

The Brain-Friendly

Workplace

5 Big Ideas From Neuroscience
That Address Organizational Challenges



Erika Garms

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Part 1

Convergence of Challenges Within the Workplace

ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGES ON THE HORIZON WORK OF THE FUTURE

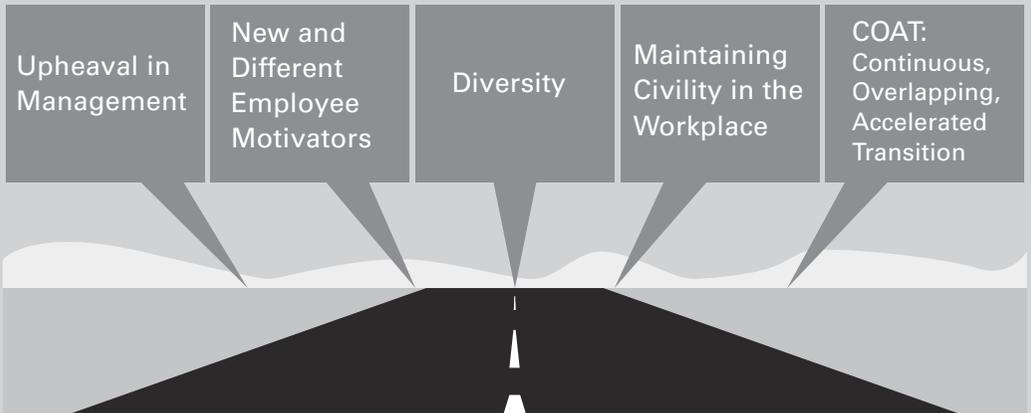
Upheaval in
Management

New and
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Maintaining
Civility in the
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COAT:
Continuous,
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Transition



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Transformation of Work and How It's Done

It is an understatement to say that these are difficult times to be a part of the American workforce. It is difficult for an employee enduring the many seismic shifts in the work that is done, the way that it is done, or who it is done in collaboration with. Is it also challenging to be an employer facing daunting challenges in one of three realms:

- hiring, training, retaining, and managing employees
- new ways of working and of being an employer
- reconceiving of, and redefining the work the organization will do.

We are living in a time of the unprecedented...the unimagined and untried. Mary O'Hara-Devereaux in "The 8 Macro-Drivers and Trends Transforming Work" (May 6, 2013) refers to this rapid transformation of *what work is* and *how it is done* as a collaboration of macro-drivers and trends, with the outcome being "...to sculpt a new landscape for work of the future."

This is big change. No longer incremental, these are game-changing, truly transformational drivers and trends. Though individual thought leaders have their own viewpoints on specifically which factors will make the workplace of the near future particularly challenging, consensus does emerge across the voices. Are they technological advances or new product design methodologies that are a complete departure from the methods we've become accustomed to? We can't say these will not be among the most impactful factors. Will they include wildly innovative organizational designs and structures? Here also, early indicators would say that these are among the major factors. For the most part, though, the most significant are about people.

To a certain extent the most significant are about **intrapersonal** challenges—managing one's stress in the face of multiple, continuous transition, for example. They also relate to the **interpersonal**. As O'Hara-Devereaux noted, it is not as much the technology itself or the sources of the disruption that demand

our response, as it is our need to make choices about how we integrate them into our lives. All at once, we are called upon to operationalize our raw intelligence, our emotional intelligence, and our learning agility—our IQ, EQ, and LQ. No wonder the words we use to describe our experience of present-day work include “crazy,” “nuts,” “overwhelming,” “turbulent,” and so on.

A human resource professional could cite big data as a major change driver for the next five to 10 years. And he would be right. A hospital administrator might point to new health insurance policy structure as a major driver. And she would also be right. The workplace challenges that will be addressed in this book include those that closely rely on and affect people in work and that can be positively affected by brain-friendly strategies. They are:

- upheaval in management
- motivating new employees
- diversity
- maintaining civility in the workplace
- managing more change faster
- creating new designs for work and organizations.

Part 1 of this book will explore the above challenges ahead. Part 2 will then take five big ideas from neuroscience—not the only five, and not the biggest ideas from neuroscience—*just five fundamental understandings that can easily be used in the workplace to make things better*. One more clarification should be made (especially for those readers who look for logic, reason, detail, and things that line up): the list of workplace challenges above do not map directly to the five big ideas. The lists will not be a one-to-one match. There are great suggestions and relevant information from all of the big ideas that you can apply to all of the workplace challenges.

Defining “Brain-Friendly”

Next, what is meant by “brain-friendly”? Brain-friendly strategies are strategies that call upon us to use our brains in the ways they naturally function. Our brains have myriad processes and functions that occur in a certain way, in a particular sequence, and triggered by specific events. Because we know this, we can manipulate our environment—to some degree—to be as conducive to brain function as possible. This is the path of least resistance. This takes the least energy and causes the least dissonance or stress.

As we’ll discuss further later in this book, our brains are always in a state we call “toward” or “away.” In the toward state, a brain is most readily taking in information, is curious, seeks patterns or explanation, and can reflect on its own thinking and awareness. In the away state, our perceptions narrow. The realm of possibilities actually constricts in our vision, perception, and awareness; we are aware of less and are less self-aware. We are not positioned for action, forward movement, or change. New information is critically judged, so much so that we do not recognize all the stimuli that surround us. We want brains in workplaces to be in the toward state as much as possible, because this is the state in which employees are calm, reflective, focused, and able to do their best and most creative thinking and producing.

“Brain-friendly learning” is a term and a construct that has been around for decades. Back in the late 1980s and early 1990s, progressive teachers at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels were using brain-friendly techniques. The same concept of *applying what we know about how the brain works, to a particular environment (school, workplace) for better performance* is happening here.

Here are a few examples of workplace practices that *are* brain-friendly and those that *are not*:

Brain-Friendly

Structuring meeting agendas in order to parallel typical attention spans

Setting sales team goals and encouraging all to work together to meet and exceed them

Organized communications plan is developed to spread the message of upcoming reorganization; employees are given multiple ways options for interacting with others about the news

Not Brain-Friendly

Ignoring limits of attention and focus in designing agendas

Telling one's sales team that the employee with the lowest close rate next month will be on probation

Executive management announces a reorganization that will begin in six months; no details now but they will be coming

By learning a bit about even a handful of fundamental brain processes, then adapting the organization's culture to fit those processes, workplaces can be transformed. They can end up looking like "best places to work" award winners and "employers of choice,"—ultimately places where employees at all levels feel calm, confident, and able to do what they are good at.

Part 2

Five Big Ideas in Neuroscience and How to Make Them Useful



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Weathering the Storm

By most accounts of renowned futurists and trend watchers, we are not yet drinking from the proverbial fire hose. These monumental shifts are on course for a pileup but what we experience now are symptoms of being on the front edge of the wave. These are leading indicators that illustrate our discomfort with and subconscious reaction to these trends:

- skyrocketing rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide
- drug use
- chronic disease (heart, cancer)
- burnout
- extreme labor shortages in certain niche areas
- outsourcing to other organizations (and countries).

How do we survive or thrive in spite of these challenges in a way that preserves and prepares our human capital, improves processes and systems, and supports organizational growth, innovation, and agility? One small step may be the application of techniques emerging from recent neuroscience research. Where there is clearly no single panacea to help ease the turmoil, the field of brain science (also neurobehavior, neuroleadership, cognitive social neuroscience, and interpersonal behavioral neuroscience) does offer some fundamental principles about brain function that can be adhered to in creating better work relationships and environments.

Increasing Organizational Resilience

Using the techniques described in this book can improve employee's work experiences, and therefore, their contribution to the organization. The work unit environment, the organizational climate, and the ultimate effectiveness of the organization stand to improve, in turn, with the application of these "big ideas."

They are:

- neuroplasticity
- SCARF model of human motivation
- use and abuse of the prefrontal cortex (PFC)
- our brains on change
- mindfulness.

The practices described will not, in and of themselves, create a “brain-friendly” environment, because that is the sum of many parts. It requires consistent use of brain-friendly techniques, as well as embedded brain-friendly infrastructure, processes, and systems. The practices you read about here, will contribute to the shaping of a more brain-friendly working environment. This book includes tools to enable an individual to:

- Benchmark the degree to which the work environment is brain-friendly.
- Re-evaluate the brain-friendly measurement over time to assess change.
- Create an action plan designed to advance the environment toward your “brain-friendly goals.”

You may ask: What is the compelling reason for looking for a new approach to use in the face of these workplace challenges?

- The U.S. still lags behind other superpowers in labor force productivity.
- We’ve tried other methods for overall improvement and few made impacts; management trends and fads have come and gone, been recycled, and fizzled out without making a demonstrable impact on our organizations as a whole.
- Current management and organization science doesn’t match present and future needs; it doesn’t adequately keep up with changes and intensity.
- Brain research offers compelling findings about learning, change management, and maintaining healthy work environments.

- This new approach complements other frameworks for growing successful organizations (for example, “best places to work” award winners).

The chapters in part 2 explain the science behind these five big ideas from neuroscience and how to apply them at work to create an improved, more productive, brain-friendlier workplace.