

Leading the emotional field in times of change



By Marc Vanschoenwinkel

Owner:
place
to grOw

Partner: time
to grOw  & time
to chAnge

Let's imagine the following three characters, which exist within each of us, all have to be on board to make change and success a reality...



They are the brain team

In this article I will describe the three main parts of the brain and how they affect leading change and, more specifically, leading emotions during a period of change. It is only when our emotions are touched that ideas become reality; otherwise, change is often no more than lip service or a lot of paper and folders and banners hanging on the wall. I will be speaking a lot about the crocodile and the monkey as visualisations of different parts of the brain. It is not my intention to offend anybody; it is just a practical way to clarify what we are dealing with. Based on scientific evidence, I am convinced of the strong influence that older, more animal-like brain parts have on our everyday behaviour. But, more importantly, I believe that the human race has the potential to acknowledge this behaviour and to surmount it in order to realise amazing things in technical as well as in social areas.

The crocodile, the monkey and the neocortex

First, let's have a look at how our brain is constructed and how it functions. It is argued that the human brain consists of three highly interconnected yet quite different parts. The key message here is that in order to get people on board with change you have to get all three parts of their brain on board! We often only address one part of the brain, namely, the rational brain (neocortex).



The oldest part of our brain, which is 500 million years old, is the reptilian brain, which we will refer to as the crocodile. The second oldest part, which is 300 million years old, is the emotional brain. We will call this the monkey. Finally, there is our neocortex or the rational brain, a spring chicken at only 2.5 million years old. The crocodile is responsible for physical survival. It regulates all of our automatic functions such as blood pressure, heart rate, breathing, etc. When it or its territory is

in danger it only has access to limited and rude ways of reacting, namely, the famous flight, fight, freeze or flock response. So, when the change you present threatens the crocodile or its territory, and to be honest all change is threatening to a crocodile, then you will find yourself confronting a room full of gnashing teeth.



The monkey brain developed when our distant ancestors started to live in groups. You can just imagine the difficulties that arose when a bunch of crocodiles all defending their own survival and territory started living together! To deal with these problems the monkey or paleomammalian brain developed. This part of the brain has access to emotions that can regulate interactions between individuals in order to make survival within a group and of a group possible.

There are two essential dimensions of regulating interactions within a group. The first dimension is order and dominance; who is the boss and what is the pecking order? This dimension determines who can eat and reproduce and in what order. Here, emotions such as anger, aggressiveness and submission play a crucial role. The second dimension is connection; individuals must be connected to tie a group together. Here, feelings of love, affection, sympathy, etc. come into play. Among monkeys grooming is the most explicit behaviour used to establish a connection. Andrew O'Keeffe, author of *Hardwired Humans* (2011), describes how chatting in groups, typically consisting of three people, is a human version of grooming. When you are next at a reception following a conference or meeting, take a look around, you will see a lot of small groups of people connecting with each other.



The youngest part of our brain is the neocortex or rational brain. It is responsible for rational (and irrational) thinking, anticipation and predictability, imagination, cause and effect thinking, creativity, and so on. In other words, the rational brain is the part of the brain with the potential to create extraordinary things.

So, whenever you talk about change (or any other “charged” topic for that matter) you are talking to a very mixed set of personalities which are feeling and thinking on three different levels:



The rational brain: What is he/she saying, what is the change and why is it necessary; does the argument appear logical and consistent? Is it consistent with my own beliefs ?

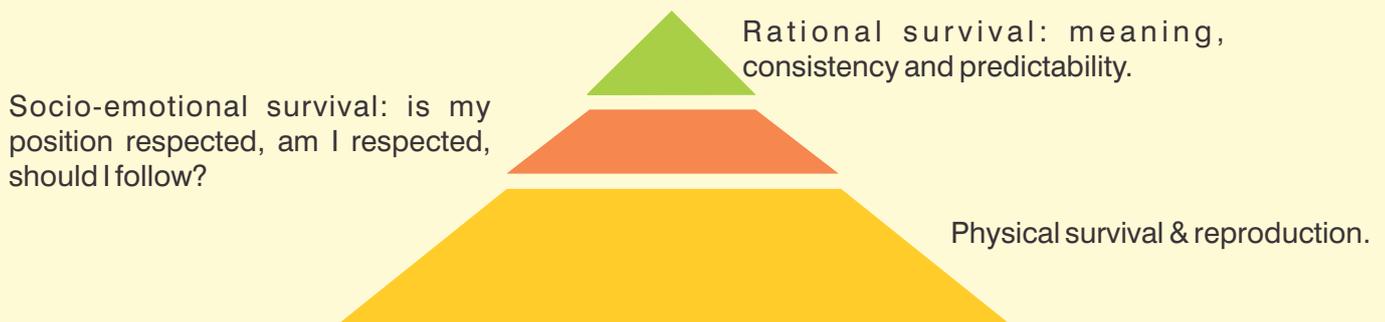


The crocodile: Is my survival/territory in danger?



The monkey: Is he/she more dominant than me, is he/she with or against me, does he/she care or not care about me, should I follow him/her or not (if you don't trust the messenger, you will not trust the message)?

Below is an illustration of what I call the emotional/rational pyramid:



If you don't send the right message on all three levels then you and your proposed change are in trouble. What we see is that most communication is conducted on a rational level and we aren't aware of what is happening at a monkey and crocodile level. Although we've describe these three parts of the brain as three separate brains, in reality they are highly interconnected and form one organic whole. They all influence each other. If you hear a “bad” argument you will experience negative emotions. The reverse is also true: if you feel bad you tend to hear “bad” arguments. Over the last few centuries we have placed so much emphasis on rational thinking that a lot of us seem to have forgotten that for 300 million years we have been mostly emotional beings. The rational part of our brain has only existed for 2.5 million years, a very short time given our 100s of millions of years of evolution.

Talking to all three brains: The essential messages to get across when communicating change



Reptilian level: In any case, you will survive. If you cannot give this message, then make clear what exactly will happen if someone will not be able to survive in that particular team, department of organisation. Give perspective for survival within an other environment.



Emotional level: Although the road may be difficult I am there for you to help wherever I can, I will lead and facilitate you, I care about you and we are connected, you can trust me. This does not mean that I will avoid communicating difficult messages; on the contrary, I will be honest.



Rational level: These are the rational and logical reasons why changes are being made... Lets discuss how you can integrate them within your own set of convictions, beliefs and values.



Talking to the crocodile:

Make sure you don't get eaten, calm things down but make sure that the crocodile is paying attention.

For the crocodile, survival is the most important issue. Losing territory (food) and safety is the main trigger for a fight, flight or freeze response.

First of all, you must make sure that the crocodile doesn't eat you. Sometimes when the crocodile attacks it is necessary to show it that you are stronger and the dominant animal. You can do this by remaining calm and highlighting the boundaries of your territory, i.e. what (behaviour) is acceptable and what is not. You have to do this with force and authority.

But, if you want to calm the crocodile in order to remove its disturbing influence on the emotional and rational brains, it is worthwhile being aware of the concept of loss aversion espoused by O'Keeffe (2011) which argues that the aversion to loss is an even bigger driver than the motivation to gain something. When faced with the prospect of change, people's immediate reaction is to believe that they will lose something. Once this seed is planted (which it is instantly) the imagination will take over inspired by the crocodile's fears. One sound piece of advice is to immediately get in touch with people's worries and beliefs about loss and to undermine them by delivering key facts and figures within a dialogue. This may seem contradictory as dialogue is typically an intervention on the rational level, but I am convinced that dialogue is the only way to effectively deal with the crocodile brain. People have to express themselves. If you only present facts and figures the rational brain will perhaps say yes, but the crocodile will resist. You must deal actively with this resistance (e.g. listen, ask about worries and fears, look for solutions together) or it will grow. Also, one of the most significant effects of dialogue is that by asking people to verbalize their feelings you force them to move from the crocodile brain to the rational brain. This brain takes over as it is the only one that understands language (Rock, 2009).

Equally important is the need to capture the crocodile's and the monkey's attention in a positive way (yes, I think there is some overlap here between the crocodile and the monkey brains). This will make the crocodile (and monkey) curious and keen to use its energy to investigate the issue being presented. As a result, the first seven words of every presentation or meeting are crucial. A single moment will determine whether the crocodile and the monkey are engaged. O'Keeffe (2011) states that the first seven words of a presentation or meeting must:

- Be specific
- Be true
- Refer to one concept/basic idea
- Trigger emotion
- Consist of simple language, no technical jargon
- Be short and story-like

For example, you could start a presentation by saying: "We throw a Mercedes away every week!" Then, stop talking and let the crocodile and the monkey take action to investigate: let them react, be surprised and explore by inviting them to ask questions.



Talking to the monkey:

Avoid creating a chaos, respect position, interest, need for leadership and need for connection

As mentioned above, I interpret the main function of the emotional brain as being the survival/thriving of the individual within the group and the survival/thriving of the group within its environment. In this sense, when interacting with other individuals two feelings in particular are important:

1. Who is the dominant party?

Who is calling the shots, do I want to follow, do I know my place in the pecking order or do I still have to find out where I am? Or, perhaps I feel that I can/should/want to be the leader? These feelings lead to all kinds of submissive or dominant behaviour or behaviour that fluctuates between the two.

2. Are we connected?

Do we trust each other to defend each other's interests; are we helping each other or competing? The feeling of connection is established by behaviour that embodies it: listening, helping, touching, grooming (the human version is chatting in small groups), being together, sharing successes and worries, and so on.

When managed appropriately, these two main feelings (dominance and connection) will create the dynamic required to lead the group to survival and performance. And, as the emotional brain doesn't understand language, dominance and connection is communicated by behaviour.

In my view, these two feelings correspond with the dimensions of a long-standing behavioural concept, namely, Timothy Leary's (1957) rose of Leary. What follows is my own adapted version of this concept based on extensive reflection and experience. I see it as a core tool for communicating with the emotional brain (the monkey). This version of the concept is less rational and describes how one can imagine how the emotional brain would perceive certain behaviour. I intentionally exclude a lot of nuances, as these are more a characteristic of the rational brain than of the emotional one. I call it the emotiongraph.

The emotiongraph:

I am dominant

Competitive leadership: I feel a strong need for self-assertion and active self-defence.

I show behaviour that sends the message: "I am the boss and I take care of myself (my own goals and ambitions)."

Constructive leadership: I feel strong and confident but I also feel respect for and connection with others. I show behaviour that sends the message: "I lead, but I will also protect your interests."



INSIDE OUR HEAD



I am not connected and I don't care

I am connected and I care

Forced or false docility: I am docile because I am scared and/or frustrated. I will often wait for the right moment to attack or bite.

Voluntary docility: I am docile but satisfied, willing to follow and to add because I feel that you care about me and will protect my interests.

I am docile

When using the emotiongraph, it is important to highlight the following key points (practical examples follow):

The difference between inside, outside and other side.

In my experience, it is common to find a difference between the inside (what do you intend to communicate), the outside (what you do and say) and the other side (how your behaviour is perceived). Over the past few decades I've coached many leaders who intended to be constructive leaders but who displayed behaviour that caused others to perceive them as competitive leaders. Positive intentions are a good start but they alone are not good enough. What counts is your behaviour and how it is perceived and you are responsible for this behaviour and its perception. It is your responsibility to manage both.

But, of course, leaders too have a crocodile and a monkey within. Leaders are often under significant pressure to perform and to keep their position. It should be no surprise, then, that their crocodile and monkey are often challenged. This is probably why there is often a difference between the inside and outside. Leaders are, or at least feel, under pressure to keep up appearances which leads to all kinds of behaviours that do not necessarily correspond with their intentions.

At this point, I feel it necessary to state that, in my view, personality is a product of the three brains interacting with each other. Basic instincts and internal emotions (related to maintaining or expanding survival, reproduction and social position) lead to the creation of rational constructs in the form of values, norms and convictions, which in turn leads to outside behaviour within an external context. But, along with this inside-out influence there is also an outside-in influence. An external context can demand new behaviours, reshape norms, values and convictions and influence basic emotions. That's why it is crucial for leaders to understand themselves in order to identify the elements that influence their behaviour and how they choose to manage and develop their behaviour in their own interest, that of their co-workers and that of the organisation. I feel that knowing yourself and daring to be honest with yourself and others will lead to authentic leadership. It is this kind of leadership that connects highly to the emotional brain and that will successfully engage and motivate people.

The laws of interaction, action and reaction

According to the rose of Leary, behaviour triggers behaviour. For the vast majority of people, dominant behaviour triggers docile behaviour and the other way around. However, caring behaviour triggers caring behaviour and uncaring behaviour will evoke uncaring behaviour. So, constructive leadership will trigger voluntary docility and voluntary docility will trigger constructive leadership. Competitive leadership will trigger forced or false docility and forced or false docility will trigger competitive leadership. The latter is often a crucial pitfall for leaders as they often do not realise that they are being pushed into an aggressive competitive leadership style by a resistant team. The challenge is not to succumb to this pitfall as competitive leadership will only reinforce and feed resistance. Furthermore, the leadership style triggered by resistance will be used as a justification for that same resistance!

So, perhaps you are fully prepared to explain in detail the facts about a new change. But how are you communicating with the monkey and the crocodile? They will decide if people follow you or not!

Below are some examples that will position you in the different corners of behaviour. Your behaviour will determine if you get emotional and fundamental support for change or not. The list is not exhaustive but it illustrates some of the most common situations which I see almost every day. I see leaders losing or winning the battle by being on the competitive or constructive side of

I am dominant

Competitive leadership:

One-sided focus on business and results.
Talking without context, without clarifying goals and purpose of meeting/talk.
Talking for more than 5 minutes.
Saying: "Yes, but..."
Listening and responding without connecting to what is said.
Using high pressure communication ("it IS", adjectives).
Explaining things without understanding what others want to know.
Handling people differently without transparency as to why.
Not being clear about expectations and roles.
Letting conflicts continue.
Not making decisions that are important to others.
Not caring about how people treat each other.
Having high expectations but not offering any help, having low expectations.

Constructive leadership:

Paying attention to results AND people.
Always stating goals and approach for each meeting and talk.
Asking questions to discover concerns and possibilities.
Asking: "How can we solve this?"
Answering questions, sticking to the point.
Communicating using facts, figures and examples. Expressing yourself by saying: "In my view..."
Checking the information people really need; what do they need to know about?
Being transparent when allocating specific roles and responsibilities, why him or her.
Resolving on-going conflicts.
Making decisions.
Not accepting disrespect among the group.
Having high expectations but creating the conditions and support needed to achieve them.

I am not
connected
and I don't
care



I am
connected
and I care

Forced or false docility:

Keeping quiet, not agreeing but not saying anything.
Using a pocket veto: "You see, it doesn't work."
Agreeing with something knowing that it will fail.
Using the grapevine to vent negativity and pessimism.
Making a non-verbal statement: looking discontented, angry, detached, uninterested.
Not asking how people feel.

Voluntary docility:

Asking questions for clarification.
Executing tasks as agreed and within the given timeframe.
Asking for help if needed.
Making suggestions for improvements.
Offering a constructive suggestion if not agreeing with an idea.
Helping and supporting others.
Positive non-verbal behaviour: at ease, smiling, making eye contact.

I am docile

Consequences for leading the emotional field on an organisational level

Prepare your communication well. The first seven words you use need to make the crocodile and the monkey curious without putting them into fight, flight, freeze or flock mode. Unless this is a crucial and/or necessary part of your strategy and you have a well thought-out plan to handle this). The latter can be a strategy when you feel that you first have to awaken the crocodile and the monkey to get some movement and that this is only possible by shocking them.

A vision and a plan give structure and predictability to all brain parts. Although a vision and plan seem to be mostly an issue for the rational brain, they also offer structure and predictability to the monkey and the crocodile. However, in order for this to be the case, the vision has to include honest, positive intentions for the group and individuals (we are striving for a future which is in the best interests of all or most of us). Also, I do not believe that a plan needs to be detailed as a highly detailed plan makes no sense in these rapidly changing times, but it must show the actions and safety nets that are in place to address any threats to people on all the three levels:

- Crocodile: What we will do if your territory is in danger.
- Monkey: What we will do to make sure that, whatever happens, we stay connected and emotions are acknowledged.
- Rational: What we will do if changes are not compatible with core beliefs and values.

Make sure that **the rationale for change is logical, clear and consistent.** Use facts, numbers and descriptive examples to illustrate what needs to change. At all costs avoid adjectives, e.g. “we (read: you) have to become more pro-active, creative, client-focused,” etc. Frankly, these words have no meaning and are a real status crusher for the emotional brain. With one word you can trigger resistance in the emotional brain. In a fraction of a second you label people as not being pro-active, creative, and so on. They do not know what you mean, but they are still angry.

Use arguments, facts and examples that engage the emotions. You can talk for a long time about our ever-changing world and the impact on your organisation, but if your information is not interesting to the crocodile or the monkey it will have no effect. So, use facts that show that survival, territory, status and position are in danger. This will trigger the crocodile and the monkey and will create a sense of urgency. At the same time, to avoid a destructive level of fight, flight, freeze or flock, you must convince people on an emotional/monkey level that you are the leader that can guide and protect them and that there is a social fabric in place (i.e. a team that is connected and that offers support) that will provide them with the safety they need. The advice presented below will ensure you can achieve this.



Make an emotional stakeholder/force field analysis wherein you analyse not only the rational position people may adopt but also possible reactions on the emotional level. Where (what people, teams, departments) are the anticipated hotspots? Where can you expect change to be blocked by loss aversion? Is the fear of loss justified? What can you do to inform people and solve problems? Before communication the change, create an action plan about who is going to tackle possible destructive emotions as well as when and how.

Give people the chance to save face. When a discussion becomes too rational it often leads to someone feeling they are losing face which is a variant of losing position. If I present a strong rational argument at a certain point you will have to admit that I am right. This can look as though I've won and have convinced the other person on a rational level. But what happened to the monkey and the crocodile? They often feel offended, as if their position has been taken away. They are angry (although this feeling is often not shown as it is not acceptable) and will probably become resistant. So, go easy on argumentation. All arguments will trigger an opposing argument leading to competitive leadership and ultimately to the monkey displaying false docility. Take people seriously, ask them to state their arguments and say first where you agree (and not always where you disagree). Never say "you are wrong" but "I see your point of view but I have another one". Instead of defending positions try to understand the other person's perspective and see where integration and win-win is possible.

Co-create as much as possible. Co-creation is possible when people get autonomy within a clear framework (a defined direction and playing field). This is crucial for the emotional brain. A framework offers structure, which will lead to initiative. Without a framework the monkey becomes afraid to explore and to take the initiative. On the other hand, when a feeling of safety is established people will feel empowered to act autonomously and to find their own approaches and solutions. A clear framework provides territory, position and respect, all crucial for the crocodile and the monkey.

Don't put the monkey or the crocodile in a cage! Plan ahead and create a **chain of dialogue sessions** where people can express their feelings and concerns and responses/solutions to these can be facilitated. The core of these sessions is not only to allow expression but also to coach people to a high level of maturity in handling change. All management, **top management included, must be part of this dialogue.** The crocodile and the monkey need to be guided and reassured by their alpha leaders. This cannot be achieved by one or two PowerPoint presentations, but only by continuous involvement and dialogue.

Invest in leadership development. Your leaders are the nervous system of your organisation. They will get people on board emotionally or they will lose them. Remember the saying: People don't quit an organisation they quit a boss. When taking into account how our brains function it is essential to develop the following insights and skills:

- **Knowledge of and insight into the dynamics of the brain:** Being strongly aware of the needs of the different parts of the brain will result in more effective communication and will enable you to get people on board with change more quickly.
- **Self-awareness and self-knowledge:** Leaders who know themselves. Leaders who understand their own emotions, values, norms and convictions and how these drive their behaviour can create an engaging emotional culture.
- **Skills in leading with emotional intelligence:** Learning how to communicate with all parts of the human brain. If more than 20-30% of your leaders don't show the right attitude and behaviour as explained in the emotiongraph your change is likely to fail.
- **Leadership is power and presence:** Like it or not, I am convinced that a leader needs a sound amount of power. Not power based on hierarchical position but power based on presence. As I've said, sometimes other monkeys and crocodiles need your crocodile and monkey to be dominant and define what is and isn't acceptable

More detailed examples of the importance of your behaviour as a leader of change

What the rational brain usually says or does (for all kinds of often unintentional reasons):



What the crocodile hears to make it fight, fly, freeze:



What the rational brain could say or do:



How this will neutralise the crocodile and get the monkey to follow, leading to emotional and rational participation:



Start talking without first explaining the context (goal and approach, role of audience, etc.).

I am here to say what I want to say, I don't care that you are in the mist about purpose and approach

Starting a meeting with an introduction that clearly defines the meeting's goal, intention, approach and audience roles.

I have a message to tell but you are important to me , so I make sure that you understand goals and what is expected from you.

Not sharing information because you feel that all information is confidential

You are not to be trusted. To make sure that I am not in danger I will exchange as little information with you as possible.

Taking the time and using existing tools to communicate whatever you can. Explicitly stating when certain information must remain confidential.

Some information is confidential but because I care about you, I take the time and make the effort to inform you wherever I can.

Saying: "Don't worry about this change, everything will turn out well."

Don't be silly, my little monkeys, I know best.

Asking people what their worries are and seeing if something can be done about them.

I can imagine that there are worries and I care about you, so I take the time and make the effort to listen to your worries and try to solve them with you.

Talking about your ideas for more than 5 minutes.

I am important, my view is the only one that counts; I will not bother to ask you anything.

Asking a question after a few minutes, checking if people are listening, asking what they think/feel.

You are important to me and I care about you and although at this moment my opinion is important, so is yours. While I will decide matters most often, I will typically seek your perspective before doing so.

Listening to others and then giving an answer that has no connection to what the other person said.

I only pretend to listen. I am not really interested.

Really listening to others and making sure that your response relates to what the other person has said.

You are important to me and I care so I really listen to you and will explain where I agree and where I don't.

Saying: "I agree but..."

I know it better and you have overlooked important elements

Saying: "I agree with this and this, where I differ or where I have a concern is..."

You are important to me and I care about you so I clearly and directly state where I agree, where I don't and why.

Giving certain people specific tasks and responsibilities without explaining why.

I am the boss and I decide; this is none of your business, you do your job and don't look at others.

Explaining why you want certain people to take on extra responsibilities.

You are important to me and I care about you so I want to be honest; I want to be transparent about the roles and tasks assigned within this team.

Proposing a solution for everything.

I am the only one capable of finding an alternative

Asking: "What would you propose as a solution?"

You can find a solution yourself, you are clever and strong enough, but let me help you if necessary.

Saying: "So that's it, now go and do it."

Perhaps you have an opinion about this, but we have to do it regardless so I am not going to bother to ask you your opinion, that will only waste time.

Asking: "What do you think? How can I support you?"

This is going to happen but you are important to me and I care so I want to know your thoughts. Where we can, we will use them.

Saying: "You probably won't be happy but it's really important that we do this."

Please don't bother telling me how you feel; I already know how you feel and there is nothing we can do about it.

Asking: "How do you feel about this? Can we do something about...?"

I care and you are important to me so knowing how you feel is crucial to me. If you really feel bad, we have to at least manage those feelings.

Saying: "You should do it, we expect it from you, it is your task so start!"

Your task, your worries. It's not my problem.

Saying: "Go ahead, you can do it, ask me if you want some help."

This is your task, but I am with you and ready to support you.

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place
to grow

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