Shifting the balance of power.

Avoiding the perils of polarized leadership.
Korn Ferry Hay Group’s partnership with Richard Boyatzis and Dan Goleman provides a validated measure of emotional and social intelligence competencies and an extensive source of behavioral data. The Emotional and Social Competency Inventory (ESCI) also benefits from ongoing studies that explore emotional intelligence (EI) and its relationship to performance at work and other key outcomes.

What's inside?
This series of updates shares recent research and its implications for developing EI through training, coaching and education.

This report challenges traditional assumptions that role differentiation – between the task focused and the people focused leader – is natural and necessary.

It introduces recent findings on the neurological basis for role differentiation, and for the distinct behaviors that support each type of role, and shows how emotional and social intelligence can help leaders keep an effective balance between them. When business success depends on responding effectively to others, being open to new ideas, and being creative as well as analytical, leaders need the adaptability to switch quickly and easily between both roles.

The ‘not invented here’ syndrome is a product of over-activated task focused thinking. It blocks us from seeing a new possibility, another’s emotions, or a potential ethical dilemma.
‘The secret ingredient’, another report in this series, discussed how a leader’s emotional intelligence contributes to their team members’ job satisfaction and engagement.

Leaders set the tone for their teams and influence the climate they work in and their performance. Emotionally intelligent leaders do this well; their levels of EI are almost as significant as their employees’ levels in predicting employee job satisfaction (Miao, Humphrey & Qian, 2014).

This report summarises recent studies that explore the duality often observed in leadership roles, its basis in neurobiology and its consequences for leadership performance. It discusses the implications for the impact leaders have on employee satisfaction, engagement and performance. And it offers practical suggestions for developing balanced, ethical leaders.

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Miao, Humphrey & Qian, 2014.
Are leadership roles ‘hard wired’?

The differentiation between two leadership roles – the task focused leader and the relationship focused leader – is a familiar one.

This distinction has its benefits, it provides a practical, short-cut approach to placing the right kind of leader in the right situation. But it presents longer term challenges for leadership development, succession planning and organizational agility.

Boyatzis, Rochford and Jack (2014) discuss these challenges in their review of studies of the opposing domains hypothesis. This theory suggests that these two different approaches emerge from activation of two distinct neural networks:

- Our task positive network (TPN) helps us analyse and solve problems, focus our attention, make decisions, control actions and anticipate consequences. It helps us get things done. Leadership roles associated with this network focus on planning, forecasting, analytical problem solving, metrics and strategic social engagement that lead to task achievement.

- Our default mode network (DMN) is strongly linked to creativity and to identifying novel solutions. It plays a central role in our emotional self-awareness, empathy and ethical decision making. It helps us recognize the broader impact of our decisions. This network is the basis for roles in which the leader makes sense of their own and others’ emotions, constructs a sense of purpose or vision for a group, and encourages creative responses to new possibilities.

Jack et al. (2013) studied how activation of each of these networks influences how we approach the daily demands of work and leadership. They found that activity in one network inhibits activity in the other, and that each is typically activated flexibly, according to the nature of the tasks we face. When the most productive strategy is unclear, our personality, role and attitude play a part in determining which network is activated.

A leader whose approach fits the activity in hand seems to trigger the matching neural network in their team members, enhancing their ability to perform effectively (Jack et al., 2013). Adaptive leaders, who have strengths in both roles, can switch easily and quickly between them, and can recognise the cues and contexts which require a switch, are likely to be most effective.

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Jack et al., 2013.
Building our mental models.

**Autopilot versus reflection.**

The theory of opposing neural networks contributes an additional insight to previous, well-established hypotheses. Dual-process theories (Evans & Stanovich, 2013) distinguish between two cognitive processes:

- **Type 1**: quick, automatic, without requiring any effort or intention.
- **Type 2**: slow, controlled, analytic, requiring intentional effort.

Awareness of this distinction is useful to leaders who are concerned about the consequences of their typical approach. Type 1 processes generate instant, intuitive reactions, which may or may not prove appropriate, but are often more genuine responses of the person. Type 2 processes generate considered, analytic solutions to complex issues, often by abstracting them into some form of a model. Effective leaders will use both, at the right time and place, to resolve the demands of a given situation.

Friedman, Jack, Rochford and Boyatzis (2015) offer an enhanced perspective by exploring these theories together. Their work suggests that each network – the task focused TPN and the relationship focused DMN – can activate both types of processing. However, it also indicates that the inhibition of activity in one network, due to activity in the other, takes place during controlled, Type 2 processing.

Here’s how it works. A leader’s Type 1 intuitive reaction to a situation may generate, simultaneously, a common sense remedy based on awareness of the emotional tension for those involved, and will more likely appear honest or authentic. The slower, analytic, Type 2 approach may result in a deliberate, calculated solution, or even in well-considered empathy, but not in both simultaneously.

**The balancing act for leaders.**

This new insight offers leaders ways of adaptively managing their thinking, and that of their team members, to best effect:

- Creative tasks that require engagement and participation will automatically activate the relationship focused default mode network and deactivate the task positive network. When the creative process encounters an issue requiring deeper analysis, the adaptive leader will quickly and intentionally switch to engage the task positive network, in themself and in others.
- Analytical tasks that require attention and adherence to formal methods will automatically activate the task positive network and deactivate the relationship focused default mode network. When a creative or emotional issue arises, the adaptive leader will intentionally switch from analytical to relationship focused thinking to harness different perspectives in themselves and others.
Balancing the books.

Do organizations shift the balance?

Specific professions and organizations obviously rely on approaches that emerge from specific ways of thinking, but over-reliance has its dangers. Friedman et al. (2015) reviewed a number of studies that associated a failure to deactivate the task positive network while performing social tasks with reduced empathy and a hard-headed approach to social and moral judgements. They warn that the setting of short term goals, the evaluation of performance against goal completion and the reward of personal performance with material incentives can foster a culture of task focused and, potentially, competitive employee behavior. Employees experiencing this kind of work climate are less likely to engage in the trust, interaction and collaboration that support innovation and creativity. It can lead to decisions that seem expedient in terms of short-term costs, but which may have important ethical consequences.

In 2016, Rochford, Jack, Boyatzis and French reviewed new evidence which suggests that simultaneous activation can occur in parts of our otherwise opposing networks when we enter states that are neither purely task nor relationship focused. They warn of negative associations between co-activation and two typical leadership challenges: focus and performance in demanding analytical tasks, and ethical thinking in social contexts.

For organizational leaders, failure to switch flexibly between task focused and people focused thinking increases the chance that employees will perceive them to be lacking in empathy, manipulative, deceitful, calculating or overly political. For political leaders, in the extreme, it can create the conditions for inhumane decisions and atrocities.

Developing the balanced leader.

Clearly there are consequences for our performance if we allow ourselves to become stuck in the analytical approach that we tend to take for granted in working life. Leaders, especially, need to use both task focused and people focused thinking, and develop their capacity to switch quickly and cleanly between the two. Rochford et al. (2016) suggest how leaders can increase their cognitive strength and flexibility:

1. Build awareness of the two approaches, for example experience the full range of the learning cycle (Kolb, 2014) in order to develop creative and analytical perspectives.
2. Develop high levels of competency in the roles requiring each network, to decrease the cognitive effort of operating in either.
3. Recognise the contexts and cues which require a switch in roles.
4. Develop awareness of mentally switching between the two, and practise doing it quickly.
5. Attend to levels of stress and intensity that can increase the risk of becoming stuck in one, preferred, approach.

They also offer a development framework that can provide leaders with practice in both networks. The knowledge-based, technical and analytical development activities that can strengthen the task positive network are readily available in organizations and formal learning contexts.
The development activities that can strengthen the relationship focused default mode network will be familiar to practitioners who assess and develop emotional and social intelligence competencies:

- Generate exposure to new ideas and to people with diverse perspectives.
- Facilitate experiences that build self-awareness of internal cues: thoughts, emotions, preferences and preoccupations.
- Facilitate experiences that build awareness of others and the recognition of external cues: others’ thoughts and emotions, contexts, types of activity, and situational demands.
- Support exposure to emotional and social triggers that provoke emotional responses, especially empathy and righteous anger.
- Facilitate experiences that build awareness of switching between open, brainstorming activities and focused, problem-resolving activities.

- Encourage the creation and expression of personal visions.
- Encourage the coaching of others, especially around dreams, aspirations and values.
- Implement ways to celebrate social values.

Leaders set the tone for their teams’ engagement and performance. Their behaviors, and the thinking processes that underpin them, can help them and their team members approach work with the right balance of analysis and creativity. They create contexts in which employees can feel focused and ‘on task’ as well as understood and valued.

Organizations that support the development of emotional and social intelligence, as well as technical and analytical competencies, give their leaders the chance to maintain their balance in a role that presents conflicting challenges.

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The power of EI.

The fifth report in the series, ‘The power of EI’, summarises our most recent findings on the relationships between the ESCI and other Korn Ferry Hay Group assessments, with implications for leadership, employee and team performance.

The 360-degree Emotional and Social Competency Inventory is available through Korn Ferry Hay Group. If you would like to find out more about the tool and its applications, please visit www.kornferry.com/haygroup

References


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