

The Battle of the Brain

We've heard it since childhood and it sounds so easy. *Control yourself. Don't let your emotions get the best of you.* And then we read about a sports star with millions of dollars at stake who has lost it—not on the field but in some escapade or in domestic abuse. That's followed by reports of some unfortunate travails by a corporate leader, such as Uber's former CEO. All we can do is shake our heads.

At least the head is the right place to start to understand this behavior. This all reflects a battle in the brain. It is a battle that revolves around impulse control, the tug-of-war between getting what you want now and at any cost, and a moderating counterforce that just says no. These opposing forces are significant for any leader, of course, since being too impulsive can spell trouble—not just in sports or the C-suite, but everywhere.

Every corporate culture has its own implicit ground rules, and with executives shifting from one company to another so often now, it is a matter of survival to learn them fast. Take one executive I know who shifted from a quick-response, constant-time-urgency company to one with a more laid-back pace. His fast-paced style that had previously worked well came across as impatient and rude. And the mismatch cost him: Before he realized what was

going on, he wound up left off crucial conference calls. Only eventually did his boss warn him to take it easy, slow down, listen people out.

The sports star, the headline-grabbing CEO and the too-quick executive are, at the brain level, telling one and the same story: the eternal tension between the prefrontal areas and the amygdala—between ego and id, as Freud would say. The prefrontal circuitry, just behind the forehead, operates as the brain's executive center. When this area predominates, we are at our rational best, able to take in information fully and respond most adaptively. It activates while we comprehend, learn, plan, weigh pros and cons, and execute well.

The amygdala, part of the emotional circuitry in the midbrain, between the ears, acts as the trigger for our fight-flight-or-freeze response. In evolution, this neural node asked that key question for survival:

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“Do I eat it or does it eat me?” Today that takes the form of, “Am I safe?” and “Can I get what I want right now?”

In the design of the brain, the amygdala has a privileged position. When it reads signals that there is an emergency, these impulsive circuits can hijack the prefrontal areas and take over our decision-making. The result can be anger, fear or a grab for pleasure. The amygdala spurs us to take what we want, do whatever we like. One sure sign of an amygdala hijack is regretting what you just said or did.

Amygdala hijacks are not always so obvious; sometimes they are a slow boil, not an outburst. Consider, for example, someone who can't stand a boss

or colleague but is helpless to change the situation. The person makes half adaptations, holds in frustrations and stays flooded with stress hormones like cortisol, which do more than create agita. Those hormones borrow energy from other biological reservoirs, like the immune system. Being susceptible to every cold that comes through the office or that the kids bring home from school can be one sign of this.

One indication of maturity can be seen in increasing the gap between impulse and action. In the emotional intelligence world, we call this “emotional self-control,” one of the dozen competencies that Korn Ferry Hay Group research finds distinguish

outstanding leaders from average ones. With this competency, a leader can keep disruptive emotions and impulses in check and maintain effectiveness even under the most stressful conditions. And with such calm comes clarity.

All these competencies are learnable capacities; we need not be at the mercy of the amygdala. A big help here is mindfulness, which lets us pick up on the signals that a hijack is brewing and short-circuit the impulse. For instance, we can sense an angry impulse as it starts to stir up self-righteous indignation. With mindfulness we can see those thoughts coming, and remind ourselves that we don't have to believe them. This creates an

inner choice point we did not have before.

And it can make all the difference in the world, as it did for the CEO of a national real estate company. He used to blow up at bad news so often he ended up in an information bubble, where fearful subordinates spun bad results in a better direction. But a therapist showed him that his own fear of failure triggered his amygdala attacks. With that understanding, and a bit of mindfulness, he learned to spot his impulse to lash out while it was still coming and tilt to the prefrontal cortex. The result? His staff became more candid—and now this CEO has a more realistic sense of how the business is actually doing. ●