The Art and Neurobiology of Connection: The Leader’s Challenge

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- When we feel connected and safe, the cerebral cortex of our brain responds by becoming involved, which leads to peak performance.
- When we work in a culture of constant fear, the deeper levels of our brain are activated to respond to the fear and our cerebral cortex is disabled.
- Cultures that are negative and focus on people’s weaknesses create “learned helplessness,” lead to high rates of depression among the workforce, and cannot achieve the results of optimistic workplaces.
- The profession loses far too many excellent nurses every year because of the inability of managers and leaders to seriously connect with the front line.
- What we do as leaders creates a physiological reaction and a basis for effective or ineffective work units.

THE STORY OF A NURSE named Nell. She loved her job. Her manager, Helen, hired her as a new grad, connected with her, and always found ways to help her excel. This manager created a unit with the highest patient satisfaction, quality, and staff satisfaction scores for the entire facility and created an exceptionally hard working group that excelled at peak performance. What was this manager’s secret? She was able to reach out and connect with everyone. She cared about people and, in turn, the people on the unit learned to care about each other and to work together as a motivated high-performing team. Helen ignited the spark which connected and motivated people to feel good about themselves and their outcomes. Nell was grateful for the opportunity to do significant work as a nurse and was extremely happy about her decision to go into nursing. Her family was energized.

And then things changed. Helen moved out of state and another manager, Kate, appeared. This manager immediately began operating from a rule-based mentality and gave the impression she didn’t trust that staff on the unit could do a good job. She emphasized the need for improvement, but failed to recognize any good work that was done. For example, when the staff was talking in the hall, she immediately interrupted to ask if they were socializing or working. Nell dreaded going to work because she felt a sense of depression and gloom when she entered the unit. Patient satisfaction scores dropped. Kate responded by imposing more rules. For example, Kate mandated scripted interactions the nurses should use with patients and she audited the nurses’ performance by shadowing them and critiquing their ability to use the script. When Nell’s family life started to fall apart because her unhappiness spilled over to her personal life, she left nursing to pursue a career as a real estate agent. Forever, she missed the beauty of those years with Helen who modeled positive connections with patients and staff, who lit the light of love in everyone and the satisfaction of doing significant work. Nell never returned to nursing because she feared the scene would be repeated, and she did not want to go through that kind of horrific experience again.

Unfortunately, this saga is repeated too many times in too many health care sites throughout the country. If the nurse does not leave, the toll on her or his physical and mental state manifests itself in a variety of ways. What was Helen’s magic secret? Simply, she made positive connections that led to growth and empowerment in the people she managed. But how did Helen connect with the mind and body?

Connecting and the Neurophysiology of Peak Performance

Hallowell (2011) applies the science of neurophysiology to explain that human connections or lack thereof actually affect the physiology of the brain and influence performance positively or negatively. Simply stated, when we feel connected and safe, the cerebral cortex of our brain responds by becoming involved, which leads to peak performance. When we work in a culture of constant fear, the deeper levels of our brain are activated to respond to the fear and our cerebral cortex is disabled. Hence, we see that Nell’s reaction to the two very different environments was the normal physiological reaction of her brain to the environment where she felt connected and safe and to the other environment where she perceived fear.

KARLENE M. KERFOOT, PhD, RN, CNA, FAAN, is Principal, Kerfoot & Associates, Inc., Milwaukee, WI; and a Nursing Economic$ Editorial Board Member. Comments and suggestions can be sent to karlene@indy.rr.com

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Mirror neurons fire and imitate what we see another person doing or experiencing (Hallowell, 2011). Watching someone in pain causes us to feel pain empathetically. When people are optimistic and happy, our neurons mirror and pick up those feelings. We gain or lose connection by the functioning of this process. Physiologically these neurons mirror their environment. Hence the physiological reaction occurs to a culture of support and a culture of fear. According to Slap (2010), emotional detachment is the result of our brain shifting into a threat-containment mode to create a protective process when it perceives our health and safety are in jeopardy. Slap (2010) notes that people working in these circumstances suit up for work, leave the best of themselves at home, and go off to work in what he calls the “detachment factory” where humans are forced to work in difficult working situations. Nell obviously felt this fear and her brain automatically kicked in the detachment module to survive the threat to her health and safety.

The positive effect for people working in an environment that promotes a sense of well-being and optimism is documented by Seligman (2006). He describes how cultures that support learning, the well-being of people, optimism, bonding, and positive focus will lead to peak performances and excellence in outcomes. By contrast, cultures that are negative and focus on people’s weaknesses create “learned helplessness.” These cultures cannot achieve the results of optimistic workplaces and lead to high rates of depression among the workforce. Seligman (2006) also documents these cultures affect the neurobiology of the brain and lead to either positive or negative performances because of their effect on the neurophysiology of the brain.

So now that we know the brain functions much better where there is an opportunity for positive connections and where the brain’s sense of safety damps the primitive fears and supports the higher cognitive process that are necessary for high performance, what does a leader need to do to create the sense of connection?

**What to Do?**

It seems simple to say that it is all about leadership. We know people will mirror what the leader does. Sutton (2010) states it really it is “all about you.” He tells us there are two acid tests every boss should fret about every day: (a) Do people want to enthusiastically work for you and would they choose to do so again? and (b) Are you in tune with what it feels like to work for you? If the answer to either of these is negative, the opportunity to create valuable connections with people that in turn leads to positive high performance will not happen. So the ability to create connections starts with the boss being able to positively answer these two questions. It is imperative the boss also knows the truth about the perceptions. Some assume the answers to the two questions will be positive. However, evidence-based leadership demands the answers be driven by data. This means the boss willingly and frequently will ask for anonymous 360 degree feedback and will solicit other data-driven feedback to answer these two questions correctly. The feedback will mirror either positive or negative leadership.

Slap (2010) notes the leader needs to cultivate the C-state (connections) and avoid the F-state (fear). In the digital age, he notes personal connections are harder to create but much more important since the opportunities are limited. He discusses creating the “human moment” by planning purposeful face-to-face engagement to create the connected environment. Other high-priority actions are simple acts of gratitude. When we tell people they make a huge difference to the company and we sincerely thank them for their contributions, a sense of security and well-being is created neurobiologically that leads to feelings of security and connectedness to the organization.

The work of leadership goes beyond a 1:1 relationship with staff. The leader must also interact with the environment that is outside one’s span of control to develop a culture that is healthy and physiologically supportive for staff. Hill and Lineback (2011) note that managing your team is just one of the three imperatives the leader must manage. The other two skills are managing yourself and managing your network. These authors tell us that to manage yourself, you need to consider if you use formal authority effectively, if you create caring relationships but not personal relationships, and finally do people trust you as a leader. Managing the network involves identifying those who need to be in your network, and involves building strong operational relationships that will support the work of your team. Without these elements of managing yourself and managing your network, you can’t be a successful manager.

**Summary**

Too many nurses like Nell have been lost to patient care because of dysfunctional management. The profession loses far too many excellent nurses every year because of the inability of managers and leaders to seriously connect with the front line and expose themselves to the reality of the work nurses are doing. What we do as leaders creates a physiological reaction and a basis for effective or ineffective work units. Nell not only suffered at work but also in her personal life as a result of a negative leadership style. In the face of this strong physiological evidence, why can’t we get this right?

**REFERENCES**


