



## ***Building a Culture of Service Excellence Takes Brain Power***

by Thomas Dullien

**B**uilding a culture of service excellence is very likely the most common training initiative, and the one, which fails the most. How can such a claim be made? If it were more successful, there would be a few definitive books on how to do it correctly and we wouldn't have to do it over and over again. Instead we keep reciting the obvious reasons why it fails; listing anything from not hiring towards the culture, to failing to clearly define the culture, to not repeating the message often enough, and to lacking leadership that doesn't provide a role model for others to emulate. Does that mean leaders and managers know exactly what the culture of service excellence is, but don't fully understand their role? Maybe the lack of understanding refers to a lack of understanding of what shapes behaviors?

### **Effective Leaders at all Levels are Needed to Enable Others to Engage**

It is simply a myth that the leaders' behavior and 'modeling' causes changes the behavior of the followers. Understanding others means understanding the biology of the human brain. Changing human behavior requires changing the human brain. To change the human brain, it must be genuinely engaged. Such true engagement differs from the presently much hyped "employee engagement," which merely tries to influence behavior through gifts, rewards, and recognition.

It is neuroscience, and not just psychology, that gives a better understand what drives human behavior and motivation in human workplace settings and allows one to gain a differentiated awareness about the service processes in complex situations. Recent technologies, such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), positron emission tomography (PET), and electroencephalograph (EEG), allow for the exploration of the hard science that triggers the soft skills needed to influence innovation, creative thinking and elasticity in the face of change. The application of brain science to leadership performance, however, challenges traditional behavioristic approaches held so dear since Maslow, Herzberg, McClelland, et al. Viewing behavior change through the lens of neuroscience gives leadership a better understanding of how and why employees feel engaged. It also accentuates that most of what is implemented to change the behavior of employees is counterproductive, causing the opposite of what is needed to improve outcomes.

For example, when managers continue to "show and tell" employees what to do to change behavior, let alone using threats and rewards to develop new skill sets, the employee's brain actually becomes less effective, i.e., their engagement

levels decrease and their mind closes down towards new ideas. There is nothing engaging about listening to someone else's solutions. On the other hand, when the communication with employees develops in a way that promotes their insight and personal experience, plus a given opportunity to make decisions, their brains are significantly more resourceful. It is already known that we cannot teach experience, but we can allow experience to be the teacher. It is called experiential learning.

Scripting any customer service approaches, be it ice-breakers, to cold-call sales lines, telephone responses, or how to announce promotions is doomed to fail, because it is not a genuine thought process and creates a fake experience for our brains.

One of the primary hurdles that leaders encounter is trying to engage employees in results-oriented decision-making that is aligned with the shared vision. Interestingly enough, those, who are able to successfully apply such skill sets, have a worldview reflective of a systemic versus mechanistic concept. A systemic perspective values relationships, experience, collaboration, and human potential, whereas a mechanistic view focuses on seeing the whole as a sum total of its parts, it is a reductionist thinking, and a hierarchically linear approach to organizational change. What does that mean? Contrary to common belief, *building a culture of service excellence has to develop from the bottom up, not from the top down...* unless one can find examples in real life where the construction starts with the roof and works its way down to the foundation.

Studies show that the limbic system, the emotional center of the brain, conducts an assessment five times per second to decide whether or not something in the environment – a sound, person, tone of voice, place, glance, gesture, sensation – is good (rewarding) or bad (threatening). The human brain's default setting is the threat response; also recognized as a state of disengagement. Placing high importance on role-play and scripted responses is counter-productive, because the brain recognizes the artificial environment. It sees no need to rapidly decide what is good and bad in the environment and therefore doesn't even try to mobilize our mental resources quickly.

It is important to confront uncomfortable real life experiences and employees need the support and mentoring of leadership after such encounters. Such encounters allow employees to reflect on their experience, to establish feedback and to elevate subconscious actions into consciousness.

It is that process that over time changes behavior. It promotes the brain's ability to access cognitive resources, specifically the prefrontal regions where creative insights, complex problem solving, and social collaboration, cooperation, and teamwork are supported. Being able to talk about their experience later helps employees to regain this higher order thinking.

### What About Modeling Behavior?

While a leader's mood and behaviors significantly impacts the performance of the entire organization, it does not change the behavior of employees in the long term. Newly discovered brain cells, referred to as mirror neurons, give people the ability to see themselves in other people (*Cattaneo & Rizzolatti, 2009; Iacoboni, 2008*), underscoring that the mind exists 'between' people and that the emotions and behaviors of others are in many ways contagious. It is equally true that the mirror neurons do not equalize the positional standing in a hierarchy; i.e. *the lower position in the hierarchy can mirror the enjoyment, fun, 'angst' or frustration, but only on his or her level and not at the level of the leader.*

There is a neurochemical link at the interpersonal, organizational, and systemic level that illustrates how these brain cells allow people to 'mirror' what another person is doing and saying, and they are only activated when the observed behavior is intentional. For example: If the leader's tone is negative and critical, it will activate the same neural circuits in the employee, impairing the mental capacities needed to process the feedback and improve practice. *Telling employees what to do or providing incentives to get them to change behavior are counterintuitive to relationship-based, socially intelligent leadership, and often create the opposite effect of what leaders want.*

Transforming the culture happens through the exploration of personal and repetitive experiences of new habits supported through continuous mentoring and coaching. It does not happen by training for it in advance. New patterns of behavior are reflected first at the biological level in the human brain. Through the act of continuous observation in the form of intentional personal focus, new pathways in the brain become stabilized so that it can change.

Here are some examples in no particular order:

**1) When you are having fun, the guests have more fun and stay longer.** Fun is a personal and subjective experience. No leadership interference is needed, except for the feedback question: "Are you feeling more relaxed now?" and "Does this make it easier for you to build relationships?"

**2) Make greetings social, "How are you today?" or "I love your earrings!"** The social environment in a casino's diverse

environment no longer has a 'common sense.' Employees must be given the freedom to change the greeting according to the encoded signals they are receiving from the guest. Encourage your staff to introduce their supervisors and managers to 'their guests/players.'

**3) Using the guest's name creates an emotional attachment for most people.** It works best if we get to know their preferred name (nickname) and then make every effort to remember it. Employees using this in conjunction with introducing their supervisor, manager or director become valued hosts.

**4) Anticipate their needs; don't wait for them to ask.** Poor service culture starts with lack of eye contact. Every employee, regardless of position and work assignment learns to appreciate a 'continuous greeting process' with each other and the guests throughout their workday. If fully supported, it creates a mindfulness and every employee is 'in the moment' at every moment of their day.

**5) Advocate for the guest – instead of saying "No, we can't do that" try "Let me see what I can do for YOU!"** It has to strike a personal tone, otherwise the steps 1-4 above do not make sense. All these steps build on each other. It is not a training initiative, but a daily urgency, which after several years, becomes a culture.

**6) When a guest thanks you, respond with "It was my pleasure!"** Avoid the phrase: "No problem!" at all cost. Check your mind right now and see if you remembered the word 'problem' or 'pleasure'?

The concept discussed above is known as neuro-leadership. It is not another leadership theory but rather a leadership tool. David Rock (2008) developed a neuroscience-based framework for engagement called the SCARF Model that describes five domains, or social drivers – status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness – as the areas where the human brain can be triggered into either a threat (disengagement) or reward (engagement) state during social interactions. Since the culture of service excellence takes place primarily during social interactions, neuroscience can help significantly to debunk old myths and gain fresh insights. ♣

*Dr. Thomas Dullien, CCE, CCM, CHE is Executive Director of the Human Resources and Development Department at Barona Resort & Casino. He can be reached by calling (619) 328-3442 or email tdullien@barona.com.*