HOW DO LEADERS INFLUENCE OTHERS? (PART2)

By Richard Searle, www.searleburke.com

Being influential or an Instagram “influencer” does not make you a leader, but it is hard to lead if you are not influential. Influence and persuasion are critical tools used by leaders to mobilize others, but until now there have been big gaps in our knowledge about what influences and moves our fellow humans.

Recent neuroscientific studies of the human brain are beginning to reveal more of these secrets and they can provide a real edge for contemporary leaders. These conclusions have broad application both to leadership and to the world of business. Airlines, for instance, have been scratching their heads about how to get passengers to pay more attention to the important safety instructions intended to prime them before each flight for speedy reactions in the case of an emergency. Research has helped them to figure out how to gain more attention and to influence passenger behaviour. Hospitals are figuring out how to persuade medical and hospital staff to make better choices and to stop making people sick by ignoring the traditional warning signs to wash their hands regularly. More on these later.

In Part 1 on influence I explored my “Three Influence Steps” which I regularly teach to leaders using a range of fun simulations. That article was titled “How Leaders Win Friends and Influence People”, and in it I drew heavily from the fields of game theory, psychology and the decision sciences. Just to recap, my Step One says that leaders can only influence others in terms of others’ interests and what they value – ignoring or over-riding their interests is not influence but is either command and control or manipulation. Initially, therefore, leaders may need to park our own agenda and do a bit of digging if we want to influence people. Step Two examines how to find leverage by exploring the full range of what others value, including their substantive, relational and procedural interests. And my Step Three demonstrates how leaders can still help shape what others value, because people are not always clear, fully enrolled, unilateral and consistent, or even rational about their interests.

In her recent book “The Influential Mind”, cognitive scientist Tali Sharot examines what the latest studies of the brain are revealing about our power to change others. She has a bold take on the “future of influencing”. She argues that we now know how to move artificial limbs with our minds and thoughts, and experiments with rats demonstrate we can directly change the behaviour of a rat on the other side of the world who is wired up via computer to the brain of another rat currently being trained in new behaviours on our side of the world. The future she says is “my mind in your body”. The future of influencing is that I can directly change your neural activity and behaviour by connecting you up to my brain. It sounds like science fiction, yet I notice

that the most recent edition of “Nature” reports that scientists already have developed AI which successfully converts human brainwaves into human speech. This is an example of direct access to another’s thoughts, and could prove a boon for a range of disabilities.

Some of you may be shocked or concerned by Tali Sharot’s predictions. Is she still talking about influencing or is she describing a future of programming and brainwashing? Sharot offers this rejoinder: “While you may not yet be altering another person’s brain activity directly, you are nonetheless altering it. You are simply using language, expressions and actions to do it.” These are the more conventional and very effective methods of influencing for leaders, and we will explore them next in this article. And for those who think I have been drinking too much of the Kool Aid at the altar of Neuroscience, I will offer some of my own qualifying remarks about it later in this article.

In my experience, many managers believe that rational argument and evidence are very influential, and it is one of the most common influence strategies which I observe leaders using. Many managers will argue facts until they are blue in the face. Unfortunately, this approach often works like a damp squib! It is not because everyone else is stupid – it is because we all have a bias to look for confirming evidence and to discount or ignore disconfirming evidence. Some people believe that climate change is a hoax, and others believe that vaccination can cause autism in their children. The data and evidence against both those beliefs is overwhelming for many of us, but underwhelming for the devotees of those positions. Arguments or ridicule based on data rarely change their beliefs or their actions. What might influence them?

Research has shown that we need to find some common ground. For instance, trying to prove to parents that vaccination does not cause autism often has little impact, but these parents are still making choices out of a strong commitment to the health of their children. Research indicates that showing that vaccinations can protect their children and other children from deadly diseases is the more influential approach because it doesn't contradict prior beliefs or ask them to abandon their concerns, and it appeals to shared commitments.

We have known for a long time that emotions can have a bigger impact and are more influential than facts and data, but neuroscientific studies are giving us an even better understanding about how this works. This power of emotion poses a problem for some leaders who lack emotional versatility or who still subscribe to the old management adage that emotions are dangerous in the workplace. Research is revealing the processes of "coupling" and "synchronization" which can occur during emotional communication. We have these common sayings about "being on the same wavelength", or "being of one mind" or "being in synch with a group", and it turns out that this is literally what emotional communication can achieve while leaving us feeling a little "light headed". I have even experienced it with a hundred thousand people at inspiring football games at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. Images of the brains of couples and groups show a synchronization of the patterns of neural firings during such emotional connection. The huge advantage of contagious emotion for influencing is that, in this state, others are far more able and open to hear the message of a speaker or leader from the point of view of that influencer

rather than block it out because of their default viewpoints and feelings. It doesn't seem to work for rival football fans though!

In the interests of transparency, let me declare that I also used another influencing technique at the start of this Article – you can be the judge of its' effectiveness. We know that humans are curious and that we are particularly curious about information and knowledge which we expect could deliver good news to us, or solve a problem for us or give us an advantage in some endeavor. Conversely, we are often diligent in avoiding potentially bad information such as any advance warning of an inheritable disease. Pharmacies have known for some time that more expensive pregnancy tests which are slightly faster than their competitors can sell at a large premium to other products. Customers who are hoping to avoid pregnancy may settle for the slower and cheaper product. The human brain is designed to reward us with pleasant chemicals such as dopamine when we engage in favourable activities such as eating a chocolate cake or having sex. It turns out that the same reward is released when we receive, or simply expect we may receive, good news or useful information. It appears that my peculiar media activities regarding the performance of the Geelong Cats have been predicted by the studies of the brain experts. If I expect, or know about, a win by the Cats I will devour every news story, and if I am dubious of success or disappointed by a loss I will treat all media analysis with disdain!

What are the implications of such curious tendencies for influencing? People are more open to being influenced by a leader, if the leader can demonstrate that there is a gap in the knowledge of others, that the

leader has access to good information, and that having this knowledge will provide genuine and reliable benefit for others. Establishing the gap is the essential part, and advertisers have realized that it does not need to be a particularly substantive gap to arouse interest in consumers. The gap causes anxiety in us, and the potential reward of all that dopamine and beneficial knowledge motivates us to bridge the gap.

How did the airlines influence more people to pay attention to safety instructions, and how did some hospitals get staff to wash their hands more often? They both stopped listening to their traditional instinct that if they had something important to say, others would want to know about it. And they both stopped trying to scare people into action and compliance. It is often easier to motivate people with rewards than fear. The airlines started to make a variety of fun safety videos using dancers, celebrities and staff, and with a strong focus on the holiday pleasures awaiting passengers after a safe flight. However, there is a complication to this principle that people freeze when scared which I have explored in previous articles and I will simply refer to here - Kahnemann and Tversky demonstrated a contrary tendency for humans to jump into risk-taking activity in order to avoid a definite threat or loss. Negative advertising in politics is so prevalent, disliked and influential because it seems to tap into both these tendencies in voters.

Studies in hospitals showed that compliance with safety warnings over the washing of hands was woefully low – it didn't even improve much when staff volunteered to be filmed and monitored for the studies. It wasn't that the medical staff didn't appreciate the risks – some of them had written the warnings - but that knowledge wasn't enough to

influence their choices or behaviour. The hospitals switched to timely rewards and fewer warning signs. Studies showed that using electronic scoreboards which flashed the cumulative scores for individuals and teams after each hand-wash led to outstanding compliance levels. This principle isn't rocket science but nor is it common practice. A small reward or recognition given at the time of a desired behaviour can be very influential. Leaders could definitely adopt this practice.

Martin Seligman is the founder of the Positive Psychology movement and is certainly one of the most influential psychology scholars of our time. He is in his mid-seventies now and has recently written his excellent autobiography called "The Hope Circuit". Seligman came to attention fifty years ago when his research on rats demonstrated that faced with repeated obstacles they "learned helplessness" and gave up. All his subsequent work has been motivated by those findings and he has focused on how humans can learn the opposite of helplessness, namely optimism, and flourish as a result. His work has had a huge impact, but in his autobiography he reveals that his original research was wrong! His research partner at that time, Steve Maier, went into the field of neuroscience and his latest scientific research has shown that rats and humans actually do not learn helplessness. Steve tracked the chemical processes in the brain to demonstrate that mammals don't learn helplessness - it is an automatic, biological default path to preserve energy in the face of prolonged bad events. Fortunately for Seligman this finding did not invalidate his life's work, because Maier also discovered that we do have a path which can over-ride our default setting, and this path does involve learning and it is all about learning

control. Phew! Positive Psychology is saved since its' whole emphasis is on the possibility and methods to learn optimism, resilience and control.

This story illustrates the potential of brain studies to advance our knowledge about how humans tick. But it provides a red flag as well for the bold new field of neuroscience. It reminds us that science also involves lots of interpretation, and those interpretations are not infallible. Seligman is a social scientist and got a lot right, but he also got things wrong. Additionally, Seligman no longer believes that his original experiments on animals were ethical. Ethics raise a second qualification which we need to apply to the field of neuroscience and its' contribution to influencing. Leaders cannot simply park our critical faculties or our ethical standards in the face of its' great possibilities. Social media and technology companies won us over as champions of individual empowerment and liberation, and now we are dealing with the social dangers lurking below the surface of their wizardry. Neuroscience can help leaders to be more influential, but it could also result in even more tools for manipulation in the absence of true leadership.