



How to Develop a High Performance Culture

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If only there were a silver bullet for leaders...

Many leaders are constantly seeking the ultimate solution to build a strong culture, raise performance levels and operate at maximum efficiency and effectiveness.

There are, of course, widely appreciated management methods for raising performance. But they're rarely put into practice. Perhaps it's because they feel counterintuitive to many managers. Even the leaders who use them, and whose enterprises benefit from the results, don't know why they work. So the value of these powerful practices is often overlooked.

That's where neuroscience comes in. Breakthroughs in human brain research are revealing new insights about cognitive processes. With a little knowledge of how these three underused practices affect the brain, you can use them to generate a more energizing culture.

1. Purpose

Take the time to help employees fully understand the purpose of their work – explaining the significant value of tasks, so they understand their contribution to the organization's larger objectives.

When people know the reason goals exist, it's easier to form a “goal hierarchy” – a mental structure in which priorities can be considered as complements rather than obstacles to one another. This makes it more likely that people will follow through.

Stressing purpose to employees helps leaders deploy the cognitive power of altruism. The brain's reward system is directly activated by helping others. When it's clear to employees that they're helping others through their work, their intrinsic motivation rapidly expands. Management by objectives is a far more limited mental schema than management by aspiration.

2. Autonomy

Micromanagement, the opposite of autonomy and the default behavior for many managers, puts people in a threatened state. The resulting feelings of fear and anxiety interfere with performance.

A reduction in autonomy is experienced by the brain in much the same way as a physical attack. This “fight-or-flight” reaction, triggered when a perceived threat activates the brain,

includes autonomic activity that makes people reactive: They are now attuned to threat and assault, and primed to respond quickly and emotionally.

When this fight-or-flight reaction kicks in, productivity falls and the quality of decisions is diminished. When the neural circuits for being reactive drive behavior, controlling oneself, paying attention, innovating, planning and problem solving are all diminished.

By giving employees some genuine autonomy, a company can reduce the frequency, duration, and intensity of this threat state. Indeed, the perception of increased choice in itself activates reward-related circuits in the brain, making employees feel more at ease.

3. Recognition

Recognize employees' success in a skillful and considered way to deliver recognition that matters. This doesn't mean heaping undeserved praise on people; it means celebrating a job well done while keeping the bar high.

The most effective leaders convey recognition and, where possible, reward employees for productive steps forward. They relay positive feedback from customers; they take care to include employees' managers when giving thanks and recognition; and they personalize their messages.

When leaders recognize employees' strengths before the team, it activates the same regions of the employee's brain as would winning a large sum of money. Rewards of all kinds, including social rewards, tend to release the neurotransmitter dopamine, which produces good feelings. These reward circuits encourage people to repeatedly behave the same way.

Public personal recognition provides lots of rewards for our brains. It increases social status, enhances the sense of being a valued member of the group, and shows that hard work will be fairly recognized. Most people's neural circuits will respond directly and positively to these.

The Benefits of Imitation

The three management approaches I've described can create a climate of trust that spirals upward through the organization because people in social settings tend to pick up the mood and attitudes of others nearby, often to a degree they don't consciously realize.

This process, which neuroscientists call *imitation*, has been studied extensively. For example, "emotional contagion" has shown how one person's emotions can rapidly influence those of a group. The brain also has a process known as mirror neuron activity – when people see others act in a certain way, circuits in their brain are activated as if they had taken the actions themselves, even if they don't directly imitate that behavior. Observation can at times substitute for personal experience – watching someone else in a situation can have an impact on the brain similar to that of experiencing it directly.

The workplace is a natural medium for viral behavior, transmitted through observation. As long as employees see the difference it makes, a change in a few individuals' neural patterns can move rapidly through the organization. Social scientists sometimes refer to this phenomenon as

social proof or the *bandwagon effect*, and it has long been documented as a vehicle for social change.

There's enormous potential for combining neuroscience theory with efforts to help leaders improve the positive impact of their organization's culture. The more leaders who understand the value of fostering autonomy, purpose, and recognition—and who translate these principles into practice—the more others will mirror them and the more widespread these practices will become within the company.

By providing scientific evidence of the power of social imitation behaviors, neuroscience can help leaders see the value of constructive organizational culture change, and deploy more effective ways to accomplish it.

Michelle M. Smith, CPIM, CRP is a highly accomplished international speaker, strategist, and author on performance improvement. She speaks and writes about what she knows first-hand as a former leader of a Fortune 100 global conglomerate, and now as a researcher and strategist. Internationally renowned as a respected authority on leadership, workplace culture, talent and employee engagement, Michelle passionately shares new insights and tools for leaders to confidently, effectively and strategically lead their organizations to success.



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Speaker ~ Author ~ Strategist

Areas of Expertise

- Next Practices in Leadership; The Future of Work
- Employee Engagement, Talent & Corporate Culture
- Global Trends in Recognition, Incentives & Motivation
- Branding; Creating a Unified Corporate/Employer Brand

Previous Speaking Engagements (sample)

- The CEO Summit
- ExecuNet TV
- Corporate Executive Board Executive Insight Conference
- CEB's Re-Imagine HR Conference
- The Conference Board of Canada
- Northwestern University FORUM Think Tanks
- Constellation Research's Connected Enterprise Conference
- Renaissance Executive Forums
- Ragan Communications Conferences
- CAI HR Management Conference
- Furniture Marketing Group Annual Symposium
- The Motivation Show (*United States, Spain, Mexico, Australia, United Kingdom & Portugal*)
- WorldAtWork Annual & State Conferences; WorldAtWork TV
- Incentive Marketing Association Executive Summits (*United States, Canada & Europe*)
- SITE International Conferences (*Hong Kong, Iceland, Mexico, Canada & United States*)
- SHRM Annual, State and Regional Conferences
- ANA's Business Marketing Assn. Conferences & Events
- International Marketing Congress (*Portugal*)
- Motivate Europe Live (*United Kingdom*)
- CIPD Reward Conference (*United Kingdom*)
- NHS Employers Conference (*United Kingdom*)
- National Incentive Show; Incentive World (*United Kingdom*)
- Institute for Human Resources Rewards & Recognition
- Recognition Professionals International Conferences
- PPAI's Annual International and Brand Conferences
- Advertising Specialty Institute Conference
- Promotional Marketing Conference (*United Kingdom*)

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Biography

Named as one of the Ten Best and Brightest Women in the incentive industry and to the Employee Engagement Power 100 list, Michelle is a Change Maker, Top Idea Maven, and President's Award winner, who has worked in every facet of recognition and incentives, both domestically and internationally.

A highly accomplished international speaker, strategist, and author on performance improvement; Michelle is a respected authority on leadership, workplace culture, talent and employee engagement. She speaks and writes about what she knows first-hand – as a former leader of a Fortune 100 global conglomerate, and now as a researcher and strategist.

Michelle has published and presented more than 1,500 articles and speeches and is a trusted advisor to many of the world's most successful organizations and the governments of the United Kingdom and the United States.

She loves solving complex problems, and put that to good use representing the Incentive & Recognition Industry in educating and lobbying the U.S. Congress on industry best practices.

Michelle is the Past President of the FORUM for People Performance at Northwestern University and President Emeritus of the Incentive Marketing Association. She's Vice Chair, Corporations for the Incentive Federation and was the Founder and Editorial Chair of *Return on Performance Magazine*.

Michelle is also active in the C-Suite Network, the National Speakers Association, WorldAtWork, SHRM, Recognition Professionals International, the Marketing Leadership Roundtable, and the Society for Incentive Travel Excellence.

For more information:

Michelle's Speaker Video: https://youtu.be/aU_3UkQH7c

Visit Michelle's profile on LinkedIn:

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/michelle-m-smith-cpim-crp>

Blog: <http://www.eremedia.com/author/michelle-m-smith/>

YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/user/theMichelleMSmith>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/michelleMsmith9>

Fun Fact:

Michelle has appeared in a Glenn Frey music video, a major motion picture starring Al Pacino, and sang under the direction of the Conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra.

Published & Broadcast Media (sample)

Fox Television, the BBC, *Fortune*, *Business Week, Inc.*, *TLNT*, *B2B Marketer*, *Marketing*, *Financial Review*, *Huffington Post*, *Workforce*, *Return on Performance*, *Career Contentment Radio*, *Business America Radio*, and contributions to the books "Bull Market" by Seth Godin, "Contented Cows Still Give Better Milk" and "Social Media Isn't Social."