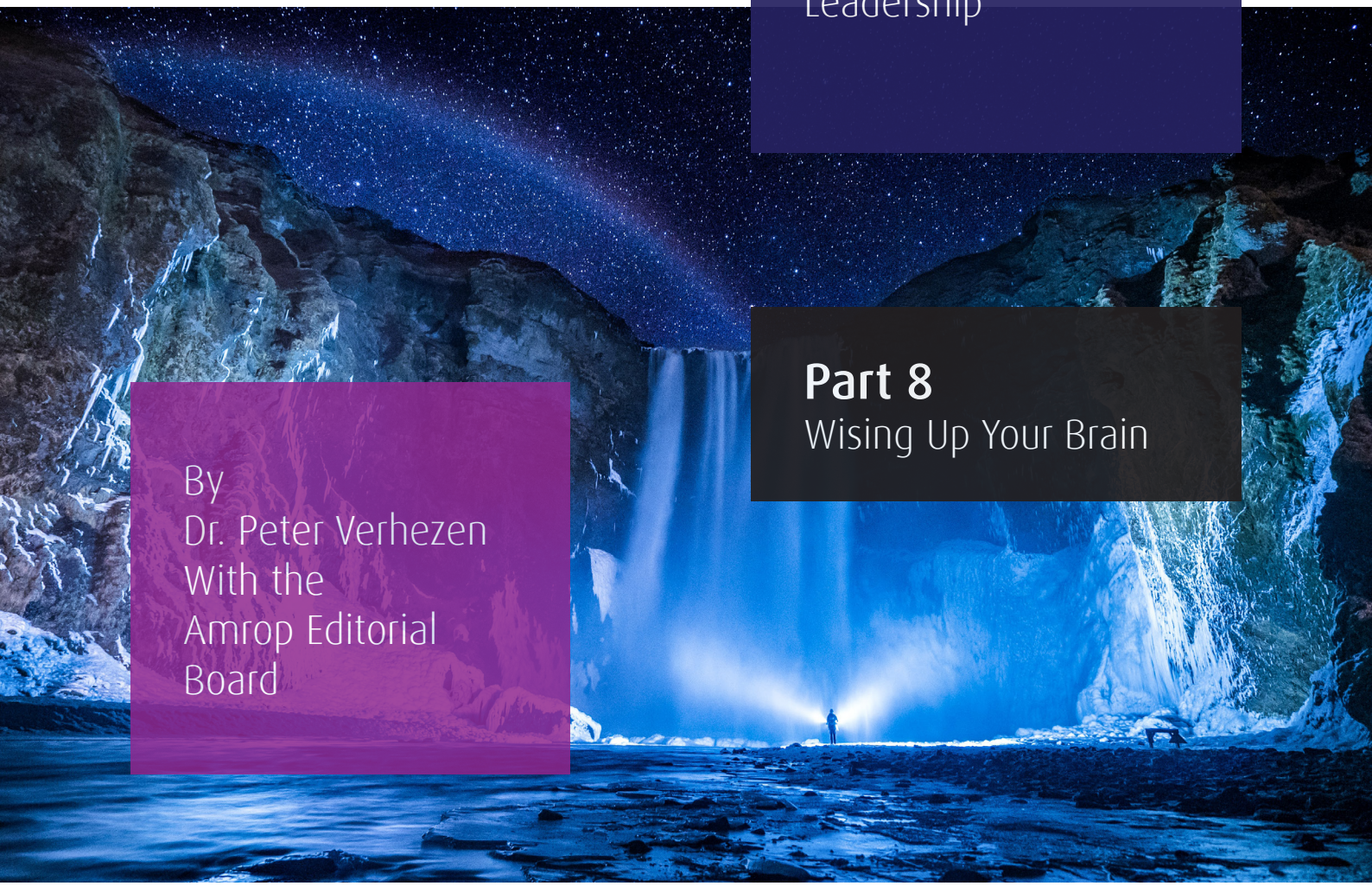
Leadership

Inside the Wise Leader's Brain

The Neuroscience of Leadership



Part 8

Wising Up Your Brain

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With the
Amrop Editorial
Board

Amrop
Leaders For What's Next

Wising up your brain — Down to Business

So far we have explored a wealth of neuroscientific theory. As a senior executive, how can you train your brain in practice? In 2018, we conducted a global study[14] to explore the approach of leaders to wise decision-making. Drawing on our study we present eight key practices to 'wise up your brain', and a snapshot of how widespread these may (or may not) be.

8 Keys to Wising Up

1 Blending intuition and reflection

Let's recall the two different 'roads' in the brain: The High Road (System 2 thinking) is closely related to taking decisions focused on other-centeredness (more difficult and slightly longer). The Low Road (System 1 thinking) is closely related to basic survival emotions and emphasizes self-centeredness (easier and faster).

The more reasonable and responsible our choice, the more our brain has taken into account the claims of competing habits and impulses, overcoming and 'federating' them.

Intuitive, gut feelings are enormously useful. However, in deliberating the best course of action, a wise leader will back these up with a critical and conscious reflective process. This is all the more important because of our ability to 'see' causal relationships. Sometimes, however, these relationships don't exist. The more we exercise this duality, the more easily and 'automatically' we'll be able to reach wise decisions. Only around half of the leaders in our study say that they listen to their intuition or 'gut feeling' and the information gathered during a decision-making process.

[14]Wise Decision-Making, Stepping Up to Sustainable Performance

2 Drawing on experience

Leaders face relentless pressure to get things done. Wise decision-making means taking time to consciously look back to your past experience in order to move forward in a sustainable way. Doing so helps you to gain insights, become more mindful and take a broader perspective. These insights from the past (via experiences) and being more mindful (about experiencing) can be important resources. Yet only 10% of the leaders we surveyed habitually draw on their experience. Three times as many report gains in knowledge and perspective when they do.

3 Checking bias

Much has been written about bias. Less, about avenues that can help leaders reduce their likelihood of falling into the thinking traps that lurk beneath the surface of supposed rational decision-making. Here is a set of processes to help you spot possible bias in your thinking: The last three are generally or always practiced by between 30 and 40% of the leaders we surveyed.

1. Systematically work through the information available
2. Work through several scenarios, estimates or forecasts
3. Imagine none of the options you have in mind are possible and ask: *what else could I do?*
4. Think about what you'll miss if you make a certain choice
5. Imagine the advice you'd give someone else, if you were not involved
6. Conduct a 'pre-mortem' – imagining the reasons why the decision could fail.

4 Involving the right stakeholders

As a leader it is for you to decide how high you set the 'consultation bar'. However, involving other brains in your decision-making can reduce the risk of thinking errors. Here are the *do's and don'ts* as practised (more or less) by the leaders we surveyed.

The (challenging) do's:

Getting in-depth or diverse viewpoints. Only a quarter to a third systematically conduct one-on-one interviews with selected top executives, or involve different stakeholder groups.

Selecting stakeholders on the basis of their knowledge or competence. Only around a third always take this avenue.

Involving 'difficult' people who raise blocking/delaying questions. Only 4% systematically take this metaphorical trip to the dentist.

The (tempting) don'ts

Using stakeholders as allies to validate their opinions. A small minority of leaders (14%) systematically fall into this honeypot.

Selecting who they involve on the basis of a harmonious working relationship. Around 20% systematically take this road.

[15]Soll, J.B .; Milkkan, K.L. & Payne, J.W., (2015), "Outsmart Your Own Biases", Harvard Business Review, May; Heath, C. & D. Heath, (2013), Decisive. How to make better decisions, London, Random House.

[16]4LS Evaluation – a Management Assessment Tool, Magnien, L., Eppling, E. Fransès, G., (2002) (adapted) ©Krauthammer.

5 Mastering reflection in action

Reflection in action is about taking a step back, 'thinking about thinking', when taking a difficult decision. It involves looking at the content of what is going on, framing a problem, checking our habits, feelings, mental leaps and generalizations. Only around one in ten leaders systematically exercises reflection in action. And only around a third generally or always do. Around twice as many stay on the level of content (19%) than on the level of judgments and habits, or checking their mental leaps and generalizations. Only around one in ten always tries to see negative ideas or opinions in a new light.

6 Safeguarding social ethics

Wise leaders cultivate — even institutionalize – the signal-spotting reflexes that ensure a company's ethical antennae are fit for purpose. Any firm is a potential breeding ground for unethical behavior. *Ill-conceived goals and incentives* may intend to promote a positive behavior, but encourage a negative one. *Ambiguous goals* may lead to corner-cutting. In cases of *indirect blindness*, third parties are not held sufficiently accountable. *Motivated blindness* means overlooking unethical behavior because it's in our interest to remain ignorant. When we allow unethical behavior because the outcomes seem to serve the firm, we are *overvaluing outcomes.* All too easily we find ourselves on the *slippery slope* — unethical behavior develops gradually - and ends in a reputational crisis.

7 Seeking Feedback

Constructive feedback, especially on our attitudes and behavior, is a core part of the continuous learning that is a facet of wise leadership. Seeking out feedback in a conscious and proactive way is a key element of a leader's self-knowledge and ability to make wise decisions. But 42% of leaders are (understandably) a little shy of feedback. They accept what comes their way, and in a small minority of cases, react defensively when it does. Feedback-seeking is admittedly difficult. Here are some avenues to help executives master the reflex and to help others give feedback in a constructive manner.

1. *Declare your goals and fields of interest:* for more concise and relevant feedback
2. *Give feedback on the feedback:* this is a learning process for both sides. Irritations should be aired early on to enable the process to move forward.
3. *Ask clarifying questions:* look for examples, recommendations on what to do differently
4. *Never self-justify:* No-one is fully right. Holding back is an art, linked to reflection in action
5. *It is up to the receiver to process and apply feedback:* control, follow up and warnings are not part of the process.

8 Practicing Mindfulness

Mindfulness meditation can enhance and speed up the automation process of taking the High and Low Roads. One of many forms of meditation, it teaches us not only to stay alert and present in the moment, but also to observe sensations as they come and go, in a non-judgmental way. Meditation has a potent effect on the brain structure and function[17] and helps to us to take distance from our (often selfish) self or ego. Our research suggests that consistent practice may direct executives to make wiser decisions (see below). Wise decisions usually imply a more holistic perspective that goes beyond self-centeredness. The higher moral road in our brain prevails over the lower, self-centered road.

Meditation is not for everyone. Fortunately there are other forms of 'mindfulness' or 'reflective' practices open to leaders. The aim is to gain awareness and insight. Such practices often bring about a state of 'flow'— a state of total absorbtion in activity. Examples include walking, writing, yoga, and the arts (practicing or observing music, dance, visual arts, or handicrafts).

We asked leaders which of these practices they engaged in regularly (several times a week or daily), and their effects on wise decision-making. Walking was most commonly and regularly practiced, with three quarters of walkers reporting a highly positive effect. Only one in five leaders meditated, (over half on a regular basis). However 95% of meditators reported a highly positive effect on their decision-making — the highest numbers of any of the specific practices we surveyed.

Conclusion

Wise decision making is not limited to moral superheroes. Nor are we at the mercy of a clockwork brain over which we have no control. Instead, wise decision-making is the result of a continuous practice of mentalizing. Mindful awareness is a must for any executive who wants to make a wise decision.

The power of prospection and better (hypothetical) foresight — while acknowledging the inherent uncertainty we all face - is what makes us wise(r). And this foresight, our ability to predict and contemplate the future, may be the defining attribute of human intelligence. Deploying our innate and learned (cultural and personal) beliefs and concepts is a central function of our fascinating and extraordinary brain.

Wise decision-making is, in essence, holistic; wise leaders take multiple perspectives into account, managing in the gray, making decisions that are ethical, responsible and sustainable.

Our journey reveals that wise leadership is holistic not only on a conceptual, but on a neuroscientific level. As a wise leader, we make better use of the brain's multiple and inter-connected zones, its in-built inclination towards wise behavior. When we exercise wise leadership, we are managing with our gray (matter). We are activating the potential of a highly-evolved organic machine. Its power for learning, abstraction, innovation and imagination is unmatched, and something that we are only just beginning to understand. What we do know is that all leaders can, and should, learn to exercise its incredible potential. Doing so has never been more important than it is today.

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