

# Social Intelligence and the Biology of Leadership

by Daniel Goleman and Richard Boyatzis

*New studies of the brain show that leaders can improve group performance by understanding the biology of empathy.*

The concept of emotional intelligence continues to occupy a prominent space in the leadership literature and in everyday coaching practices. But in the past five years, research in the emerging field of social neuroscience—the study of what happens in the brain while people interact—is beginning to reveal subtle new truths about what makes a good leader.

The salient discovery is that certain things leaders do—specifically, exhibit empathy and become attuned to others' moods—literally affect both their own brain chemistry and that of their followers. The individual minds become, in a sense, fused into a single system. Great leaders are those whose behavior powerfully leverages the system of brain interconnectedness. A potent way of becoming a better leader is to find authentic contexts in which to learn the kinds of social behavior that reinforce the brain's social circuitry. Leading effectively is, in other words, less about mastering situations—or even mastering social skill sets—than about developing a genuine interest in and talent for fostering positive feelings in the people whose cooperation and support you need.

The notion that effective leadership is about having powerful social circuits in the brain has prompted us to extend our concept of emotional intelligence, which we had grounded in theories of individual psychology. A more relationship-based construct for assessing leadership is *social intelligence*, which we define as a set of interpersonal competencies built on specific neural circuits (and related endocrine systems) *that inspire others to be effective (ie Get the results you...and they...both need!)*

Recently, our colleague Claudio Fernández-Aráoz found in an analysis of new C-level executives...that those who had been hired for their self-discipline, drive, and intellect were sometimes later fired for lacking basic social skills. The people Fernández-Aráoz studied had smarts in spades, but their inability to get along socially on the job was professionally self-defeating.

What's new about our definition of social intelligence is its biological underpinning, which we will explore in the following pages. Drawing on the work of neuroscientists, our own research and consulting endeavors, and the findings of researchers affiliated with the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations, we will show you how to translate newly acquired knowledge about mirror neurons, spindle cells, and oscillators into practical, socially intelligent behaviors that can reinforce the neural links between you and your followers.

## **Followers Mirror Their Leaders—Literally**

Perhaps the most stunning recent discovery in behavioral neuroscience is the identification of *mirror neurons* in widely dispersed areas of the brain. Italian neuroscientists found them by accident while monitoring a particular cell in a monkey's brain that fired only when the monkey raised its arm. One day a lab assistant lifted an ice cream cone to his own mouth and triggered a reaction in the monkey's cell. It was the first evidence that the brain is peppered with neurons that mimic, or mirror, what another being does. This previously unknown class of brain cells operates as neural Wi-Fi, allowing us to navigate our social world. When we consciously or unconsciously detect someone else's emotions through their actions, our mirror neurons reproduce those emotions. Collectively, these neurons create an instant sense of shared experience.

Mirror neurons have particular importance in organizations, because leaders' emotions and actions prompt followers to mirror those feelings and deeds. The effects of activating neural circuitry in followers' brains can be very powerful. In a recent study, our colleague Marie Dasborough observed two groups:

One received negative performance feedback accompanied by positive emotional signals—namely, nods and smiles; the other was given positive feedback that was delivered critically, with frowns and narrowed eyes.

In subsequent interviews conducted to compare the emotional states of the two groups, the people who had received positive feedback accompanied by negative emotional signals reported *feeling worse about their performance* than did the participants who had received good-natured negative feedback. In effect, the delivery was more important than the message itself. So, if leaders hope to get the best out of their people, they should continue to be demanding...but in ways that foster a positive mood in their teams. *The old carrot-and-stick approach alone doesn't make neural sense; traditional incentive systems are simply not enough to get the best performance from followers.*

Here's an example of what does work. It turns out that there's a subset of mirror neurons whose only job is to detect other people's smiles and laughter, prompting smiles and laughter in return. A boss who is self-controlled and humorless will rarely engage those neurons in his team members, but a boss who laughs and sets an easygoing tone puts those neurons to work, triggering spontaneous laughter and knitting his team together in the process. A bonded group is one that performs well, as our colleague Fabio Sala has shown in his research. *He found that top-performing leaders elicited laughter from their subordinates three times as often, on average, as did mid-performing leaders.* Being in a good mood, other research finds, helps people take in information effectively and respond nimbly and creatively. In other words, laughter is serious business.

### **The “Finely Attuned” Leader**

Great executives often talk about leading from the gut. Indeed, having good instincts is widely recognized as an advantage for a leader in any context. Intuition, too, is in the brain, produced in part by a class of neurons called *spindle cells* because of their shape. They have a body size about four times that of other brain cells, with an extra-long branch to make attaching to other cells easier and transmitting thoughts and feelings to them quicker. This ultra-rapid connection of emotions, beliefs, and judgments creates what behavioral scientists call our social guidance system. Spindle cells trigger neural networks that come into play whenever we have to choose the best response among many. These cells also help us gauge whether someone is trustworthy and right (or wrong) for a job. *Within one-twentieth of a second*, our spindle cells fire with information about how we feel about that person; such “thin-slice” judgments can be very accurate, as follow-up metrics reveal. Therefore, leaders should not fear to act on those judgments, *provided that they are also attuned to others' moods. Such attunement is literally physical.*

Followers of an effective leader experience rapport with her. Much of this feeling arises unconsciously, thanks to mirror neurons and spindle-cell circuitry. But another class of neurons is also involved: *Oscillators* coordinate people physically by regulating how and when their bodies move together. You can see oscillators in action when you watch people about to kiss; their movements look like a dance, one body responding to the other seamlessly. The same dynamic occurs when two cellists play together. Not only do they hit their notes in unison, but thanks to oscillators, the two musicians' right brain hemispheres are more closely coordinated than are the left and right sides of their individual brains.

### **Firing Up Your Social Neurons**

The firing of social neurons is evident all around us. (NB: Goleman goes on to explain how they analyzed a video of how people reacted to legendary Southwest Airlines CEO Herb Kelleher....recounting how people who didn't even know him had a consistently positive reaction to him.)

The only way to develop your social circuitry effectively is to undertake the hard work of changing your behavior. Companies interested in leadership development need to begin by assessing the willingness of individuals to enter a change program. Eager candidates should first undergo a thorough diagnostic

assessment, akin to a medical workup, to identify areas of social weakness and strength. Armed with the feedback, the aspiring leader can be trained in specific areas where developing better social skills will have the greatest payoff.

The training can include rehearsing better ways of interacting and trying them out at every opportunity, being shadowed... then debriefed by a coach and learning directly from a role model. The options are many, but the road to success is always tough.

### **How to Become Socially Smarter**

To see what social intelligence training involves, consider the case of a top executive we'll call Janice. She had been hired as a marketing manager by a *Fortune* 500 company because of her business expertise, outstanding track record as a strategic thinker and planner, reputation as a straight talker, and ability to anticipate business issues that were crucial for meeting goals. Within her first six months on the job, however, Janice was floundering; other executives saw her as aggressive and opinionated, lacking in political astuteness, and careless about what she said and to whom, especially higher-ups. Many complaints focused on her failure to establish rapport with people or even notice their reactions.

The bottom line: Janice was adept neither at reading the social norms of a group nor at recognizing people's emotional cues when she violated those norms. When presented with this feedback, Janice was of course shaken. What upset her most was the realization that she was not having her desired impact on other people. At coaching sessions Janice would describe notable successes and failures from her day. The more time Janice spent reviewing these incidents, the better she became at recognizing the difference between expressing an idea with conviction and acting like a pit bull. Such mental preparation activates the social circuitry of the brain, strengthening the neural connections you need to act effectively...precisely why Olympic athletes put hundreds of hours into mental review of their moves.

Janice was asked to name a leader in her organization who had excellent social intelligence skills. Janice identified a veteran senior manager and switched to a job where she could work with him. Janice's mentor coached her on how to express her viewpoint about contentious issues and how to talk to higher-ups, and he modeled for her the art of performance feedback. By observing him day in and day out, Janice learned to affirm people even as she challenged their positions or critiqued their performance. *Spending time with a living, breathing model of effective behavior provides the perfect stimulation for our mirror neurons, which allow us to directly experience, internalize, and ultimately to emulate what we observe.*

Janice's transformation was genuine and comprehensive. In a sense, she went in one person and came out another. If you think about it, that's an important lesson from neuroscience: Because our behavior creates and develops neural networks, we are not necessarily prisoners of our genes and our early childhood experiences. As she progressed in her training, Janice was strengthening her social circuits through practice. And as others responded to her, their brains connected with hers more profoundly and effectively, thereby reinforcing Janice's circuits in a virtuous circle. The upshot: Janice went from being on the verge of dismissal to getting promoted to a position two levels up. Companies can clearly benefit a lot from putting people through the kind of program Janice completed.

### **Hard Metrics of Social Intelligence**

Our research over the past decade has confirmed that there is a large performance gap between socially intelligent and socially unintelligent leaders. At a major national bank, for example, we found that levels of an executive's social intelligence competencies predicted yearly performance appraisals more powerfully than did the emotional intelligence competencies of self-awareness and self-management.

Social intelligence turns out to be especially important in crisis situations. Consider the experience of workers at a large Canadian provincial health care system that had gone through drastic cutbacks and a reorganization. Internal surveys revealed that the frontline workers had become frustrated that they were no longer able to give their patients a high level of care. Notably, workers whose leaders scored low in social intelligence reported unmet patient-care needs *at three times the rate*—and emotional exhaustion *at four times the rate*—of their colleagues who had supportive leaders.

At the same time, nurses with socially intelligent bosses reported good emotional health and *an enhanced ability to care for their patients, even during the stress of layoffs.*

These results should be compulsory reading for the boards of companies in crisis. Such boards typically favor expertise over social intelligence when selecting someone to guide the institution through tough times. *A crisis manager needs both.*

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As we explore the discoveries of neuroscience, we are struck by how closely the best psychological theories of development map to the newly charted hardwiring of the brain. Back in the 1950s, for example, British pediatrician and psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott was advocating for play as a way to accelerate children's learning. Similarly, British physician and psychoanalyst John Bowlby emphasized the importance of providing a secure base from which people can strive toward goals, take risks without unwarranted fear, and freely explore new possibilities. Hard-bitten executives may consider it absurdly indulgent and financially untenable to concern themselves with such theories in a world where bottom-line performance is the yardstick of success. But as new ways of scientifically measuring human development start to bear out these theories and link them directly with performance, *the so-called soft side of business begins to look not so soft after all.*

## ARE YOU A SOCIALLY INTELLIGENT LEADER?

### Empathy

- **Do you understand** what motivates other people, even those from different backgrounds?
- **Are you sensitive** to others' needs?

### Attunement

- **Do you listen attentively** and think about how others feel?
- **Are you attuned** to others' moods?

### Organizational Awareness

- **Do you appreciate** the culture and values of the group or organization?
- **Do you understand social networks** and know their unspoken norms?

### Influence

- **Do you persuade others** by engaging them in discussion and appealing to their self-interests?
- **Do you get support** from key people?

### Developing Others

- **Do you coach** and mentor others with compassion and personally invest time and energy in mentoring?
- **Do you provide feedback** that people find helpful for their professional development?

### Inspiration

- **Do you articulate a compelling vision**, build group pride, and foster a positive emotional tone?
- **Do you lead** by bringing out the best in people?

### Teamwork

- **Do you solicit input** from everyone on the team?
- **Do you support** all team members and encourage cooperation?