathways to be activated as opposed to threats in the process.

Applying CORE in the robustness phase

As you assess robustness of a change plan, keep part of your awareness on the threats that might be triggered and seek ways in the design of the change to eliminate as many threats and create as many rewards as possible. Involve people in designing the change, as this will give them a greater sense of certainty about their future and help them feel that they have some options in what happens and the choices they have. It will also help them begin to understand how they will need to reshape themselves to fit the new organisation. You should also be willing to try new ideas and take risks during this phase as you seek the most robust solutions.

Responsiveness phase

✦ It is important to acknowledge and deal with the human impact of change; this is often the least attended-to factor in unsuccessful change projects. It involves understanding and responding to the emotional journey that we all experience when faced with change, regardless of whether we perceive it to be positive or negative. How are people reacting to the changes and the implications for them? What do they feel they are losing and what might they gain? How clear is it to them what will change and when? How and when will they stop what they used to do and start what they are going to do? How will they deal with the ambiguity in the transition? How can we support them until the new order is business as usual? How can we help people create new behavioural habits so the change sticks?

Focus on the middle

In any given change situation 20-30% of people will be natural promoters of the change and 20-30% will be natural opponents. The remaining 40-60% of people could go either way. Engaging this middle population positively in the change is where the biggest dividends lie:

✦ Coach them through the changes, involve them in the plans and help them see the future – these will all light up reward pathways that will make their engagement more likely.

✦ Bring their emotional reactions to light, put them in a larger context and acknowledge them as important – equipping managers to anticipate and deal with them constructively pays enormous dividends in winning the hearts and minds of the people affected by change.

✦ Help people understand why change is happening and allow them to explore their sense of loss or anger at the upheaval. Help them manage the confusion or anxiety they feel. Encourage them, when the time is right, to see the positives in the new order. Only then will they become ready to embrace and work creatively with the vision of the future.

Applying CORE in the responsiveness phase

This is where the CORE model and a greater understanding of the human brain really comes into its own. It helps us understand the emotional reactions people have at an unconscious level to what is being asked of them. As they find threats made to their certainty, options, reputation and sense of equity they experience the emotional reaction without understanding the source. Using the CORE model to label the cause of these reactions and rethink the responses will reduce the threat more than attempting to suppress the emotion. Moreover, training leaders and staff at all levels to use the CORE model and understand the patterns of human reactions to change creates a common language and mindset about the difficulties people encounter – a mindset that focuses on understanding and mitigating the threats, rather than blaming people for ‘being difficult’.

Using the brain to lead change

The value of using neuroscience in change

✦ Neuroscience can also tell us a great deal about why people who support the change at an intellectual level do not always make the behavioural changes required. It is rare for any change to require no behavioural change on the part of those affected by it. But our brains don't like change: our brains like habit and routine because what is habitual is done without thinking. The 'memory' of doing it is stored in the basal ganglia and works like an automatic pilot. This is very efficient for the brain.

When we have to do new things we need to pay attention and process our actions with the prefrontal cortex, which takes much more energy and effort than working from the basal ganglia. It is exhausting to keep this up for long so our natural tendency is to want to go back to doing what is familiar and doing them in the old way.

Again, making understanding of this widespread in the organisation reduces the frustration and blame

directed at those who are struggling to change and gives a sense of perspective that enables people to see that one day the 'new ways' will be as habitual as the old if they persist.

✦ All four components of the change model are equally important, but they do not necessarily all receive equal attention from the designers and implementers of change. Action is often valued more highly than careful and thoughtful planning. Decision-makers can become intransigent when challenged to expose and re-examine their reasoning. Some sponsors believe they can force their plans through, regardless of known problems with previous efforts at change and prefer to plough ahead, rather than enquire into and anticipate foreseeable resistance, problems or blocks. Attention is frequently centred solely on the technical aspects which, although crucial, will not in themselves deliver easy or lasting change. All too often impatience, desire for action and belief in hierarchy result in leaders ignoring the human impact of the change, believing people will 'do as they're told' or 'just have to get on with it'. Understanding what is going on in the brain helps clarify what we have always known: that this simply doesn't work.

Paying insufficient attention to one of the components will not necessarily cause an entire change to fail, but it is extremely likely to make it more painful to implement and more difficult to sustain. Leaders tend to have one aspect of the change model which they naturally gravitate towards. This can generate a bias for action in that area and a neglect of the other areas. Knowing if you have a bias and what it is will help you to ensure your focus is adjusted or that you engage others to lead the areas you neglect.

An HR leader's mindset

+ Great HR leaders don't all have identical skills, but they all share a common mindset. Adopting this mindset is essential to have the self-belief, drive and focus necessary to lead change through a business.

In 2008, we conducted a research study with a group of HR Leaders judged by their organisations to be highly skilled and effective. The aim was to discover what, if any, common characteristics and behaviours they shared. The results showed that their experience, qualifications and skill sets varied widely, but that they shared many similarities in how they thought about and defined what they did. In particular, we discovered they all share the following:

Sense of purpose – Clarity of vision about what they are there to do and a willingness to go out to the edge in order to achieve it. This purpose included bringing the organisation to, and through, change.

Business focus – Defining themselves as business people first and holding themselves accountable for creating business success.

Function construction – Focus on crafting a fit-for-purpose HR function and leading it to deliver success for the business through the people

agenda.

Self-knowledge – Authenticity and integrity, awareness of their own values, self-belief, continuous learning and an ability to manage their own energy and motivation.

+ We call this their mindset. And because of this shared mindset, when great HR Leaders describe the steps they follow to achieve success, they describe a common path:

+ Start with a clear sense of passionate purpose

+ Develop a compelling story about what is possible for the organisation

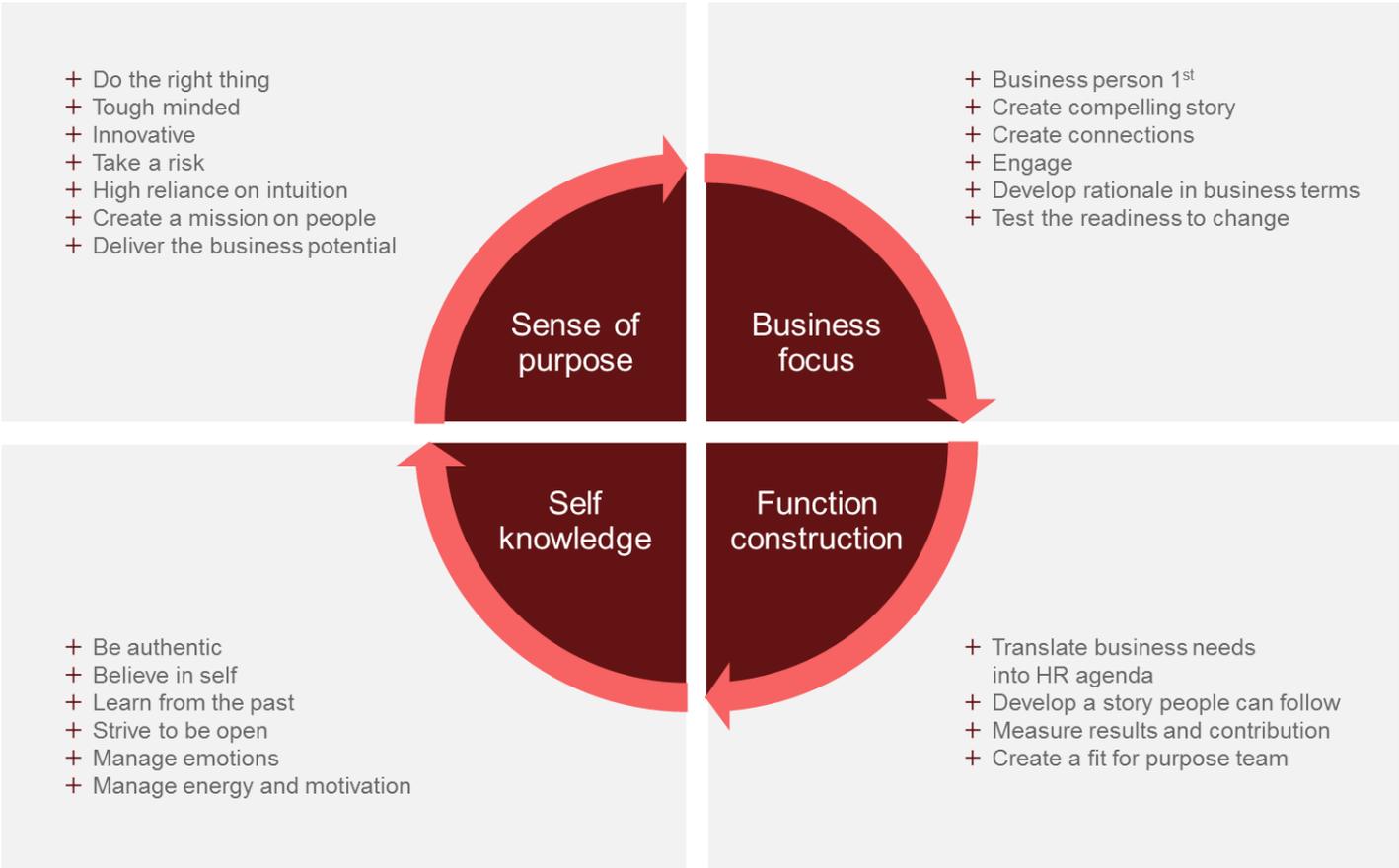
+ Pace the organisation in its readiness for change

+ Be brave, take risks and learn from testing ideas

+ Create an innovative and competent HR function that can be inspired to come along for the ride

+ Measure progress and constantly reinforce success

In summary, great HR leaders are unusually self-aware. They know what they are there to do and why, and that it's about transforming the business not executing an HR agenda. They see themselves as leaders in the business, not implementers for it or advisors to it. They 'sell the story' of what is possible for the organisation and inspire others to join them in the change. They work hard to engage stakeholders and ensure the organisation is ready because they know the futility of thrusting change on an unripe organisation. They take risks and try new ideas, not recklessly but in pursuit of the best solutions, structures and approaches possible. They achieve this through focusing on building an HR function that is fit for purpose: one that can bring about change and replicate what the leader does at every level, because using all the touch points and bedding in the change at all levels is the best way to make it sustainable and real. They also know that what gets measured gets done, and they track progress accordingly.



The leader's change charter

✦ As a leader who must achieve change it's important to pay attention to every part of the change process. Here are five key activities that will help you do that whilst applying the lessons of neuroscience. We call it the Leader's Change Charter:

- ✦ Understand your own reaction to the change
- ✦ Identify who is stuck or resistant
- ✦ Facilitate insight in others
- ✦ Have people set goals for new behaviour
- ✦ Reinforce and reward new behaviour until new habits are formed

A leader's skill set

✦ HR's key contribution to any change process is understanding the architecture of change, ensuring it is applied and educating others who are leading and involved with the change.

We know it's far from easy. It requires an all-round skill set. The following are five of the most important things HR change leaders must be able to do:

1. Recognise when change is happening, however small. Change tends to gain people's attention when it is large-scale and systemic (when a merger is underway, when HR is going through full transformation, when a company-wide IT system is being implemented or when a company is relocating, for example). In these circumstances, there will usually be a carefully thought-out change plan with multiple work-streams. In contrast, in smaller change situations the fact that change is occurring at all is often missed and the change proceeds unmanaged and without architecture. This is an issue, as smaller changes need to be managed just as thoughtfully as large ones, and HR needs the skill to notice the smallest of changes for what it is.

For example, a restructuring of a single department resulting in a few redundancies would not register on most people's change Richter scale; it's a redundancy exercise not a

change project, right? Wrong. For everyone in that department and anyone tangentially connected to them, it constitutes a huge change and should be managed accordingly, with attention to all four components of the architecture and a keen alertness to the levels of perceived threat present for those who remain. Sadly the focus is often on the robustness of the solutions – complying with the law in executing the redundancies – while ignoring how well thought-through the plan is in the first place, how expected or unexpected it will be, given the company's history and what the emotional impact on those remaining will be. Even a plan to hire a single senior person could be enough to merit being examined from a neuroscientific and change architectural perspective. HR's role is to have it recognised as such.

“Be visionary, spot opportunities and think differently.”

2. Influence others in the business. Influence is underpinned by credibility and made easier through relationships. HR leaders must devote energy to establishing their credibility and building their relationships widely so that when the need to influence arises, the ground will be fertile. The art of influencing is in knowing when to push and when to pull; when to ask and when to tell; when to pace the client and when to lead. It is in understanding how to insist without dogmatism; how to compromise without folding; and how to withdraw leaving the way open for future progress. Without influence, the HR leader is confined to executing the will of the business leaders and cannot add true value to the direction and management of change.

“By being a business person first, I have the freedom to develop HR’s scope.”

“What are we doing, where will this take us what will the business get from this?”

3. Communicate promptly and clearly. A lack of clear understanding or knowledge about impending change is one of the biggest causes of resistance and negativity. In neuroscientific terms, the absence of good communication triggers threats to people’s sense of certainty and the options they have more than anything else. Clear communication of facts as they become known is the ideal. But even in their absence, communication about why decisions or facts cannot yet be communicated and realistic statements about when they will be known will do a great deal to reduce the threat. HR leaders have to make sure business leaders understand the importance of this communication – how it can engage people, stabilise the environment, reinforce the important change messages and prepare for

the future. In doing so, HR must help clarify messages and understand the many forms and mediums communication can take: informal chats at the coffee machine, one-to-one and team meetings, formal briefings, town halls, emails, newsletters, intranet, podcasts and many more. HR should also use its many touch points with employees to play its own part in the communication process, and ensure others are equipped to do the same.

“Create a compelling story”

4. Coach and consult. One of the most powerful levers in leading change is involving people in the design and implementation and helping them to come to their own conclusions about the value of it and what it will mean for them. Simply keeping them informed is not enough: they need to feel that they have contributed to the thinking; that their views have been heard and are valued. Without this they are likely to feel a strong challenge to their sense of reputation and the options they have and consequently resist the change. The more they have gone through their own thought processes in relation to the change, the more likely they are to have internalised what it means for them. The key skills in bringing people to that point are coaching and consulting: asking powerful questions that shift people’s thinking, reflecting back a clear understanding of what has been said, empathising, challenging assumptions and proposing alternative views of the world. Making these skills widely available in the organisation not only helps with the change process but enriches the quality of the leadership forever.

“Ensure there is time for real debate and creation not just monitoring.”

5. Diagnose accurately. Questions are a key tool of the HR trade. In the absence of good diagnosis, the tendency will be to treat the symptoms without understanding the nature of the disease. Armed with a knowledge and understanding of the structure of change and the drivers behind people's behaviour, together with the ability to ask the right questions, HR is perfectly placed to diagnose the most likely root source of any problems that arise. Honing this skill and coupling it with the development or use of diagnostic tools and templates to enable others involved in the change to look at its structural soundness, is a valuable contribution HR can make.

“Risk taking isn't about shooting from the hip, it is measured and calculated.”

“Test if the business is ready for the change.”

Case study

Neuroscience in practice

† Over a period of a year we worked with a large international bank to implement a major HR change programme supporting a super-regional growth strategy in their business. Their issue was that the HR team as a whole had relatively low change-management skills and many of the senior HR team were ambivalent to the change. Our challenge was to engage them all in the change, increase their commitment to it and enable them to manage themselves and others through the change process.

After researching the root causes of the difficulties their HR team were having, and consulting their team on how they normally managed strategy and change, we designed a change leadership programme based around a 3 -day workshop for each of their top 200 HR people.

The workshops encouraged these senior HR people to take responsibility for the change in themselves, their HR team and the business – integrating neuroscientific insights to help them understand what goes on for people during change, and how to manage their own levels of engagement.

Our follow-on work was to equip the HR leadership team to engage their team and business stakeholders in the organisational change, through using tools such as CORE and the Leaders Change Charter. HR leaders underwent a 2-day workshop learning how to use the tools in practice and how to pass on the skills to others. HR leaders are now leading the change of the next stage of the transformation of the business and the function.

Further information

✦ The Head Heart + Brain team have deep understanding and experience helping HR leaders lead change. If you would like to find out more about CORE, our Leading HR research get in touch at partners@hhab.co.uk.

The team at Head Heart + Brain work with the rational and cognitive content - the head; with the emotions focusing on how people are successful -the heart and with the brain using the findings from neuroscience to inform their work.