

Trend Topic: Transformation in the accelerated age

By



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Dr. Helena Boschi is a psychologist who focuses on applied neuroscience in the workplace. She brings the fascinating world of brain science to life in way that is understandable and relatable for all people who are interested in improving their ability to think, make decisions, drive change and interact with others. Helena has held senior positions with global organisations and has worked across a range of disciplines, from sales and marketing to international relations, organisation design and leadership development. She is uniquely placed to bridge neuroscience with corporate life, applying insights to the workplace in a way that is practical, relevant and compelling. A member of the British Psychological Society, Helena delivers compelling messages that are backed by science, grounded in the real world and communicated in a style that engages all of her audiences.

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Talking transformation: a new language for leaders

We hear them all the time. Words like ‘transformation’, ‘change’, ‘disruption’ and ‘innovation’ have become embedded in the vernacular of most organizations today.

But do we love them?

The human brain is primed to avoid anything that smacks of uncertainty. Our most vital (and most taken-for-granted) organ sits inside our heads surrounded by darkness, waiting to receive various sensory signals that must then be assessed and acted upon. The brain works rapidly to integrate these signals in order to provide us with a coherent picture of what they mean and what we should do about them.

The sensory information the brain receives is largely incomplete. Our past knowledge and experience step in to provide the reference material to help the brain predict what it thinks should be there. When this prediction matches the sensory input, the brain is able to process everything quickly and efficiently. anything unexpected or outside our knowledge constitutes an unknown or potential risk, putting the brain into an alerted state and triggering a stress response. This is even the case with positive

change or anything new that we are actively driving ourselves. 'Different', historically, could have meant 'danger'.

In the modern world the brain is still operating old systems. It doesn't take much for the brain to sound the alarm bells and activate the same stress response as if we were facing a real threat to our life. This means that even words that hint at anything outside of what we know are not automatically loved by the brain. In fact it is the reverse. The brain actively tries to protect us from the very constructs that we create for ourselves.

So why do we persist in placing demands on the brain that it struggles with?

To answer that point we need to remember that much of how we treat people in business has its origins in the past, stretching back to the 18th century with the industrial revolution when standards were introduced to improve working conditions. Over the centuries the focus has shifted towards performance measurement, data management, legal compliance, employee motivation and engagement. Even though the best-intentioned practices claim to support people's careers and wellbeing, there are some fundamental issues with how people are treated today. In part, this is because it is only until relatively recently that we have been able to look inside the brain and understand a little more about what is really going on.

Today, armed with a growing understanding of how the brain handles what we ask of it, we have an opportunity to rethink what we ask of leaders and the employees they are supporting. Since language is the primary tool across all businesses, it is probably a good idea to start there and examine how leaders can impact the wellbeing, behaviour and performance of their teams through what they say.

One of the big problems is that jargon has infiltrated its way into the fabric of most organisations. Jargon sells. It helps us belong. Our strong herd instinct and need to feel part of a social entity mean that we want to talk the same language as everyone else in the corporate club. So we jump onto the

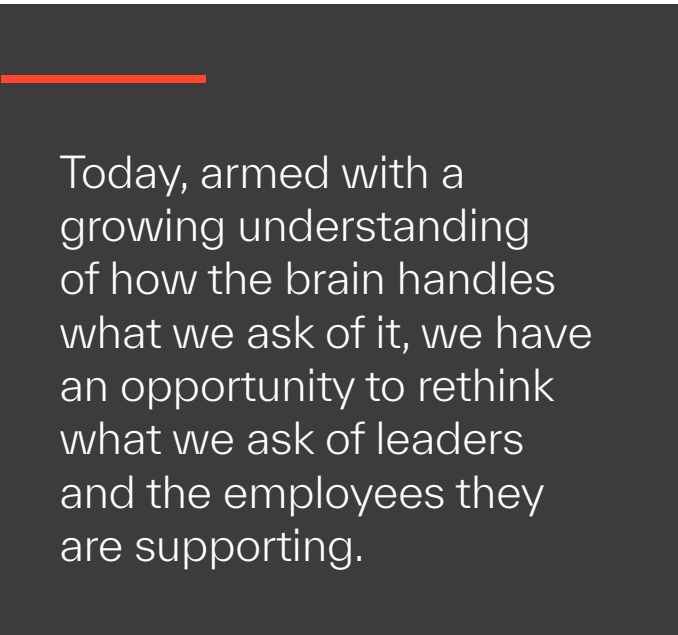
latest bandwagon of buzzwords, adopting words and phrases that help us sound impressive and in the know. Why would we want to use plain English when we can 'ideate', 'leverage', 'go forward', 'circle back' or 'pivot'?

There are three things that compound the problems associated with anything to do with the language of leadership in a changing world.

The first is the brain's craving for familiarity, habits and routines that help it conserve energy and expend minimal effort. Any change requires us to leave the well-trodden paths and routines that we have forged to facilitate ease and efficiency. Put simply, we are reluctant to abandon what has made us successful in favour of a future we can't be sure of.

The second is that the abstract language of change and transformation (think 'transition', 'optimisation', 'redesign', 'right-size', 'paradigm-shift') are too vague for a brain that craves clarity and certainty in order to be able to predict and decide.

The third is that, as we bounce from one challenge to another, many systems and processes that were useful just last week/month/year may almost certainly need to be reviewed or recalibrated with increasing urgency. A programme of 'managing change' may be obsolete almost the minute it is out of the starting gate. The skill needed



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now is to be able to change course quickly and adapt to a new 'new'.

What does all of this mean for leaders tasked with change?

There isn't one straightforward answer to this question. Perhaps this is why leadership is not straightforward!

There are many lists that advise leaders to communicate frequently, involve people early and be a good role model. What is below is not one of those lists! The following guidelines are suggestions based predominantly on brain science – and you may find some rather surprising!

Keep it simple

The best gift leaders can give their people is a clear, simple language, whereby aspects of a desired 'transformation' are broken down into bite-sized, chunks. People need to know specifically what is expected of them. Leaders should avoid words like 'synergy', 'leverage' and even 'change' unless they can then translate these terms into concrete, practical and actionable outcomes. The brain is extremely visual, so the more descriptive the words, the more

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easily the brain will see and process them. The use of pictures or graphics is even better.

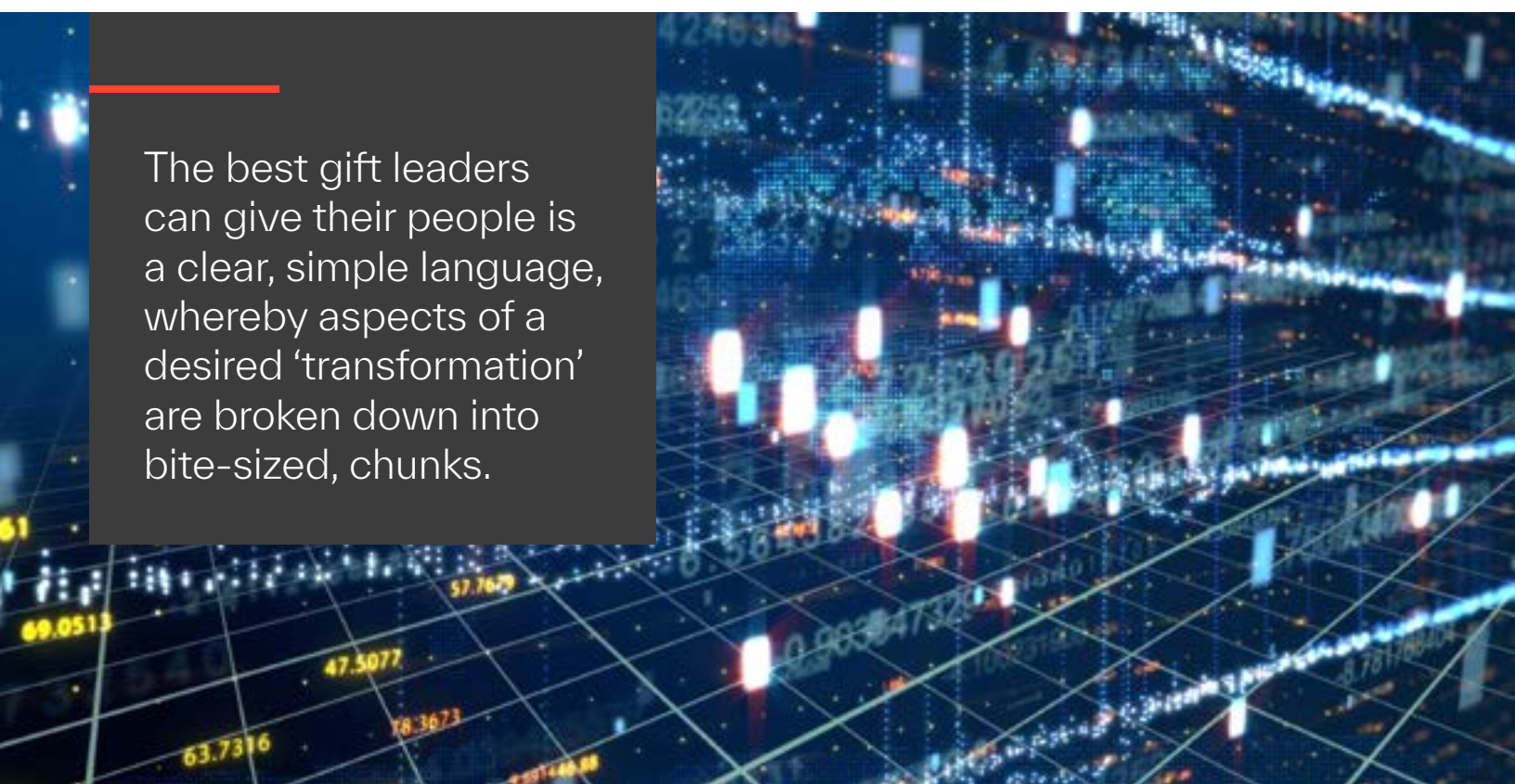
Meet (don't exceed) expectations

Being a reliable, trustworthy pair of hands is predictable. Exceeding expectations is not. The issue here is how we activate the brain's reward system. The chemical released by the brain in anticipation of a reward is dopamine, our 'motivation molecule'. Dopamine is a key chemical in our learning, attention, decision-making and habit formation. Dopamine keeps us going and stops us quitting. As with all our neurochemicals, dopamine needs to be maintained at a nice steady level. Too much or too little of any of these chemicals can throw us off balance, affecting our mood, behaviour and overall health. When our expectations are met, we stabilise dopamine levels. But when expectations are not met, dopamine levels drop, leading to disappointment, a state which we are designed to avoid. The real problem comes when expectations are exceeded. The resulting dopamine spike may seem to be a good by-product. After all, we love the feeling of dopamine being released! But in fact this spike can potentially set us on a path towards possible burnout. *Exceeded* one day becomes *expected* the

next. Expectations keep rising; we keep having to do more. And crucially we set ourselves up for *not* doing what we say we are going to do because it is not what people expected in the first place. In an unpredictable world people crave consistency. *Meeting* expectations gets us there.

Build better uncertainty tolerance

In the aftermath of Covid and with a lens now on AI-related change, geopolitical unrest, global warming and economic instability, any future is fraught with ongoing uncertainty. There is no point in trying to control what can't be controlled – even though this is what the brain will try to do. But we can build better internal systems that help us become more adaptive and responsive with every turn. The key lies in the small things that we can do each day to keep pushing ourselves out of our comfort zones. Anything new (no matter how small) or a disruption to normal patterns helps the brain to learn to break away from its own routines. Leadership is often rewarded for speedy delivery of outcomes so asking leaders to invest time in interrupting the efficiencies they have implemented may present something of a problem. However, the more we give ourselves small challenges and face the frustrations of learning, the



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better we will be at dealing with the unexpected when it arises. And as individuals' brains get used to swift, incremental adjustments, the easier change will be at the organizational level.

Beware of 'Social Loafing'

There are always people who work harder than others. The bigger the group, the greater the likelihood of 'Social Loafing', a concept first described by the French engineer Max Ringelmann in the early 20th century. Watching people pull on a rope, Ringelmann found that the sum effort of the group was less than the sum of individual efforts. In other words, some people allow others to do the heavy lifting. The best way to combat social loafing is to reduce the size of the group, in order to ensure greater visibility of the individual team members and consequently an increased expectation of contribution and accountability.

Provide the illusion of choice

As mentioned earlier, the human brain likes to feel in control of its decisions. The choices we make help us define and validate our sense of self. The freedom to choose gives us a sense of agency and autonomy and is an important ingredient in our health and well-being. Choice helps us own our behaviour and we are motivated to do something new or different if we feel we have had some say in the decision. Stress arises when we feel overwhelmed or out of control, prompting us to reach for the familiar and revert to old practices. Choice – any choice – is what matters, even though the options on offer may be pre-determined. Leaders can decide how they present various alternatives, as long as they give the people they lead room to choose between them.

Create closure

The brain needs closure. The enemy of closure is 'Shiny Object Syndrome', which is endemic in a great many organisations. Even the best-intentioned leaders are easily distracted by the latest great initiative or scheme. What they may not realise is the net effect of not allowing their people to finish something first. When we don't (or aren't able to) complete a piece of work, the brain holds onto it and keeps remembering it, leading to a phenomenon called the 'Zeigarnik Effect'. This effect was named after a Lithuanian psychologist called Bluma Zeigarnik, who noticed that unpaid orders in a café were remembered by waiters, but paid orders were forgotten. We have all experienced the way loose ends niggles away at us until they are addressed. Being denied the sense of accomplishment that comes with completion can cause considerable frustration and even low self-esteem. Completion allows the brain to tie up the loose end, releasing us to move forward. Even in a world of constant course correction, leaders need to create closure through breaking tasks down into smaller activities, shortening timescales and celebrating completion as milestones – even minor ones – are achieved.

We hear every day that change is 'accelerating' and that 'change is here to stay'. The final note of hope for leaders is that when we – leaders included – feel out of our depth, it is at this point that the brain accepts it needs to learn. Our neurons reorganise themselves and our brain becomes stronger as a result. It is when we see ourselves not as experts but as novices that the brain becomes curious and open to new opportunities. In today's world change is often unexpected and almost certainly unsettling. This is a time when both those leading and those being led need to work together to figure out the best course of action, through continual testing and exploration. It is a time of endless opportunity and shared discovery. Leaders don't need to have all the answers. In fact leaders who don't know – and know they don't know – are far more effective than leaders who do! —