

Stop the Job!—Implications for Leadership and Management Practices

“Stop the Job!” That’s what oil and gas company employees shout out when they see someone doing something unsafe. Those three words spoken loudly get people’s attention and instantly bring the unsafe work and workers to a halt. For several years now I’ve wanted to yell STOP THE JOB to leaders and organizations everywhere. STOP the job! Don’t you know about all the amazing scientific research on the brain and what it means for business? Do you realize that the leadership and management practices you are using may very well be accomplishing the opposite of what you are intending?

Ignored Research

For decades scientists have been doing research on how our brains work. There is currently remarkable research available for organizations to apply to the way they lead and manage people. Sadly, almost none of it is being used because we are so wedded to our old management practices. And why are we so wedded to those management practices? Ironically, we are victims of our own efficient brain processes that effectively turn information we hear over and over again into deeply embedded beliefs. But there is some good news in all of this. Most organizations don’t do a very good job of applying the outdated management and leadership practices anyway. So while there are beliefs and thinking to be changed, there aren’t really that many habits to be replaced. (How good are your managers at giving feedback or recognition? How well is your performance management system working? How engaged is your workforce?) And there’s more good news. The research that’s been done reveals some pretty simple things that everyone in an organization can do to put the research into practice.

Let’s take the case of giving feedback. What’s your goal when you give someone feedback? Behavior change and improved performance, right?

Let’s see how giving feedback has been working for you. Take a few seconds to answer the questions on the next page to gauge how comfortable and effective you are at giving feedback.

Giving Feedback: How Is It Working?

How often do you give feedback?	Rarely				Very Often
	1	2	3	4	5
To what extent do you feel comfortable giving feedback?	Not at all				Great Extent
	1	2	3	4	5
To what extent is the feedback well received?	Not at all				Great Extent
	1	2	3	4	5
To what extent do you get the results you are seeking from giving the feedback?	Not at all				Great Extent
	1	2	3	4	5

If you answered 4 or 5 to each of these questions, then stop reading right now. You are among a small number of people who are comfortable giving feedback and very effective at it as well. Keep doing what you are doing. It's working.

BUT, if at least one of your answers was in the 1 to 3 range, then you may want to read on. It is actually completely *unsurprising* that your attempts at giving feedback are less than effective. It's really quite predictable given how our brains operate.

Brain Freeze

When we sense that bad news is coming, the fear center of the brain takes over and shuts it down. Result—little or none of what's being said is heard. And even if it is heard, guess what—that kind of information stays in our working memories for at most 20 minutes and then disappears. The working memory is in the newest part of our brain. While about 96% of our brain operates very efficiently on automatic pilot, it takes lots of energy to hold something in the small portion of the brain that is working memory¹. And it takes even more energy to move it from working memory to the automatic hardwired part of the brain.

So when you deliver feedback—news that is putting the fear center on high alert and pretty much shutting down the working memory, you don't need to be an odds maker in Las Vegas to determine that the feedback is not going to be retained. And what's more, because so much of what we do is automatic, the old behavior you want to change is most likely very efficiently hardwired in there.

Picture the brain as a rain forest. The first time you tread on the forest floor you hardly make a dent. To forge a path requires lots of trips back and forth on the path. So if you're going to give someone feedback you will need to give it over and over and over for it to be heard. Then the person will need to act on it for it to have a chance of becoming a new habit. Not very efficient.

Positive Technique

So what's the alternative? What's another approach?

Instead of making a direct hit on the fear center of the brain and producing lots of stress-related chemicals, like cortisol and adrenaline, why not activate the positive chemicals in the brain and use those to facilitate the behavior change you are seeking?

Picture yourself as a biochemist. You have a choice of producing a batch of negative chemicals that are going to shut down the other person or you can help spark the production of positive chemicals that will energize the other person and motivate them to take action.

But how do you spark those positive chemicals? What's the source of the positive chemicals?

One powerful source of positive chemicals is the moment of insight. When you solve a puzzle or a problem, you feel a rush of energy. That rush of energy comes from the positive chemicals being produced when the connections are made in your brain. So the question becomes how do you become an insight sparker?

Research shows that when we are feeling positive we are much more open to new ideas and more creative—more likely to have an insightⁱⁱ. When we are feeling negative, we shut down and maintain our existing point of view. So to pave the way—to open the mind for insights—one of the best approaches is to start with the positive.

For the last several years, however, managers have been told that it's manipulative to give someone a "feedback sandwich"—that starts with the positive, then goes to the negative (constructive) feedback, and ends with the positive. They've been told to be direct—just deliver the "constructive" feedback without the sandwich bread. Actually, it turns out that giving someone a feedback sandwich is probably more effective than just delivering the so-called constructive feedback. At least the feedback sandwich starts with the positive. Starting with the positive opens up a person's mind and makes them much more willing and able to change their behavior. So there's some chance that the feedback sandwich could work. But why not go for the "insight sandwich"—start with the positive, spark an insight that produces wonderful self-motivating chemicals, and end with the positive? When you substitute "constructive feedback" with "energizing insights," you have the sandwich of choice.

Catalytic Leader

But what if you're too annoyed with this person and their behavior to start the conversation on a positive note? Perhaps you feel irritated that you even have to have this conversation. Well, then, it's time to reframe your thinking because you both need to be in a positive frame of mind for this to work. Remind yourself that this is a competent individual who wants to do a good job and wants to be engaged in their work. (If you don't have that opinion because the person has previously ignored your direct feedback, now you know why it was ignored). Their current behavior is a hardwired habit—it's automatic. And it's very hard to change behavior that's hardwired.

Approach the person as someone who is capable of doing a very good job, who has lots of strengths and can use those strengths to identify what he or she could do differently and better. Treat the other person like an expert who has the answers. Because in fact, this person is the expert with the answers about what he or she can do and will do to improve their performance and change their behavior. And as much as you'd like to, you don't have control over that. What you now have—courtesy of the latest brain research—is the good sense to know that a direct hit on the brain will only shut it down. And more importantly, you know that your job is to be a brain chemist who helps trigger the insight and chemicals that will set the new more desirable behavior in motion. A very positive mission indeed.

ⁱ Rock, D. (2009). *Your Brain at Work: Strategies for Overcoming Distraction, Regaining Focus, and Working Smarter All Day Long*. New York: Harper Collins.

ⁱⁱ Fredrickson, B. (2009). *Positivity: Groundbreaking Research Reveals How to Embrace the Hidden Strengths of Positive Emotions, Overcome Negativity, and Thrive*. New York: Crown Publishers.

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