

The Neurology of Conflict

- Marcia Hughes & James Terrell

What happens to our brains when we “lose it”? The new field of social neuroscience is discovering intriguing answers. We now know we learn in part because of mirror neurons and that spindle cells build intuition and contribute to those instant judgments now referred to as thin slicing. How do these and other brain functions affect our ability to be collaborative as we resolve conflict? In this article we’ll explore some of what we know about the brain and conflict and discuss effective conflict resolution strategies that come from people understanding their own predilections and then being able to manage their responses to achieve effective results. The traits measured by personality profiles such as the MBTI, values surveys such as Spiral Dynamics, and skills assessments such as the EQi, Conflict Dynamic Profile or TKI, and team effectiveness such as the TESI point the way for improving our skillfulness as trainers and leaders in these critical areas. The conscious intentional use of skills highlighted by these assessments together with the neutrality and communication strategies of mediation augment the trainer’s understanding of how to train effectively and the participants’ ability to understand how to manage their responses. This discussion will briefly reference assessments while primarily focusing on understanding and responding effectively to conflict.

Core Concepts

1. Count to 10 before you speak when upset: This key concept is taught in kindergarten if not pre-school. Now we know the neuro-biological reasons why this works. Most people just need to know the principle and practice it.
2. Amygdala hijack: This concept was created by Dan Goleman and explains why counting to 10 or some other brief pause is essential before responding when one feels triggered. You can learn more at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amygdala_hijack
3. Decision making and emotions: Antonio Damasio has led our understanding that emotions affect decisions; pure rationale thought just isn’t possible. This expands our ability to understand what triggers conflict as well as the necessary decision making components that build resolution. Damasio demonstrates in his 1994 book *Descartes’ Error* that “pure reason” that is free from emotion or



personal bias is an illusion. Every image we conjure up in our mind has attached to it some emotional response and its associated feeling.

4. **Neurobiology Defined:** Neurobiology is the study of cells of the nervous system and the organization of these cells into functional circuits that process information and mediate behavior. It is a sub-discipline of both biology and neuroscience. Neurobiology differs from neuroscience, a much broader field that is concerned with any scientific study of the nervous system. Neurons are cells that are specialized to receive, propagate, and transmit electrochemical impulses. In the human brain alone, there are over a hundred billion neurons.

The success of the body, in fact its survival depends on its ability to receive information from the environment, interpret it accurately, and respond to it effectively. Unfortunately our neurobiology can work against us, for instance when we learn the “stress habit”– that is familiarize ourselves so much with the external cues of stress that we develop internal correlates that trigger the same kind of fear and anxiety as real life but now are due merely to imagination.

Applications: Goleman and Boyatzis in “Social Intelligence and the Biology of Leadership” (HBR, Spring 2011) discuss three critical aspects of brain biology – mirror neurons, spindle cells, and oscillators – and highlight how we can develop practical socially intelligent behaviors that expand on our neural power and our connections and influence with others.

- **Mirror neurons:** “The brain is peppered with neurons that mimic, or mirror, what another being does. . . [these] brain cells operate as neural Wi-Fi, allowing us to navigate our social world. When we consciously or unconsciously detect someone else’s emotions through their actions, our mirror neurons reproduce those emotions. Collectively, these neurons create an instant sense of shared experience.” (Goleman and Boyatzis, p 45).

We are wired to resonate with the behaviors which are modeled around us. This is infinitely more effective than verbal descriptions. Imagine learning to tie a shoe or ride a bike based on such instruction. In child development this principle is the source of the bonding between of her parents and infant, most specifically the mother.



- Spindle cells: “Intuition is in the brain, produced in part by a class of neurons called spindle cells They have a body size about four times that of other brain cells, with an extra-long branch to make attaching to other cells easier and transmitting thoughts and feeling to them quicker. This ultra-rapid connection of emotions, beliefs and judgments creates what behavioral scientists call our social guidance system. Spindle cells trigger neural networks that come into play whenever we have to choose the best response among many.... These cells also help us gauge whether one is trustworthy and right (or wrong) for a job. Within one-twentieth of a second, our spindle cells fire with information about how we feel about that person....thus leaders should not fear to act on those judgments, provided that they are also attuned to others’ moods. (p 46)
 - Oscillators: “... coordinate people physically by regulating how and when their bodies move together. ... When two cellists play together. Not only do they hit their notes in unison, but thanks to oscillators, the two musicians’ right brain hemispheres are more closely coordinated than are the left and right sides of their individual brains.” (p. 46)
 - Thin Slicing --- As described by Malcolm Gladwell in Blink (2005) is the concept that we make instant judgments and very often stick with them. These judgments can be accurate but in conflict resolution we guide people to broaden their lens and gather more data so new concepts and answers become available.
5. Social Intelligence: Social Intelligence (SI) is measured by your ability to persuade, influence, connect – in short to lead a meaningful life connecting with others and applying your skills to match your values. Defining Social Intelligence is tricky as it encompasses so much of what we express, of our world view, and our interpersonal values. SI is definitely based in people skills. And it’s much bigger as it encompasses our capacity to understand and exude our values in all dimensions of living. We define SI as:

Social Intelligence is the capacity to understand and respond effectively to the emotions, social cues and needs of others in a way that furthers our own values and demonstrates respect for others at the individual, team, organizational and global levels.



Thorndike originally coined the term Social Intelligence in 1920 and was referring to a person's ability to understand and manage other people and to engage in adaptive social interactions.

6. Manage Self: This is one of the key sets of strategies for being the best you can be to resolve conflict.
 - Impulse Control – This is the most impactful EI skill according to thought leaders, Howard Book (2009) and Rich Handley (2009). Impulse control is managed by choosing time, tonality, content and demonstrating a listening engaging attitude. Extroverts usually need to dial down their engagement; introverts need to dial it up.
 - Internal Talk – One good source for demonstrating the enormous consequence of our internal messaging is *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy* by David Burns (1980). By giving ourselves positive and patient feedback, we can then pass that on to others. It can give us the pre-disposition to diffuse conflict instead of stir it up.
 - Competing responses – This behavior management tool could be used to diffuse responses likely to trigger conflict. An example is training oneself to say “Let me think about it” with a neutral tone every time you are inclined to respond cynically to a co-worker. Installing this competitive response will convert the anxiety previously driving the self destructive response to an insignificant one
 - Optimism / Positivity – Extensive research is demonstrating the power of a positive attitude, such as believing a conflict can be solved. It provides resourcefulness, reduces stress and supports creative thought in finding solutions. Thought leaders include Martin Seligman (2002, 2011) and Barbara Fredrickson (2009).
 - Move towards, away, against – Humans have a few classic ways of responding and how we manage our habits and willingness to respond by being supportive, withdrawn or antagonistic strongly colors the nature of a potential or actual conflict.

Interventions

The purpose of our work at Collaborative Growth is to build sustainable behavior change for leaders, individuals and teams by expanding emotional and social intelligence skills. We're excited to incorporate the awareness of brain biology and to include the work of leaders and thinkers in social intelligence as we facilitate sustainable change.



Some other conflict resolution strategies that take advantage of this evolving wisdom:

1) Quick and powerful

- Drop a pen (the time it takes to pick it up slows you down)
- Take a drink of water
- Walk around the block
- Stair therapy (go climb one or more sets of stairs)

2) Build Reflective Awareness and Action

- To be effective we must embrace vulnerability without victimhood. Reflective awareness with action based in taking responsibility can move people out of conflict.
- Strategies at the individual level are journal writing or taking brief notes.
- Strategies groups or teams can use requires the act of listening without commenting; and that is truly listening. Discussion can occur after the full listening.
- The significant power of deliberate group discussions, twelve step groups, cancer healing groups, long term deliberate gatherings - leadership groups, book clubs – requires discipline

3) Act – Move -- Engage

- 2% project – Develop a personally rewarding part of your life as described in Marcia’s Life’s 2% Solution
- Exercise
- Make a deliberate shift of manageable proportions to change one habit to another - e.g., being more or less assertive, empathetic, doubting.

4) Trainer Led Exercises

- Marcia Hughes and James Terrell have authored several books that provide strategies and exercises for resolving conflict including: *Emotional Intelligence in Action, 2nd Ed.* (2012), *Developing Emotional Intelligence: Exercises for Leaders and Teams* (2010), *The Handbook for Developing Emotional Intelligence* (2009), *A Facilitator’s Guide to Team Emotional and Social Intelligence*, (2009), *A Coach’s Guide to Emotional Intelligence* (2008), *The Emotionally Intelligent Team* (2007), *Life’s 2% Solution* (2005).



Assessments

Some of the good ones are:

Personality: MBTI, Emergenetics, Disc, Hogan, Firo-B

Skills: EQi, Conflict Dynamic Profile or TKI

Team Effectiveness and Skills: TESI

Values: Spiral Dynamics

Contact

Contact Marcia Hughes and James Terrell at Collaborative Growth for more information on how to use today's learnings about neurology and conflict resolution to resolve conflict and build collaborative intelligence.