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## The hard truth behind the ‘soft’ side of leadership: why people resist new plans, and what we can do about it

### Is it true that people are resistant to change? Or that the human side of organisational life is ‘softer’ than the financial, or technical?

New research in neuroscience shows us that the way employees react to events in their organisation is based on hard-wired electric and chemical actions in their brain. Many well-used methods of carrot and stick, persuasion and communication may have little controllable influence on individuals and groups. Features of big ‘change programmes’ may be scientifically likely to produce the opposite to the desired effect because of the way the human brain works, which may explain why so many fail.

Brain activity is now being observed in ways which were previously impossible, allowing new research into how the brain responds to what goes on in people’s day to day experience at work. With computer simulation and tracking, new insights are being produced by academics from California to Oxford.

### Behaviour is not simply conscious and controllable

This research shows how, handled one way, change in one’s day to day environment can create negative reactions in the brain that are as strong as a physical blow. If handled well, it can release endorphins and energy that can radically galvanise individuals and groups.

The research suggests that people’s response to major change is not conscious and controllable. It is driven by a basic part of the brain common to all mammals – the part that manages threat and survival. These deep instinctive responses will cause the brain to be dysfunctional or work below par, until the ‘threat’ is managed. We know that some organisational change programmes are planned to provide leaders with a sense of certainty and control, which has the opposite impact on those at the receiving end.

### Aspects of change that cause problems

Turbulence and unexpected turns of events are part of organisational life, so what does the neuroscience tell us about the best way to manage people? The research is quite clear about what will create problems for employees and what will improve the outcomes:

- **Surprise** in itself is always a bad thing. The clearer and more openly the path has been laid beforehand, the better. Don’t wait in order to better ‘control’ the situation or to know more.
- **Loss of control** is a bad thing. Empowering people to explore and decide how to achieve a new direction is far more effective than telling them what to do differently. Even with job cuts, some voluntary choices or options make a big difference.
- **Uncertainty** is a bad thing. Try to reduce it. Be clear about what you can and what is still to be discovered. As a leader, better to say what you don’t know, and the things you are certain about.
- **Threat to status and role** is a bad thing. Even a new role that is as senior as a previous one can feel like a loss of something important. Take time to respect the past and explain the future.

When major change is managed to reduce surprise, minimise loss of control and uncertainty, then even drastic change can have a very positive impact and produce stimulus and energy. Much of this is intuitively obvious, but what we have not understood before is what creates a physiological response in the brain which will produce distraction and poor performance.

These new insights should provide confidence that it is very possible to take employees through major and difficult changes, as well as providing a much clearer scientific picture about the conditions for that success.