

Alive at Work The Neuroscience of Helping Your People Love What They Do

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Chapter 1: The Way Things Ought To Be

The Seeking System in Action

Consider Bonnie Nardi. She didn't become hooked on *World of Warcraft* because of the cool graphics. That helped, for sure, but there was something else going on. She became hooked because it allowed her to express her unique skills as part of a team, explore new things, and find a sense of purpose--the three triggers that activate the seeking system.

Self-Expression

Like each of her guild members, Bonnie had a specific job to do. As a night priest, her superpower was to heal other players who had been wiped out during the action. She did this well. But even though she had a specific role, she was free to imagine it and interpret it any way she saw fit to help her team succeed. Bonnie was able to leverage her character's unique abilities and powers, which she had developed over a period of time and will continue to fine-tune in the future.

Experimentation

Do you see how the game also normalized experimentation and exploration? It necessitated them, in fact. Although the chance of failure was high for each attempt, the cost was low and the lessons learned were immediate, personal, and emotional. This meant that Nardi and her guild could afford to think up new approaches and try them out, reacting according to how the environment responded to their previous ideas. Each subsequent experiment was based on better data, and they could continue to refine their strategy until it paid off.

Purpose

In combination, these circumstances gave Nardi an unexpected sense of purpose. It may sound surprising, but as we'll see later in this book, the feeling of purpose doesn't only come from curing diseases and improving the world. We'll learn how the feeling of purpose also ignites when we can see the cause and effect between our inputs and our team's progress. For example, sense of purpose soars when we can offer insights to our team about the environment and what might work better. Likewise, we feel a sense of purpose when we can experience firsthand how our unique role is necessary to other people.

Performance

Alison Wood Brooks, a professor at Harvard University, showed that the answer depends on whether you activate your positive emotions (like excitement) or negative emotions (like fear, which we discuss in chapter 2). In one study, Brooks recruited 113 people to sing Journey's hit in front of a stranger using Nintendo Wii's "Karaoke Revolution." But here's the catch: Brooks instructed the participants to say, "I am anxious" just before they sang. She instructed the other half to say "I am excited." One little word shouldn't matter, right?

As it turned out, people in the "excited" condition sang much better than the people who cued themselves to be anxious. Almost 30 percent better, jumping from 53 percent to 81 percent accuracy, as measured by Nintendo's voice-recognition software.

Why? Either way, physiological arousal occurs in people who have to sing in front of a stranger. If we interpret this arousal as anxiety, the fear encumbers our enthusiasm and creativity (let's face it, fear is never going to help someone belt out a Journey song). When singers interpret their arousal as excitement, their seeking systems surge, causing them to be more playful, optimistic, and creative. If we can trigger our seeking system during stressful experiences, it promotes adaptive responses that "help shift negative stress states to more positive ones."

Brooks studied this, too. Before a challenging math test, she told a different group of people, "You will complete a very difficult IQ test made up of eight questions under time pressure. For each question, you will have five seconds to select the correct answer. You will receive feedback about your accuracy after each question.

These instructions were custom-made to induce stress (research shows that the phrases *time pressure* and *IQ test* make people very anxious). Participants were then randomly shown one of two instructions, displayed in large letters on their screens: "Try to remain calm" or "Try to get excited." Who got more of the difficult math questions correct: People who tried to calm down or people that tried to become more excited?

As you might have anticipated, participants in the "get excited" condition performed better, almost 8 percent better, on the same difficult math test. The difference between a B and a C grade.

As with singing, positive emotions improve problem solving because people are better able to marshal their cognitive resources to cope with the task at hand, instead of being encumbered by fear and threat. When people try to become calm under physiological arousal, on the other hand, they are telling themselves that the arousal is "bad"--that it is unwelcome. They code the same arousal as threat and anxiety, which activates fear, shuts down creativity, and hinders problem solving.

Brooks found the same phenomenon again in public speaking performances. Compared with participants assigned to say

“I am calm,” people assigned to say “I am excited” were perceived by independent judges as more persuasive, competent, confident, and persistent. This same phenomenon also has been found in a stream of sports psychology research: when athletes interpret their high arousal as excitement, they are more likely to exhibit playful, learning-oriented behaviors.

This is why leaders need to know how to activate people’s seeking systems. When you increase enthusiasm and excitement, you improve problem solving and creativity. This is how most people want to feel in their jobs--not only because these feelings lead to better work outcomes, but because we spend most of our waking hours at work, and positive emotions put more living into life.

Motivation

Like a bottomless well that we just can’t fill, our seeking systems are not placated after we’ve achieved a goal.

Happiness and Health

What it all comes down to is this: when we’re working and living in environments where exploration and experimentation are encouraged, we’re happier people.

Chapter 2: The Way Things Are--And How To Make Them Better

(The Seeking System)

...unfortunately, learned helplessness occurs in many settings.

Especially work.

Many employees find themselves caught in a crossfire between their biological seeking systems and their organizational realities. Their built-in biology urges them to explore their environments, experiment and learn, and assign meaning. But most people work in organizations where they don’t feel that it is possible to do any of these things. After a spate of bad experiences, such as being shut down for using creativity instead of following the rules, employees begin to ignore the urges of their seeking systems. This means they shut off the dopamine and let their anxieties dominate. Like the dogs in Seligman’s experiment, many employees learn how to shut off and just “take it”--an attitude that results in disengagement at work and depressive symptoms in life. They end up making a living but not a life.

Fear Is Kryptonite to the Seeking System

Panksepp describes an experiment in which he assessed rats’ play (he measured both their laughter and their invitations to play, such as pouncing) before and after he placed a small tuft of cat fur in their play space. The smell of the fur activated rats’ innate fear system, and their play was completely inhibited. In the four days before they were exposed to the fur, the rats exhibited an average of fifty invitations to play in the five-minute sessions. After the introduction of the cat fur, play invitations dropped to zero (play invitations for the control group, which did not receive the fur, remained at fifty). It took three days after the fur was removed for the rats to slowly start to play again at all, and the levels of play never returned to the pre-fur sessions (thirty-five was the new high, even after five days with no fur).

What we are seeing here is the *inhibiting relationship* between the seeking system and the fear system. When one system is activated, the other shrinks back.

Limited Roles

The dream of scientific management was that employee’s quirks and self-expression wouldn’t get in the way of standardized processes. And so even today, in big organizations, most people work very specialized jobs. We’re mechanics or web designers or salespeople or teachers and so on. Our employers designed the jobs and then found people who could perform the necessary behaviors. We have a set of predetermined tasks to accomplish in a certain amount of time.

This is, of course, much less true in small startups, where work routines are still being invented to solve problems. In startups, all employees are expected to use their best skills help the organization survive and grow--whether what they’re doing is a part of formal job or not.

Controls and KPIs

In an IBM poll of CEOs worldwide, creativity was identified as the single most important leadership trait for success.

Balancing the Freedom and the Frame

What we need to do is help employees find the freedom in that frame. The freedom refers to the space where employees can experiment, try new things, express themselves, and play to their strengths. Great organizations balance a strong sense of employee freedom and experimentation within an operational frame.

Some leaders refer to this as working on the airplane while you’re flying it. Of course, this is only possible when employees understand the big picture--the organizational frame--and the shared purpose of the work.]

A Coalition of the Willing

We’ll see leaders asking new hires to share stories about themselves on their first day, encouraging employees to make up their

own job titles, offering “free time” to work on personalized projects, and finding ways for employees to experience the impact of their work on others. These can all activate the seeking system.

Chapter 3: Encouraging People to Bring Their Best Selves to Work

The Power of Best Impressions

As we confirmed in subsequent studies, an *individualized* approach to onboarding, where newcomers like Adesh write about and share stories about their best selves with others, leads to greater performance and retention. And perhaps more importantly, it connects employees more closely to their organizations.

After tracking the participants for six months, we found that Adesh and his colleagues who were placed in the “best self” condition were outperforming their peers who had participated in Wipro’s typical onboarding sessions. Their customers, for example, reported 11 percent high satisfaction--72 percent compared with 61 percent. And, we found that the “best selves” cohort were more likely to remain in their jobs--retention improved by a whopping 32 percent! Compared with the control condition, results also showed that it helped to talk about Wipro’s values (the second condition)--this reduced quitting by 14 percent but did not lead to significantly better customer satisfaction.

So in the end, asking people about their best selves and letting them share their ideas with their new peers worked the best--but in all my years of working with companies, I have not seen a company use this approach to onboarding.

Our Best Selves

At Wipro, we tried to perform what psychologists call a *wise intervention*. A wise intervention is when you do something new and small that has disproportionately large effects because it fixes something that’s making people feel emotionally vulnerable.

Self-Expression in Teams

In one study, psychologist Martin Seligman randomly assigned one set of participants to learn about their “signature strengths” by taking an inventory of character strengths (you can take it too: [www. authentic happiness.org](http://www.authentic happiness.org)), and were asked to use one of these top strengths in a new way every day for one week. Compared with a control group, people in the signature strengths condition had fewer depressive symptoms (including headaches, trouble sleeping, and trouble waking up). That’s because when people seek, find, and fulfill what is best and unique about themselves, it gives meaning and direction to their lives.

This is the new war for talent--not wooing employees away from competitors, but unleashing the enthusiasm that is already there within employees, but dormant.

Chapter 4: Promoting Self-Expression

What’s in a Name?

Intrigued by what Grant and Berg had uncovered, we decided to dig deeper into the recordings of employee’s interview responses, and we uncovered three common themes. First, 69 percent of the interviewees said that self-reflective titles let them bring their personal identity into the organization. As we learned in chapter 3, self-affirmation and self-expression activate people’s seeking systems, which increases enthusiasm, decreases burnout, and makes them more open and creative.

The Organization as a Self-Expression Vehicle

This is why I believe there is a big win out there for firms that think of themselves as platforms for employees’ self-expression.

Chapter 5: Encouraging Serious Play

Paying Lip Service to Creativity

When work is not framed as an opportunity to “get it right” on the first try, workers may be more able to learn in the process and ultimately to get it right than when work is framed as an opportunity to perform, to shine, or to execute perfectly.

From Play to Production

There are really only two important elements to making transformation work: giving people ownership of the vision of what it should look like, and giving them a safe space to try, experiment, and fail. This is why, after the team had the vision, we set this crazy time frame--two weeks--and just gave them the space to mess around. Of course, it can’t be perfect in two weeks. Nothing *needs* it to be perfect. We gave people lots of room for failure, by saying “Let’s just get *something* done in two weeks.” I said to the team, “I know it won’t be perfect, but your plan is good. So let’s

experiment.”

Chapter 6: Expanding on Freedom and Creativity

Cracks in the Culture

When agility and innovation are called for, it's better for employees to frame their goals around learning (e.g., developing a new set of skills; mastering a new situation) rather than performance outcomes (e.g., hitting results targets; proving competence).

A raft of studies over the last twenty years align with Vandewalle's and Edmonson's findings. Simply put, learning goals are more effective at improving performance in changing environments where innovation is important. This is because they draw our attention away from the end result and encourage us instead to use our curiosity and discover novel strategies.

Changing the Game

To trigger innovative new ideas, Tim tried to encourage employees to spend some of their time working on “bootleg projects” and “nonlinear ideas” that are outside their normal job scope. He said the results were underwhelming--almost everybody was stuck in predictable, confined patterns of work. Which is not surprising when the drive to meet normal operations and his existing KPIs consumes all our time and energy.

So Warren scaled things up by creating a small panel of employees with the authority to allocate \$20 million to rule-breaking, game-changing ideas. The new practice, called GameChanger, started with the assumption that ideas could come from anywhere across the company, and did not need to come from a certain department. Then Time waited for the avalanche of game-changing, revolutionary ideas. The avalanche was more like a trickle. The fact that even \$20 million was not enough to break people out of their learned helplessness shows how shut off employees were to exploration.

But Warren didn't give up. With the help of a consulting firm, he built a three-day Ideation Lab. Seventy-two would-be entrepreneurs showed up. Lots of them were employees whom no one suspected of harboring an entrepreneurial impulse. In the lab, these participants went through a process of discovery, focusing on disruptive changes in the external environment (both within and beyond Shell's industry). They worked on how Shell might harness this disruption, overturning the normal rules of the game.

Going through this process turned participants on; in fact, because emotions are contagious, their enthusiasm created some curiosity in nonparticipants. So many people started checking in on the excitement in the lab that “the doors to the conference room had to be locked to keep the overwhelming number of ‘gate crusher’ out.

Tim Warren and his colleagues had worked hard to create an innovation space within Shell, and it paid off. A group of employees' seeking systems had been activated, and the employees were ready to experiment with something that excited them. They were unclear what to do next, however. What Warren and his panel recognized was that “permission to innovate” is necessary, but not sufficient. What they needed next was a process to refine people's promising ideas through a business plan phase.

To accomplish this goal, they built an Action Lab, designed as an intensive five-day experience to help people develop their ideas into compelling venture plans for launching new businesses. For this one, the program moved away from Shell's Hague headquarters to a fourteenth-century castle in Maastricht, Belgium. Here, Tim and his colleagues brought videoconferencing, video production technology, graphic artists, a film crew, venture capitalists, entrepreneurs, and marketing gurus together under one roof. It was a large investment in an innovation hothouse--an immersive, resource-rich environment designed to inspire and to incubate new ventures. The teams of Shell employees learned how to scope out the boundaries of their ideas, identify partnerships, determine the competitive advantage of their ideas, and calculate the financial implications. They were coached in developing hundred-day action plans, which formulated ways to learn fast--devising low-cost, low-risk ways of prototyping and testing their ideas in the marketplace. We saw a similar process in the white-goods plant that implemented lean manufacturing (chapter 5).

The Shell teams also were coached to bring their ideas to life using storytelling. They worked with the graphic artists who helped them create product prototypes, and they worked with video film crews to create short-length infomercials to communicate the essence of their ventures. At the conclusion of the week, each team presented a story to a venture board (the GameChanger panel, along with a sampling of senior Shell executives and leaders who knew how to fund late-stage technology commercialization). Four teams received six-month funding to put them on a path toward full-fledged business plans.

Chapter 7: Humble Leadership and Employees' Seeking Systems

Why Does Humble Leadership Work?

I would argue that “bureaucratic leadership,” with its reliance on certainty, decisiveness, and positional power, is detrimental because it ramps up people’s fear systems, shuts down positive emotions, and stifles the drive to experiment and learn. This so-called executive disease is common because power changes how leaders view other people--research shows that power causes people to see others as a means to their ends rather than as intelligent humans with ideas and emotions. In organizational life, power can result in arrogance and self-importance, and executives too often use their power to bully and frighten employees into compliance.

Delivering Creativity

Because management is an overhead cost, managers do not create value unless they are serving the employees who create the value.

PwC started with a small, wise intervention: take the standard fifteen-minute format for the weekly meeting and have managers start the meeting with a basic servant leadership question: “How can I help you deliver excellent service?”

...even disgruntled employees in learned helplessness mode can reactivate their seeking systems--when leaders are able to be humble, listen, and give them a chance to explore their environments and improve things. And the result is not just better products and services, it also is more enthusiasm and zest. People become alive at work.
Chapter 8: Helping Employees Experience the Impact of Their Work

Is Creating Purpose Easy?

There are many ways to do this, as we’ll see, but to have a shot at success, you need to help employees do two things: witness their impact on others and develop their own story about the *why* of their work. We’ll deal with the first thing in this chapter and the second one in chapter 9.

Making It Personal

Simply telling someone the purpose of their work is like telling them about a good book that you have read. Even if it *is* good, they probably won’t recommend it to one of their friends until they read it themselves and experience it firsthand.

Purpose Is a Personal Interpretation

For example, what do you think you are doing *right now*? We all have an answer to this question, even if it is not salient to us, and even if it is not top of mind. We all have a story running around in our brain about what we think we are doing, at all times.

For example, all of us *could* honestly say, “I am moving my eyes.” Because it is true if you are reading this. Your eyes are in fact moving. Most of us would not answer the question this way, focusing on how our physical body was behaving. But if you did answer the question this way, psychologists would call this a *low level of construal*. A low level of construal, or interpretation, emphasizes the *how* element of our behavior, in terms of how you are moving your physical self. This answer would be the equivalent of the fundraisers saying, “I’m talking into the phone.” It’s physical and observable, just reporting what our body is doing. These types of responses don’t assign much longer-term, higher-order interpretation about *why* we are doing what we are doing.

You could also answer, “I’m reading.” If you answered with this story, it would shift the emphasis from your physical body into an activity with a purpose. Yes, you are moving your eyes across the page, but in the spirit of something bigger, which is reading a book (and, thank you for making it this far, by the way). The answer “I’m reading” would invoke not only your external, physical body. This story also would have some implications for your brain and why it is processing new input. It would bring cognitions and some sense of why into the picture. For the fundraisers, this might be the equivalent of saying “I’m trying to get people to donate money.”

We read for different reasons, however. Some of us might have the story “I’m reading this homework because this book is assigned for a required class, and it is due tomorrow.” This homework story is a higher level of construal. This story puts some emphasis on the brain, and definitely has a personal meaning or end state in mind. There is a *why* and not just a *how* in this story. For example, perhaps this is required reading in a required class, so your story would be “I am reading this to get my MBA.”

Now, what happens if the real reason you want an MBA is to learn finance and how to value companies? If this

were the case (and believe me, it often is!), understanding how purpose works may not mean much to you personally. If that is the case, then your story actually might be “I’m reading a required chapter on fluffy organizational behavior bullshit because it will be on the test.” This story doesn’t really require much of you--it won’t lead you to change any of your real beliefs and behaviors. And your commitment to the activity would be lower, if that is the story. You might be willing to stop if a better option came up, such as your friends getting together in a local pub (and believe me, they often are!).

Someone else might be getting her MBA because she wants to improve the engagement and creativity of people in her company. She might be reading the same words as you, right now, but if you asked her what she was doing she might say, “I am learning how to help people be more alive at work.”

Her answer, which focuses on learning, would imply that she is comparing the ideas she reads with the ideas that she already held in her brain, and then deciding whether she wants to update anything. This story implies a much more active process. It is open to challenging long-held assumptions, and it brings emotions like curiosity and excitement into the picture. And it’s more than just learning: it is learning how to make a positive effect on others. This reader is reading in order to help others engage themselves at work.

The *why* is very strong in this story, and the *how* is not as important. This story, with its high level of construal, would prompt the reader’s commitment to stick with the reading, and stay actively involved in the learning, even if the concepts became difficult and even if the pub option became available.

Purpose, Pain, and Perseverance

For example, let’s think about trying to lose fifteen pounds. Maybe your doctor has told you that the extra weight is unhealthy. How might making the tough, daily decisions to maintain a healthy diet depend on your story about why you eat?

Consider your choice between a healthy salad (with no dressing!) and a pizza for lunch after the fourth day (or the fourth hour!) on your diet. If you tell yourself a low-level construal story of why you eat, you would focus on how your *body* feels. This story would focus you on your physical sensation of a gnawing tummy and the unpleasant psychological sensation of being hungry. And then you look at the salad. It looks lame. As Wharton professor Katherine Milkman and her colleagues say, “A low-level construal of a salad would focus on its taste and its likelihood of leaving you hungry.” If your story of why you eat centers on your body, right now, and you are thinking about the salad’s ability to fulfill your immediate physical prompts, you will likely get the pizza. And most diets end this way--unsuccessfully.

If, however, you tell yourself a high-level construal story of why you eat, you might focus on your health, and your long-term goals of losing fifteen pounds. With this story, why would you put something unhealthy in your body that would add weight and makes your heart work too hard? Says Milkman, “A high-level construal of a salad would focus on the salad’s healthfulness and its likelihood of increasing longevity.” The story you tell yourself about eating changes your behavior, and you are more likely to choose the salad. Twenty minutes later, when your snarling belly is appeased, you feel pride instead of guilt.

As Friedrich Nietzsche said, “He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how.” The point here, of course, is not that you should change your story about why you eat or exercise (although endorphins are free, legal, good drugs that make life a better place to be). The broader point is to think about how the same behaviors and activities take on very different meanings to us depending on the stories we tell ourselves about what we are doing. If we choose more meaningful stories about our work based on personal experience and interpretations of our impact, we can light up our seeking systems and change our motivation, perseverance, and resilience in the face of adversity.

As leaders, if we find ways to invest in purpose experiences for employees, so that they can experience their impact firsthand, we can activate their seeking systems. Given the importance of authenticity around the purpose topic, the best thing you can do as a leader is to use your creativity and courage to offer immersive experiences to employees so that they can witness the impact of their work on others. You can help them *experience* purpose rather than trying to *issue* purpose.

The key for leaders is to make the purpose experiences thoughtful, creative, and meaningful. Let’s look at some more examples.

Customizing Purpose

When we understand the powerful humanistic results of purpose--not to mention the economic benefits of building

purpose into businesses--then our quest as leaders changes. Our mission moves from “How can I make this job more efficient, predictable, and controlled?” to “How can I give my team firsthand experiences that allow them to personalize the meaning of their work?”

Legacy, Leadership, and Purpose

And that’s legacy for us: our own family isn’t going to remember our names in two generations. Let’s take a different example. Penicillin is one of human’s greatest inventions. Do you know who invented penicillin? Do you know who invented electrical resistors? You get the point.

Lots of leaders spend time thinking about their legacy, but really all we have are the positive effects that we can have on each other today. As leaders, we have a chance to make life more meaningful, and more worth living, for the people we lead.