

Amrop Leadership Series

Leadership and the Brain A New Tool For Agility

By
Tara SWART



Amrop

Leaders For What's Next

Leadership and the Brain

A New Tool for Agility

In this second article in our series 'Leadership and the Brain', Amrop guest writer, neuroscientist Dr. Tara Swart, introduces her new tool for Leadership Agility. As the demands upon leaders reach dizzying levels, this science-based, compelling and simple platform will help senior executives understand and enhance their performance - and that of their entourage.

The Brain Agility Tool is founded on a simple truth: it *is* possible to change well into adulthood, under the right conditions. An instrument to help you integrate these conditions in every day life, the 'Brain Agility Tool' is based on utilizing six different parts of your brain. Its purpose is to assist you in improving the flexibility of your decision-making, your risk-taking, and your general leadership ability.

The tool is free of judgement. It involves honing your strengths, whilst remaining aware of your development areas. It also invites you to understand that your key stakeholders, clients, direct reports or family members may have various differing approaches to you.

Every instrument is only as good as its user. Therefore, before taking a tour of the tool, we will take a tour of the brain, starting with a modern myth. Most people know that the brain is divided into two hemispheres. Yet the 'left brain/right brain' paradigm has assumed an almost iconic status in executive dialogues, training and coaching. According to this, the 'left brain' correlates to logical, rational, analytical thinking, and the 'right brain' to more creative, intuitive thinking.

Perhaps less well-known is the fact that this paradigm, like all icons, is an over-simplification. It is probably true that most people tend to think predominantly in one way, deliberately referring to the other way as required. It is also true that 80-90% of right-handed people have a dominant left hemisphere, whereas the population of left-handers is evenly distributed between left and right hemisphere dominance.

If the 'left brain right brain' paradigm is only the beginning of the story, are you ready for the next chapter?



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The Ride of Your Life

Scientists now believe that the most under-rated axis is actually that of *the brain-body* dimension. To understand this, let’s take a tour of the Central Nervous System.

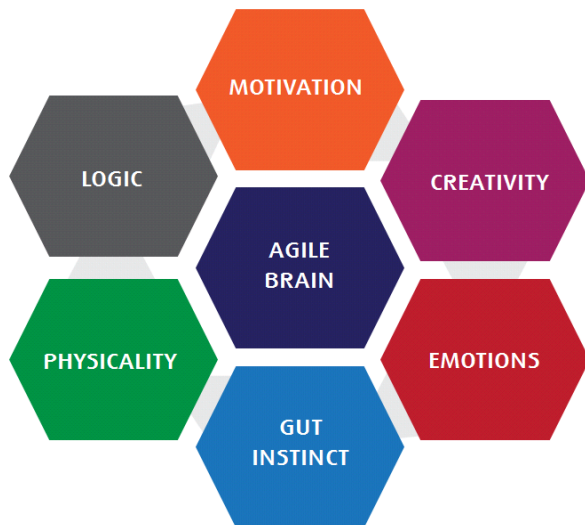
We start with the brain stem, and as we look down we can see how this lengthens out into the spinal cord, which in turn gives rise to the branches of nerves that spread out into the body and bring back information from the outside world. Looking back up to the brain stem we meet our neural ancestors - the deep, older circuitry of the Limbic system. This is the seat of our emotions. Wrapped around it

is the folded blanket of the modern, logical cortex. Humans have developed this cortex far more than other animals, including apes and monkeys, as it is involved in planning and articulated speech. Because speech is a great short cut to help others understand us, we tend to take more notice of what we are saying than of non-verbal signals such as nervous laughter, blushing, flinching or butterflies in the stomach. And here we pause for the first good news item. *If you practice sport or yoga, you are more likely to be in touch with signals from your body (‘interoception’) than if you do not.* This is a particularly important message for men! Whilst neurological differences between the sexes are insignificant, males tend to have a smaller range of vocabulary for emotional language, and information crosses between the left and right hemispheres more slowly. Still, this is changing with time, education, and changes in social expectation.

Speeding back down the body to the gut, we find an inordinately large nerve supply connecting this to the Limbic system and the Basal ganglia wrapped around the brain stem. Now we are sitting on the bank of a super-highway watching the traffic speeding between gut, Basal ganglia and Limbic system. Because the Limbic system is the older, deeper seat of our emotions, ‘gut feeling’ is derived from data that may be based more on our life experiences than on the data we use every day and keep front of mind. Increasingly I hear leaders saying that they regret looking back and realizing that they ignored their intuition or sixth sense – favorizing ‘logical thinking’ over ‘gut feeling’.

The Agile Brain. On the following page I present the Brain Agility Tool. As set out in my introduction, this is based on utilizing six different brain areas to improve the flexibility of your decision-making, risk-taking, and general leadership ability. It involves building on your strengths, whilst remaining aware of your development areas, realizing that members of your entourage may have their own approaches. Your brain agility – your ability to switch between these areas - will increase with practice as you establish or reinforce your brain pathways. Thanks to ‘neuroplasticity’ (the ability of the brain to change itself), we can develop in unused areas well into advanced adulthood.

The Brain Agility Tool



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Motivation: our basic drives: *sleep/wake*, *hunger/thirst* and *sex* originate in the Reticular formation and involve the Basal ganglia. This tool describes motivation as your *values*, your *integrity*, and *legacy*. Try to put yourself in the shoes of others – what is *their* *raison d'être*? Which factors motivate and de-motivate you, and others? How can greater awareness of your motivational fabric help you work better with your team? How can better self-knowledge help you achieve purpose and meaning?

Creativity: relates to *versatility*, *adaptability* and *vision*. Use drawing instead of writing, a mind map instead of a to-do list. Use coloured pens – preferably at least four (not including blue or black), and avoid stick men, letters or numbers.

Emotions: refer to *emotional intelligence* – *empathy* and *trust*. Basic emotions such as fear and love are deeply seated in the limbic system – specifically the amygdalae. Keep a journal of your feelings or check in on your emotional state at least four times a day to raise your awareness. Try to listen out for whether people around you have a greater tendency to say “I feel” or “I think.”

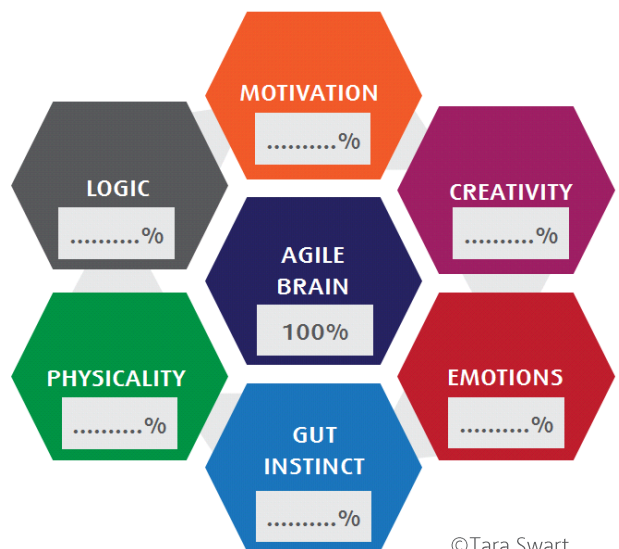
Gut instinct: is about *intuition*, *judgement* and *decisiveness*. Look out for signs or stories in life that guide your ‘sixth sense’. This develops with experience and wisdom, and there are no short-cuts to gaining that!

Physicality: relates to *movement* and this relies on the Basal ganglia system at the base of the brain, around the brain stem. Physical feelings include your *energy*, *resilience*, and ability to truly *listen*. Are you tired? Jet-lagged? Did you have breakfast? These factors can all affect your quality of thought. Pay attention to signals like nervous laughter, sweating, blushing, flinching, or butterflies in your stomach. Try listening to people to really understand their point of view, giving good eye contact, rather than interrupting with a clever question.

Logic: equates to *competencies*, the scope and scale of your *technical skill*, and *thoughts*. Write notes or a to-do list by yourself and read it out loud. Now you are using the part of brain that produces the written word and articulates speech, as well as the part that hears your own voice through your ears and into your temporal lobe. This reinforces the message for your brain.

How Are You Thinking Today?

Imagine your 100% brain resource – your 'agile brain' at the centre of this model. Now take a minute – no more – to think about how much you use the various brain areas in your day-to-day role. This may vary in differing situations, so we recommend that you pick your principal activity. You can then repeat the exercise for other situations. Allocate a percentage to each of the brain areas.



How Could This Change Tomorrow?

We have touched upon neuroplasticity – the ability of the brain to change into advanced adulthood. Stimulating it can be serious fun and can probably be increased by learning a new language or musical instrument, or by doing exercises such as crosswords and Sudoku. And yet, what are the mechanisms behind neuroplasticity? What is taking place in your brain? Three main phenomena:

- 1 **Myelination**. This process wraps a white coating around neurons to speed up transmission along them. It is usually most akin to becoming even better at something you are already good at.
- 2 **Synaptic connection and growth in critical areas**. This involves the creation of more connections between existing neurons, so allowing the map in the brain for that particular skill to grow. For example, when you use one language more than another, the lesser-used language begins to take up less space. This space is gradually taken over by your more frequently used language. In the brains of London taxi drivers who 'Do The Knowledge' – learning the map of the city – it has been found that the navigation part of their memory centres enlarges. This is applicable to the workplace - in terms of improving a skill you are already good at, but have potential to grow.
- 3 **Progenesis**. Discovered relatively recently, this involves growing new neurons from embryonic nerve cells. It can occur in the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord). Progenesis is most likely linked to developing a skill that you don't have a natural talent for, or have never practised. Therefore this mechanism is probably the hardest to deploy successfully. Most people find that they use one or two brain areas most of the time, another one or two some of the time, and one or two hardly at all. Or at least they are not aware of using these. So do pick wisely which area to concentrate on - one that will benefit you most. If there is an area you do not feel you can or want to work on, then find a right-hand person that complements your skills, or even find an organisation or role that better matches your natural strengths.



Step By Step - Tips and Techniques

Here are some simple guidelines for using the Brain Agility Tool. 'Practise makes perfect' because neurons that fire together, wire together. The brain is a 'use it or lose it' type of organ! However, it will struggle to take on more than two new habits at any one time, so I suggest a process of *spiral learning*. This means either selecting one brain area at a time and two related habits, or selecting two brain areas at a time.

Once you have practised your chosen skill, and it feels more natural because it has become a habit, move on to one or two new brain areas or skills. Continue around the model in this way until you are comfortable that you could respond with agility to different situations and people.

It may also be helpful to talk through your levers and blockages with a peer, mentor or coach.

Our tour ends with an important reminder. As well as *physical* feelings, we must monitor our own, and others' *emotional* feelings. Being self-aware is the first step to emotional intelligence. Next comes the ability to understand and respond to other people's emotional state (empathy). For example, conducting a meeting based on an understanding of your own agenda as well as the motivators and drivers of your team leads to diversity of thought, avoids 'group think' and opens the door to innovative solutions – and organizations. For more on this, please see the first article in our series – A User's Guide to Empathy,.

Investing time in your agile brain is an essential key to sustainable leadership. Those who can surf ambiguity and learn adaptively today will do better in future, in the face of inevitably accelerating change:

MANAGEMENT MESSAGES


Leaders who can surf ambiguity and learn adaptively today will do better in future in the face of inevitably accelerating change.

- 1 It is possible for the brain to change well into advanced adulthood, thanks to 'neuroplasticity'.
- 2 The 'left brain/right brain' paradigm is the start of a more complex story – neurologists now believe that the *brain-body dimension* is the most-under-rated neurological axis
- 3 Speech has played a key role in the development of the human cortex. Yet focussing upon what we are saying can lead us to neglect an invaluable resource - our experience-based, gut-feeling.
- 4 The Brain Agility Tool is based on exercising six different brain areas and switching between them – Motivation, Creativity, Emotions, Gut Instinct, Physicality and Logic.
- 5 Neurones that fire together, wire together. So it is important to work on the six different brain areas until this becomes a habit. It is equally important to focus on only one or two habits at any one time.
- 6 Empathy helps us to understand and take account of the preferences of our entourage. This promotes diversity of thought, avoids 'group think' and opens the door to innovative solutions – and organizations.

About the Author

With a PhD in neuroscience and a successful career as a medical doctor behind her, Dr. Tara Swart is a unique leadership coach who stands at the forefront of the application of neuroscience to business.

She is an Oxford University-trained doctor who specialized in psychiatry for seven years. Coupled with a PhD in neuroscience and experience in leadership, culture and strategy consulting, this enables Tara to apply a profound understanding of human performance and behavior patterns to the transformational and sustainable coaching of business leaders and their teams around the world.

Tara has 18 publications in journals of neuroscience and coaching and is co-author of the book on creativity and productivity 'An Attitude for Acting'. A keynote speaker on the brain in business, she delivers talks at blue chip corporations and educational institutions including Stanford Graduate School of Business, Columbia University, Oxford SAID and MIT Sloan. Topics include: 'Neuroscience in Business' (learning, neuroplasticity, empathy, teams) 'Your Brain on Money' (risk-taking, resilience, innovation) 'Sex on the Brain' (gender differences at work, unconscious bias, diversity) 'Look At Me, Don't Just  Me' (emotional intelligence, smart media, technology) and 'The Neuroscience of Human Error' (safety, decision-making, leadership).

www.the-unlimited-mind.com

Twitter @TaraSwart



About Amrop

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Amrop advises the world's most dynamic organizations on finding and positioning Leaders For What's Next: top talent, adept at working across borders in markets around the world.



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