



THE NEUROCOACHING CENTER

The First Step to Overcoming the Challenges of Career Transitions:

How an Understanding of Brain Science Can Distinguish The “Possibility of Acting” from “Action Orientation”

by

Srini Pillay, M.D.

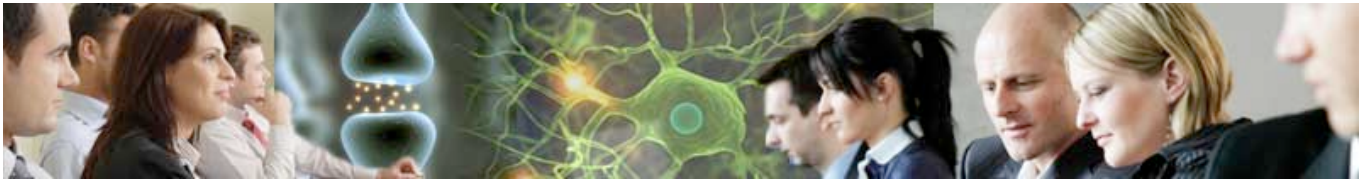
CEO: NeuroBusiness Group

Certified Master Coach

Assistant Clinical Professor: Harvard Medical School

This paper is an introduction to how brain science can be utilized to coach individuals who desire a change in their careers. Further details on how to effect these changes will be explored in a cutting-edge workshop on the Neuroscience of Change and Transformation

(<http://www.neurocoachingcenter.com/workshops.html>).

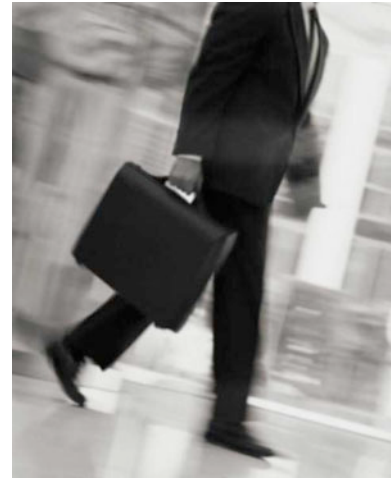


Background and Significance

Fewer than 1 in 3 employees in North America are fully engaged in their work and 19% are actually engaged (1). Furthermore, there is a correlation between degree of engagement in the workplace and retention. Despite this correlation, people on the cusp of career transitions often face multiple challenges and the actual transition to a new job can be time-consuming and oftentimes more of a “wish” or “hope” rather than action. In this paper, we will explore the brain science behind commitment, which is the first challenge of career transition. We will also explore how brain science can help illuminate what is going on when people are challenged to make the changes that they actually want. Using the real-life case of Brian, a fund manager who worked for a prominent investment firm, we will explore the differences between “possibility of acting” and “intent to act” when working with people who are stuck in their transition points in their work lives.

Case Study

Brian R. was an employee who worked for a prominent investment company, that for the purposes of this paper we will call InvestX. Brian was a junior fund manager who had spent the last five years developing himself as a biotechnology investor after his Harvard MBA. Throughout his time at InvestX, Brian found himself with varied successes and failures, and the rewards of his “big wins” were counterbalanced by the vicissitudes of his job. Being at a large investment company, Brian was attracted to the large bonuses when his calls were correct and by the potential for upward mobility in the firm, but he faced various obstructions, such as the senior fund manager, Tom M. who was always the star at the workplace and someone with whom he just could not get along. He also found himself increasingly dissatisfied with the “meaning” of his work. He longed for a greater sense of independence and a greater sense of conviction, but his company analyses and number crunching were getting to him. At his last review, he was invited to stay on for another five years with the promise of shares maturing over the next five years at which time he would have a financial windfall of another 5 million dollars. Brian found himself caught between many of these rewards at work and the growing feeling that he could not stand being in this “trap”. He sought to understand his situation more intimately and to actually help himself make the change that he knew he wanted. The problem is complex and



involves multiple components. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on commitment.

Was Brian Committed to His Desire for Career Transition?

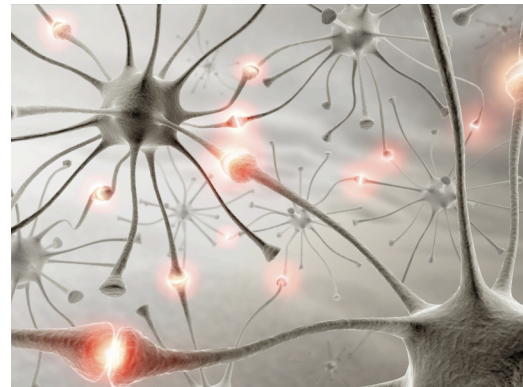
Although Brian said that he “wanted” this change, he was far from committed. Commitment is defined as “...the act of binding yourself (intellectually or emotionally) to a course of action...” Although Brian was committed to his wish, he was not committed to his action or any decision that would inspire this action. Commitment to a decision that inspires action is called “action-orientation”, and although Brian was able to acknowledge his frequent wish to leave, he had not made a commitment to leaving. He was effectively standing with his car keys in his hands, hovering at the door, but staying on for much longer than he wanted.

The necessity of commitment to the change that Brian wanted is based on the action-based model of dissonance which predicts that following commitment to a decision, there are a series of motivational factors that must arise to encourage approaching a desired goal in an effective and unconflicted way (2). These approach-oriented processes as a state of mind are referred to as “action-orientation”. Brian was all but “oriented”- in fact, he was quite disoriented by the stew of motivational and fear factors that swam about in his mind. One of the

questions that he asked was: did it make a difference? His fantasy was that he would stay in this stew and that eventually, he would become so sick of being at InvestX that he would leave. Yet, when bonus time came, or when he considered his fear of leaving something he had invested so much energy into, the challenge of leaving escalated. Brian was not in fact committed to his desired action.

What Goes On In The Brain When One Is Committed To A Decision?

Two recent experiments have shown us what goes on in the brain when a person is committed to a decision (2). In Experiment 1, using neurofeedback, when an electrode is applied to the brain to decrease left frontal cortical activation, it resulted in a



decrease in commitment to a decision. Thus, we know that if we found ways to increase left frontal cortical activation, this might increase commitment. This finding was reiterated by another study that showed that an increase in action-orientation resulted in an increase in left-frontal cortical activation and an increase in commitment to a decision. It takes an action-oriented mindset to activate this region. I call this the “get-set” position, and it is distinctly different from the “on your mark” position that places people in the direction of their goal but does not actually have them committed to that goal.

Brian was constantly in the “on your mark’ position, but his left frontal cortex had not been engaged yet since he did not have a commitment to his decision. Making this critical distinction helped Brian understand that “looking” at your goal is very different from “being committed” to your goal and he began thinking of what his “get-set” thoughts and actions could be that would be different from just being “on – your-mark”.

It is also notable that the left frontal cortex is responsible for language-related movement, and that the implications for coaching Brian are significant.

Applications to Coaching:

Coaching is essentially about creating or framing a context for change. When coaching individuals, the facts and concepts mentioned above can be helpful in setting the stage for change management.



This context is multifactorial, but a critical element of this is “language”. Oftentimes, self-limiting beliefs can translate into a language that inhibits action. Coaches can

help clients create a new language by adding the neuroscientific insights that help clients grasp what is happening. In so doing, they can increase the possibility of action-orientation. Details of this are discussed in a future paper and the workshop mentioned above.

For example, you could say to a client that there is a difference between inspiration and action, and that at Brian's earliest point, for example, he was inspired to change but not action-oriented. You can really give the client something to hold onto if you add: "...no matter how inspired you are, this will not stimulate the action-orientation center in your brain. As the first part of the coaching process, we have to bring you to action-orientation. You cannot go from inspiration to action with this resultant orientation.

The analogy is a race. If your desire is to change by running from point A to point B, simply deciding to be in the race is not enough. Staying in the "on-your-mark" position is not enough either. It will not activate the left inferior frontal cortex. To do this, you have to be in the "get-set" position. This position is action-orientation. At all time in the coaching process, we will revisit this concept. We will notice when your language is inspirational and when it is action-oriented. This distinction is critical to setting up your brain for action..."

Conclusion: Clients who are looking to be coached to realize an action-goal cannot achieve this unless they are action-oriented. Brain science tells us that action-orientation activates the left frontal cortex – without this, there cannot be commitment to a decision. This science helps to distinguish the very alluring idea of inspiration from action orientation. In Brian’s case, he had an acknowledged wish, but no commitment to acting on it. There are several ways to encourage action-orientation, but that will be the subject of another paper. The brain-based recommendations for action-orientation and the psychological basis for these recommendations will also be explored in detail at a workshop outlined at <http://www.neurocoachingcenter.com/workshops.html>.

References:

1. <http://www.blessingwhite.com/research.asp?pid=1>
2. Harmon-Jones, E., C. Harmon-Jones, et al. (2008). "Left frontal cortical activation and spreading of alternatives: tests of the action-based model of dissonance." *J Pers Soc Psychol* **94**(1): 1-15.