

BE BRAIN-SMART: AVOID RECRUITING THE “CATS”

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Our brains run off a particular energy: 25 Watt. Not 40 Watt, not 60 Watt, but 25 – however unflattering that may sound. On top of this, a constant zero-sum energy game is taking place in the brain. This means that core brain functions are fighting over the same pool of energy, those 25 Watt, all the time.

Some brain functions are capable of trumping others. They simply get to the energy pool first and take their share. One such function is called the amygdala: the threat response and relevance detector of the brain.

Every recruiter should know this function by heart. Not only is it important for a recruiter to spot high amygdala activity in applicants – because this activity dampens and drains the performance of the applicant and gives a rather fragmented picture of his/her potential.

When the threat response flares up

More importantly, you want to avoid hiring the people who trigger red alert amygdala activity in others. Why? Because high amygdala activity means that the working memory gets hampered. We need our working memories to process information, analyse, be creative and solve problems. But when the threat response of the brain flares up, it leaves little room for these functions. Everything now revolves around “survival”. It can take hours – or the whole day for that matter – for the amygdala to dampen once it has been highly activated. The performance is seriously disabled in the meantime – and the organisation loses precious time, money and productivity.

Some executives, managers and employees are Constant Amygdala Triggers (CATS). They seem to have the ability to spread fear and insecurity in others. Wherever they go, they seem to leave a trail of decreased productivity – because it takes time for others to “shake off” the interaction.

What CATS do

The amygdala activates in a number of situations – and the CATS seem to naturally heighten the amygdala levels in others:

- Status threats are sure triggers of the amygdala – and the CATS are simply “excellent” at making others feel inferior.
- Dictates, unrequested advice and even clumsily formulated feedback can make the amygdala activity in others go crazy. Many CATS seem unaware of the language they use – and the effects it has on others.
- Goals that are too big make the amygdala go red and make the thinking brain close down. Several CATS are so caught up with the end result and getting to it quickly, that they miss out on this crucial piece of brain logic.
- Not the least, the subtle micromessages that we all send out 2,000-4,000 times per day are picked up by other people’s amygdalas. Micromessages means the nonverbal signals we send out, particularly via our faces: raised eyebrows, dead eyes, a curled up nose signalling contempt – or a smile, a nod and a sparkling eye contact. If we are not aware of the micromessages we send out, we can easily undermine the authority of others and trigger their amygdalas. If we oversee the

micromessages others send us, we misread several situations and don't get to see how we affect others. CATS do both as per default: they are unaware of the power of their own micromessages and they ignore the information stored in the micromessages coming from others.

The good question is: Do you really want to recruit a CAT – a Constant Amygdala Trigger – causing productivity leaks wherever s/he goes? No matter the level of competence, vision or versatility – do you dare to let a CAT – yet another CAT – into your organisation?

A leadership presence that boosts productivity

It is easy to fall into The Amygdala Trap where lots of energy is bound to fear, stress and less useful interactional patterns. Many organisations suffer substantial productivity leaks because they have fallen into this trap: with too many CATS around who have influenced the company culture too deeply.

CATS are typically stuck in a particular mode of thinking and action: with low self-awareness, low ability to view situations from other people's points of view and a high degree of rigidity in their behavioural repertoire displayed: unable to make the most of the constant interactions they partake in and use their presence to boost productivity.

The future belongs to the organisations that are willing to guard themselves from the CATS and create brain-friendly environments that nurture flexible, resourceful mindsets and performances. From a leadership perspective, this is not a matter of being either "hard" or "soft" in ones approach. It is rather a matter of oscillating relevantly between core leadership skills: being visionary yet mastering practical execution, being focused yet open, decisive yet humble – and always resonating authenticity and eye-level approachability: the building blocks of trust.

In the future, leadership development will – to a large extent – revolve around growing social skills and brain awareness in executives and managers. Thus the future of HR and recruitment calls for clever recruiters to spot CATS – and close the gates to the organisation before they make their way to and drain the organisation.

Brain-aware organisations need both leaders and recruiters with a black belt in amygdala handling: socially bright people who know how to make the most of the rules of the brain. Who can boost the resourcefulness of employees – also when times get tough!

*You can find Anette Prehn on LinkedIn and on www.anetteprehn.com She has written the book *Play Your Brain* and runs a highly popular elearning course on "The Neuroscience of Reframing – And How to Do It". She published in *The NeuroLeadership Journal* 2012 and was honoured the title "Trainer of the Year – Leadership/Coaching" in 2009. I consider Anette Prehn's work on reframing leading edge in coaching. If you are interested in coaching, change and neuroscience then you have to know Anette Prehn!*