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Chocolate and Performance: "Fuel-Proof" Strategies for More Effective Transformations (It's All in Your Brain ...)

by Laura Stone and Scott Lacy



What if you could be more focused, calmer and better able to perform? What major transformation or culture change could be possible? What if the only thing you needed to do to perform better was to become aware

of a few things, and that by doing these things, you could improve performance and help others achieve better results?

It sounds almost too good to be true, but we recently learned just this from reading David Rock's latest book, *Your Brain at Work*. In it, Rock shares key findings on the science of the brain and how the brain functions. He also includes tips on how we can be more focused and productive (and help others do the same), and how to understand and correct what's happening when we head off-track. **Disclaimer:** A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, and we by no means hold ourselves up as authorities on brain science. However, we found Rock's insights refreshingly helpful for thinking about ways to better manage change and transformation.

Simply put, Rock likens our brain—especially the pre-frontal cortex where we do most of our thinking—to a theatre stage with a director (our mindfulness), competing actors (our thoughts), and different scenes (situations). Our ability to recognize and utilize the interrelated functioning of the brain's different parts can help us be more focused and productive, and stay cool under pressure.

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First thing in the morning or after a break or exercise, we concentrate better, are more creative, and find that problem-solving, prioritizing and decision-making all occur faster, with insights coming more easily. Why? Our brain is rested, has more available fuel, and has fewer actors (thoughts) vying for room on the stage. Here's where the chocolate comes in: The pre-frontal cortex (our "stage") is central to making decisions and solving problems. However, this part of the brain has a finite reserve of "fuel" and uses up metabolic resources like glucose quickly, requiring refueling every few hours. Taking in fuel (eating chocolate, for instance) replenishes our glucose levels. Higher glucose levels help our brain (specifically the prefrontal cortex) perform optimally. The more complex the thinking being done, the faster the fuel reserve is used, much as using your cell phone to surf the Web drains the battery faster. Glucose provides fuel for the director to function efficiently.

The idea that glucose levels have implications for individual performance was eye-opening for us. Let's take it one step further. If we are aware of and pay attention to our director, to the director's ability to efficiently move actors on and off the stage, to focus on one scene, and to effectively involve the audience (memory), then performance is dramatically enhanced. We are better in activities like decision-making, dealing with highly emotional business situations (like mergers or acquisitions), or working through complex change management needs, while minimizing the possibility of distractions, reaching an impasse, or defaulting to gridlock.

Rock suggests that when our director helps control the scene, we are better able to deal with conflict. However, when emotions run high, the director is missing. This situation requires us to bring the director back (enter a state of mindfulness) and reappraise the scene to reduce arousal of our limbic system (the brain's "emotional warehouse"). Such mindful reappraisal helps us to be more objective, and brings us down from the high emotional peaks that impede our ability to think clearly.

More brain science: When our emotions are running high, the neural transmitters are less able to make the connections required for us to think things through and make good decisions. Our limbic systems then sort through emotions unchecked and we revert to our primal instinctual focus on threats and rewards, and a friend-or-foe mentality. Without our director to help reassess these emotions, we fire before we aim—not helpful to successful change management.

People typically are resistant to change because their limbic systems are sounding the threat alarm. We consultants and leaders must understand that our brains are wired first and foremost on a primitive level (minimize danger/maximize reward). Rock refers to this thinking as "moving toward or away from" things that the brain perceives as either a reward or a

threat. Status, certainty and fairness are a few of the most important potential rewards or threats for the brain. For example, no matter how you consciously think about feedback and performance reviews, these always create "away" feelings, and your defense mechanisms go up involuntarily.

Given this insight, we need to create as much "toward state" as possible. Engaging our clients, for example, in dialogue about the future state can create a positive perception of fairness, status and autonomy, thus enabling better productivity and business results. We don't suggest painting only a rosy picture; in fact, it is better to share both sides of the equation and leave people thinking about the future's upside. Do this often, since people can only focus on either the past or the future, but not both at the same time. As Rock sums it up, "People will be paying attention either to you or to their fears. The stage isn't big enough for both at once." Therefore, "changing culture (or making any major transformation) requires creating a *toward* state everywhere you can."

Better understanding the physiological aspects of our brain can create huge opportunity for better performance. Specifically, the better we can enable and utilize our "director," the better we can perform and help others to do the same.

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