

Top of the Mind

Where leaders access their best.



by Bill Crawford

WHEN FACING COMPLEX challenges that trigger increased stress and frustration, today's leaders need a new approach for accessing their best. This new approach is rooted in recent developments in brain science.

For example, your brain is divided into three parts: 1) the *brainstem* (lower) where your fight-or-flight responses are located that regulates your breathing, heart rate, and blood pressure; 2) the *limbic system* (middle) which houses your emotions and scans incoming data for signs of threat or danger; and 3) the *neocortex* (upper) where you have access to your leadership, judgment, confidence, and communication skills.

During the day, as data comes in from your five senses, it is scanned by the limbic system. If the data is perceived as important but not threatening, then it is sent to the neocortex. When this is the case, the brainstem continues to regulate your breathing and blood pressure.

However, if the limbic system senses any problem, anything it doesn't like or has identified as a stressor or a threat, then it sends the information immediately down to the brainstem, *bypassing the neocortex*.

Once the brainstem is alerted to a threat by the limbic system, it can only respond in one of two ways: *fight or flight*. To prepare for this response, this lower part of the brain triggers the release of stress hormones, such as cortisol, which results in an increase of your heart rate, muscle tension, and blood pressure. Again, this downshifting process bypasses the most intelligent, purposeful, creative part of the brain...the neocortex.

Now, this is not always a bad thing. In fact, in a fight-or-flight situation, this is what you want to happen. However, given that few situations are truly fight or flight in nature; you find yourself trying to deal with situations that call for your best thinking but coming from the part of the brain that doesn't think—it just reacts. When you try to deal with the perceived stressors from this reactive brain, you often fail, making you feel even more stressed, frustrated, and

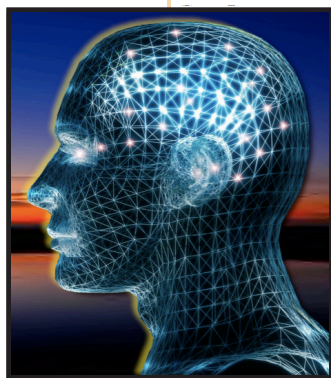
ineffective. The limbic system interprets this added frustration as more negative data, and dutifully sends it right back down to the brainstem, creating a self-perpetuating cycle.

The key to leadership is to first see stress for what it is, not something that is being done to us (“deadlines really stress me out”) but instead recognize that stress is actually a chemical change in your body triggered by the lower twenty percent of your brain.

Next, you need to change the chemical make-up of your body (from cortisol to serotonin and endorphins) and shift to the upper eighty percent of the brain (or *Top of the Mind*) so that you can access the leadership skills that enable you to bring your best to life and influence others to follow your lead.

You can learn to shift to the most purposeful, intelligent part of the brain, stay in this *Top of the Mind* perspective regardless of the situation, and even engage others who are resistant to your leadership in such a way that they shift to the more “receptive brain” and hear your suggestions as valuable.

Of course, to do this you must first understand what perpetuates the problem. For example, when you're stressed or frustrated, you tend to ask brainstem questions about the perceived stressor. “What is wrong with these people?” “What were you thinking?” “Why does this always happen to me?” “How many times have I told you?” Such questions engage the lower 20 percent of the brain, and as such, are a big part of the problem.



Neocortex Questions

I invite you to engage the most purposeful and powerful part of the brain by asking four neocortex questions (*The Four Criteria*) that enable you to evaluate any reactive response and to identify a *Top of the Mind* alternative:

1. Has this thought, emotion, or action been chosen deliberately or on purpose? Most people say that they don't choose to be stressed or frustrated on purpose, it just seems to happen to them.

2. How is it working for me? To what degree do you feel this brainstem reaction is helping you become more effective and encouraging others to hear what you have to say and follow your lead? Most people would not identify stress, frustration, and reactivity as

effective and encouraging others to hear what you have to say and follow your lead? Most people would not identify stress, frustration, and reactivity as effective leadership qualities.

3. Is this thought, emotion, or action making the statement I want to make about who I am and how I get things done? This question goes beyond “being a good role model” and recognizes that everything you do makes a statement about who you are and how you want those in your organization to be. Most leaders wouldn't choose the words reactive, frustrated, stressed, and annoyed to define who they are.

However, when you say that the challenges you face “make” you feel or do one thing or another (“deadlines make me nervous” or “red tape frustrates me”), you're saying that negative situations or people have the power to define you! If you don't want to be defined by the negative aspects of life, you must be willing to define yourself . . . on purpose.

To do this, you must first determine whether your current thoughts, emotions, and actions are ones you want to feed or change. This is where the four neocortex questions (*The Four Criteria*) come in to play. For example, when you ask, “Have I chosen this response on purpose?” “Is it working for me?” and “Is this response making the statement I want to make about who I am?” you will be tapping into the *Top of the Mind* to determine what to change. That being said, the fourth question may be the most powerful...

4. Would I teach this thought, emotion, or action to a child or to someone I love? Chances are you would not teach your children to be stressed, frustrated, or reactive.

Now that you've used the *Four Criteria* to evaluate your response, you are free to use the same criteria to move forward from a *Top of the Mind* perspective.

In other words, if you were to ask: “If I were choosing my thoughts, emotions and actions on purpose—in a way that I believe would be the most effective, that makes a purposeful statement about who I am and in a way I **would** recommend to someone I love—what would that look like? How would I be thinking, feeling, and acting differently?”

Once you have this new vision clearly in mind (*The Top of the Mind*) you can begin to apply these qualities to your role as a leader, secure in the knowledge that because you are coming from the most intelligent, capable, caring part of the brain, you will be bringing your best to life. PE

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ACTION: Shift to the Top of the Mind