



THE NEUROSCIENCE OF GRATITUDE AND ITS IMPACT ON ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

There is a heavy weight on the shoulders of health care executives as they navigate through the ongoing impact and complexity of disruptive change. Not only are they responsible for supporting their employees in managing stress associated with such change but they must also inspire and engage them in the change process. That's where organizational culture either supports or obstructs change imperatives.

Unquestionably, executives are the source of their organization's culture and are responsible for modeling the appropriate values and behaviors to successfully lead through disruptive change. However, when challenges are high, workloads intense and change stressful, leaders will often resort to default thinking. They implement the same processes and decision making that feels

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safe and may have worked in the past. Over time, these brain pathways have become well-embedded in the brain, resulting in the default way of behaving. Default thinking is no longer effective.

Just as change is inevitable, so is the way we must approach change. Innovative health care organizations are digging deeper. They are discovering

the science of gratitude, backed by studies in neuroscience, as strong and vital leverage points to successfully align change initiatives with how the brain actually works. Science has shown there is an effective way to address culture change and it includes gratitude.

Accordant's Senior Science Advisor, Robert A. Emmons defines gratitude as "an affirmation of goodness and a recognition of goodness outside

ourselves.”¹ A culture that embeds gratitude as an essential and fundamental value of the organization must be first embraced by leaders and then modeled for employees. This creates a more positive and resilient organization, able to stay strong in the torrents of change.

Dr. Evian Gordon, physician and leading developer of the field of Integrative Neuroscience, refers to the brain’s core organizing principle which is “to minimize threat (danger) and maximize reward.”² The human brain views the workplace as a social system. When employees feel disrespected or unappreciated, the pain regions of the brain are activated. These feelings are as powerful, neurally, as a physical blow to the head, with the effects strong and long lasting. Add the threat in the form of **change** and uncertainty (the brain loves certainty), and leaders can and quite unknowingly activate employees’ pain regions of the brain and their threat responses of fight, flight, freeze. Coupled with the brain’s built-in negativity bias, the unconscious emotional response to threat, employees (and leaders) can become less hopeful and resort to default thinking.

Neural studies using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRIs) have found gratitude activates the reward center and other areas of the brain, including regions dealing with greater moral reasoning, fairness, empathy, economic decision making, consideration of other perspectives and psychological well-being. If you’ve heard talk about lack of transparency, fairness and appreciation in your organization, it’s a sure bet a vast majority of employees are neurally in a threat response even though outwardly things may appear normal.

Gratitude is also considered the social glue of an organization. Grateful people are less angry and engage in more prosocial behaviors and productive relationships. Organizations see less of

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the undesirable behaviors, have greater employee engagement and improve overall psychological capital (positive developmental state of employees). Employees gain hope, have greater self-efficacy, are more resilient and are optimistic in their abilities to achieve goals contributing to the organization’s desired outcomes.

Building a culture of gratitude in tune with how the human brain works can be an important response to a Gallup poll finding 53% of American workers are not engaged.³ They simply show up without cognitive and emotional connection to their work and work place. Cultivating a culture of gratitude can positively address this.

There is an expression, “neurons that fire together, wire together.” That’s where neuroplasticity—the brain’s ability to form new neural connections—comes into play. By building a culture of gratitude, you and your employees create new and strengthen existing neural connections. The sense of threat is minimized, and employees are more open to support the required organizational changes. Leaders become more skilled in reframing the threat response and create a more positive and healthy culture, all backed by science.

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¹ Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/gratitude/definition>

² Your Brain at Work, 2009 <https://davidrock.net/books/>

³ Employee Engagement on the Rise in the U.S. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/241649/employee-engagement-rise.aspx>