

The Neurophysiology of Engagement

Ian Weinberg - 2014

Neurophysiology of Rapport

To be in rapport – Phase 1: To trigger mirror neurons in response to perceived empathy, trust and belief

To be in rapport – Phase 2: Leads to secretion of oxytocin or is associated with the secretion of oxytocin

To be in rapport – Phase 3: Oxytocin suppresses the activity of the fear-anxiety-panic-rage centre – the amygdala. Fight or flight and therefore all defensiveness is thus dissipated

To be in rapport – Phase 4: Oxytocin stimulates dopamine production leading to a mind state of gratification, contentment, enhanced self-worth and self-esteem as well as purposeful motivation. (This essentially gives rise to the Golden Triad which is associated with maximal neuroplasticity - see below.)

Interpretation of Coachee Physiology

Fear/anxiety: Activated amygdala – Defensive and guarded in posture. Increased respiratory rate, dry mouth, nervous twitches and tremors exacerbated. Devoid of rapport, a challenge or intrusion by the coach can result in a **locked-in amygdala syndrome** – the activated amygdala triggers the secretion of noradrenalin/adrenalin together with cortisol which mediate the physiological manifestation of fight/flight. These in turn stimulate the amygdala in an endless cycle of fear, anxiety, panic and rage.

Aggression: Also amygdala-based and a reflection of fear. This fear relates to projected fear of loss (loss of not arriving at aspired destination; loss of person or property; loss of control). Generally future-based. Manifests with similar physiological signs as seen in fear/anxiety together with clenching of mouth and/fists. Threatening or militant language. May devolve into rage.

Hostility: Usually reflects elements of low self esteem, low self-confidence and low self-worth. There are often indications of anhedonia – chronic absence of personal enjoyment and gratification. Distrust of the environment is a feature. They will apportion blame or responsibility for their misfortune on to others. An air of schadenfreude prevails – they derive a degree of personal gratification and contentment through the losses or suffering of others. They are prone to lapsing into periods of hopeless-helpless. Physiologically they are defensive and anxious and therefore manifest fear/anxiety physiology. They are generally uncomfortable and fidgety. Avoiding eye contact is often a feature. They are prone to fabricating and manipulating in order to enhance their self-image in the face of others (including the coach. They are the ones that manipulate their answers in our diagnostics and can be very cunning.) They are notoriously non-compliant with therapeutic intervention and will often apportion blame to some outside person/situation for their lack of progress. They sometimes derive gratification from tripping up the coach and showing him/her up.

Hopeless-helpless (neurasthenic): Devoid of purposeful motivation. This individual is either a product of nurture deprivation or reactive to environmental loss. They are no longer inspired to action. Negativity is amplified and most positivity/inspiration is filtered out. Physiologically they default into a passive, low tone posture with very little movement. There is a low metabolic rate with shallow respiration. (In our stats, there was a high rate of hypothyroidism amongst this group) An air of disinterest pervades. It is difficult to get traction. They are totally dependent on an external locus of control and inspiration.

Effective Coaching

Establish rapport: At the outset initiate a conversation which is superficial and not related to potential issues. The coach should adopt an 'equal status' stance and not a commanding/prescriptive/authority/expert pose. Any of the latter behaviours will elicit amygdala defensiveness and delayed/absent rapport

Define the burning platform: Once in rapport as indicated by the manifest physiology, identify the issues of dis-ease. Continue expanding this issue in time and space, but guided by the need to maintain rapport.

Emotional probing: Only once rapport is established and maintained can probing begin. This takes the form of: What provides personal gratification/contentment/inspiration etc. When did you last feel that etc What would you do to re-capture that good feeling etc Throughout, read the physiology to confirm congruency between what is being expressed and what is manifesting. It is the emotional association and the accurate reading of its manifestations that is most effective in 'unlocking' the pre-verbal, implicit memory and influences.

Guidance and synthesis: Provide context for the information provided by the coachee with the aim of synthesizing a new structure for them. In this way positives have been emphasized, negatives have been diluted away and self-esteem is restored. The personal mission statement which emerges will incorporate meaningful and gratifying elements.

Final success will depend on sustained rapport and the production of oxytocin. The oxytocin suppresses the destructive emotions emanating from the amygdala and stimulates the production of dopamine. Dopamine together with lesser amounts of noradrenalin promote the Golden Triad:

1. Purposeful motivation
2. A sense of achievement and personal gratification
3. An enriched environment supportive of the process

The Golden Triad has been shown to predispose maximally to neuroplasticity – the sprouting of new neuronal processes to provide enhanced wellness, performance and leadership.

A Fundamental Principle

While the aim of the intervention on the part of the coach is to neutralize dis-ease and enhance personal gratification without expressing judgmentalism, there is nevertheless a universal component which should be integrated into the coachee's frame of reference. This component is value contribution. Contributing value can be defined as making something better than it was before you engaged with it. The coachee should therefore be encouraged to contribute value to:

1. Self – fulfillment of acknowledged needs identified as enhancing personal gratification
2. Personal environment – family, friends in terms of material, physical and emotional support and empathy
3. The extended environment - in terms of material, physical and emotional support and empathy

This gives rise to **authenticity**. Sustained fulfillment and effectiveness in terms of performance and leadership necessarily requires authenticity.