**5 Opportunities to Use Neuroscience to Guide You and Enhance your Understanding of those You Coach!**



Neuroscience is fundamentally concerned with the way that the brain works; the value that it offers people who are working with other’s brains is quite vast. Understanding how the brain changes is a key area within the field of neuroscience and is therefore useful to Coaches.

From the perspective of Coaches, neuroscience is the field that can inform them of important things about the brain. Things that are key to new ways that you work with clients and also things that underpin things you are already familiar with. Neuroscience can explain why and how Coaching works. It can enlighten Coaches as to things to pay particular attention to. It can warn against other practices.

There are a huge number of opportunities within a normal Coaching engagement to use neuroscience to guide us, and here are 5 for you to further inform your work.

# 1. First Impressions, and how you can connect with your clients

Dale Carnegie had a point when he wrote “become genuinely interested in other people”. Children have a gorgeous curiosity and ability to connect. There are a lot of things that an individual could value when they are selecting a Coach. There are also some key things that neuroscience indicates to us that should be on radar. Two of these are being trustworthy and being fair. There are some great studies by Lieberman around this topic.

Oxytocin is the neuromodulator that is very important in stimulating positive social interactions. Coaching is technically a social interaction, therefore Coaches can benefit from a deep understanding of what oxytocin is, how it gets released, and how it can affect day to day behaviour.

If your client comes to you and they are stressed out, their head is buzzing with lots of thoughts, they are showing signs of anxiety and struggling to order their thoughts then you have an opportunity. Connecting with them, and helping them to connect to things that might raise their levels of oxytocin might serve them by reducing their cortisol levels.

***=> As a coach, leverage this neuroscience insight by actively finding ways to build trust with your client and demonstrate your fairness.***

# 2. Goal setting, and how you can help your clients with visualisation

Have you ever had a client not achieve a goal? How about several of them? Goals are fascinating things because from a logical perspective, if we say something is important to us and we want to achieve it then it would make sense for us to go ahead with the behaviours, the actions, which would lead to the achievement of it. As we know from experience, it is not that easy at all. There is fascinating research that would feed into all of the following components of goals and more:

• Deciding on the goal

• Thinking creatively

• Planning how you will achieve it

• Visualising the goal, and steps to reach it

• Paying attention to / being affected by relevant cues – conscious and unconscious programming (anchoring, nudging, priming)

• Exercising willpower or self control

• Helpful habits

• Monitoring progress & adapting

• Inhibiting internal distractions (emotions)

• Inhibiting external distractions

• Taking action itself

By Coaches becoming aware of the science behind goals they can support their clients in the achievement of said goals far more effectively, right from the choosing and setting of them through to how to make it more likely they will achieve their next ones.

***=> As a coach, leverage this neuroscience insight by citing a visualisation study to help a client see the potential value.***

3. Environment, and how you can help your clients create the best one

Our environment plays a big part in our lives. Many of us like to think of ourselves as independent and that we are 100% consciously in control of what we do. Several bodies of research show this is not the case. One interesting paper in the field of behaviour change puts forward the Fogg Behaviour Model. This asserts that in order for a person to perform a target behaviour they must:

• be sufficiently motivated

• have the ability to perform the behaviour

• be triggered to perform the behaviour.

In this section we are particularly interested in the third point. The opportunities to dig deep into triggers that support desired behaviours are vast. The most effective Coaches are the ones that know about these and are flexible in putting them into action.

***=> As a coach, leverage this neuroscience insight by exploring your client’s environment and where they are when they need to do behaviours leading to goal attainment.***

# 4. Habits, and how you can help your clients with their behaviours

American researchers Neal, Wood and Quinn found that up to 45% of our behaviours are performed in the same location daily. We know from experience that by acting habitually we free our conscious mind up to focus on other things.

My colleague from the Wales Centre for Behaviour Change, Paul Carter, gives a fascinating insight into habits: “Ouellete and Wood (1998) combine these factors to define habits as ‘tendencies to repeat responses given a stable supporting event’. By repeating these responses in a certain setting, the cognitive processing that controls them becomes automatic and can be performed with minimal attention and simultaneously with other actions. From a dual processing perspective then, it would seem that habit formation involves a transition from the explicit cognitive processing of information to *a more automatic and implicit system i.e. from cool to hot.*

There is neurological evidence to support this assertion. You may remember that I mentioned previously that the hot network is associated with a set of ‘inner’ brain structures called the basal ganglia, and the cold network with ‘outer’ brain structures, particularly the prefrontal cortex. Yin and Knowlton (2006) found that the basal ganglia appear to be involved in habit formation. Tricomi and others (2009) found that training a habitual response leads to an increase in brain activity in an area of the basal ganglia called the putamen. Researchers Everitt and Robbins (2005) found that recreational drug users demonstrate neural shifts in control from prefrontal cortical to striatal areas (part of the basal ganglia) as they transition from voluntary to compulsive drug use. Habits, it seems, take their hold through the formation of neural pathways in the hot network.”

As you can see, there is a lot to habits and they are such powerful things it is so worth investing in a deep understanding of them.

***=> As a coach, leverage this neuroscience insight by being clear on how new habits are formed.***

# 5. Rewards, and how you can help your clients with dopamine

It became popular in Coach training to set up ‘rewards’ for the accomplishment of a goal. This can be a great strategy; an extrinsic reward for a series of behaviours could help a person to achieve that goal. However, the brain itself ‘rewards us’ on a regular basis.

We can become conditioned into behaviours without any conscious consideration. For example, our client may only realise that they have been doing their emails first thing in the morning for the last 5 years when you start looking at their productivity. If they wanted to get more quality work done quicker and more gracefully it is quite possible this would happen if they capitalised on the time of day their brain is freshest. Knowing that ticking off small tasks, like doing emails, especially when you can see the number reducing and them disappearing from your inbox – it is almost gamification principles at play – could be giving them a dopamine hit is useful. They are likely to enjoy the feeling and miss it if they are to change their behaviour.

Behaviours can be internally rewarded. We can experience highs of neurochemicals such as dopamine or serotonin. Subsequently these behaviours become more likely to be repeated, and habits start to be formed.

With any behaviour change being aware of things like this enables you to give due consideration to what could replace the ‘reward’ they are getting from the current behaviour.

***=> As a coach, leverage this neuroscience insight by helping your client understand what is currently activating their reward circuitry can be empowering and important in making changes.***

And, that was only 5 opportunities. Neuroscience can offer a lot to the coaching world. The exciting reality is that there are Coaches out there up-skilling themselves in the field of neuroscience and who are putting what they learn into practice in a variety of ways. We are seeing Coaches:

• Teach their client relevant pieces of neuroscience

• Use neuroscience to inform their questioning

• Challenge clients in particular areas of their behaviours

• Readdress their priorities in Coaching

• Change their sales process based on what they have learnt

The story will continue to unfold and we look forward to how Coaches are strengthening their field through these practices.

**References**

In our programmes, we reference the scientific papers ideas and research comes from. We also provide a comprehensive introductory reading list.

1. Carnegie, Dale (2006) How to make friends and influence people, Vermillion

2. Lieberman, M. D. et al (2007) Fairness and Cooperation Are Rewarding: Evidence from Social Cognitive Neuroscience, Annals of the New York Academy of Science, 18, 90-101

3. Fogg, B.J. A Behaviour Model for Persuasive Design