Does Coaching Change the Brain?
Support for neuroscience in coaching

Coaching & Metacognition
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Hacking the Brain
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The Science Behind Those ‘Magical’ Changes
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Does coaching change the brain? As the marriage of coaching and neuroscience approaches, the answer to this question becomes more important. Coaches want to prove that their service has real value. If proof can be developed based on scientific research, then coaching reaches a new level of credibility. Coaching becomes more widely accepted. We can actually demonstrate what effective coaching looks like. Does coaching change the brain? The best way to answer this is to follow through on a coaching conversation to see what happens.

A Conversation With Duane

Meet Duane. He’s the director of marketing at a mid-size clothing company in Hollywood, Florida. Duane has never been able to fire a single person in all his years at this company. He will ‘re-gift’ his difficult employees. He will move them to other departments. It should be no surprise that conflict causes Duane to shut down. Shutting down the way Duane does – as with pretty much all people’s negative behavior – is based on fear: fear of conflict, fear of rejection, fear of failure. How does coaching help Duane deal with conflict? How does Duane separate himself from the emotional complexity of fear and anxiety? How can coaching help?

Duane sees something coming. Perhaps he has to discipline an employee. The primitive part of the brain has an emotion associated with conflict. That emotion is fear. The decision-making part of the brain takes that information and goes to work.

Without coaching, Duane will always come up with the same solutions about a conflict. He will process the same information, handle the fear in the same way and arrive at the same conclusions. Coaching can provide an intervention. A coach can ask Duane to think about the way he is thinking. There’s a word in neuroscience that describes “thinking about thinking.” The word is metacognition.

Coaching can put Duane in that metacognitive state. He can then see how exhausting it is to swim in these emotions of fear. Once he is able to see that, he can choose his emotions rather than getting lost in them.

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When Duane learns how to do that, he can translate that into intelligent dialogue and better results: hiring the right person or sending the right messages to people or just being comfortable in situations that have conflict.

**The QTIP Approach**

So how does a coach get a client to take one step back, and think about their thinking? Clients need techniques, tools and tangible thought processes that can get them out of their emotions and into creative space. One such tool is the QTIP, which reminds clients to Quit Taking It Personally.

Duane thinks he is the center of the universe. People are fearful and they are afraid of conflict because they think they are immensely important. They think they have this huge role in everyone else’s lives. They put a lot more energy into worrying about a conflict than they do dealing with the conflict. They need to Quit Taking It Personally (QTIP).

If you’re taking it personally, you are turning fear into a feeling. When you take emotion and turn it into a feeling, it becomes ego heavy. It becomes more than the feeling. It becomes some horrible experience. It is partly driven by raw emotions, partly driven by a perception of self in the rational brain.

Can we get Duane to talk it through in his mind before he talks it through with other people? If we get Duane to Quit Taking It Personally, he’s able to distinguish or separate the emotion that he’s experiencing from what he would like to be doing. He can quit taking the emotions personally. Then, those emotions don’t translate into feelings, which can be exhausting.

What is real is the emotion. The feeling is a perception of the emotion. Once a client enters into a feeling, it’s very tricky to get out of that feeling state. That’s when QTIP is the perfect opportunity to help him train his brain, to change his mind, to heal his heart before his work falls apart. Coaches can help clients find space to ensure they develop a flexible agile brain.

Can a coach teach a client to stop thinking personally? We can’t directly change our brain. We can change our brain by changing our mind. That creates a feedback loop. When we change our mind – the activities of the brain – then we change our perceptions and thus change our brain. What happens when people learn certain skills through a coaching process? They learn to self-regulate. They learn to QTIP in the moment so they can move back into a comfort zone so they don’t ruin their health, or the work project that’s on tap.

Research tells us that the brain you’re born with is influenced by your experiences, so that you end up with a unique set of neural networks. A left-hander will have a larger right brain and vice versa. An artist would have a larger right brain, for understanding how to draw and enjoy esthetic experiences, while a mathematician would have a larger left brain for managing details.

**Changing Clients’ Brains**

From clinical neuroscience studies, we have learned that you can rewire your brain. You can take a neurotransmission highway that leads from A to B and either turn it into a country lane or turn it into a major freeway.

“If you attend to your thinking and choose a new behavior often enough, you will change the landscape of your brain.”

We have enough data to validate this fact: If you have behavioral skills that allow you to change your mind, you will then rewire your brain to become more plastic, more malleable, more agile in the way you end up thinking.

This is where coaching becomes a true behavioral science. If you attend to your thinking and choose a new behavior often enough, you will change the landscape of your brain. If you change the landscape, new things become habit. A new habit no longer has to be so conscious. It takes a while to do that, depending on the complexity of the problem.

Duane’s habit is longstanding. He has lots of nice friends that support his habits. Having him create and reinforce a new way of doing things is exhausting. It’s extremely tiring to rewire the brain. It can be done, but it takes a lot of intelligence from the coach to keep a client on track, to help them do the homework, to help them be effective in paying attention.

This is not an easy process, but it is a very rewarding process. When the reward system kicks in, people are ‘good to go’. They have a new system locked down.
You can reformat any brain at any time and it’s never too late.

Getting Ego Out of the Way
We are all so caught up with ourselves. That may be the biggest problem in a coaching relationship. The person you are coaching is so full of themselves that they think they are the center of the universe. When they think they are the center of the universe, all these irrational behaviors happen. This is partly because they are so self-absorbed that they think they are incredibly meaningful and important. In fact, they’re just one of seven billion people on the planet.

How can coaches direct their thought processes?

The primitive emotional center of the brain always does its work before the thinking and problem-solving part of the brain kicks in.

People think our thinking skills are the thing, but it’s really just the icing on top of the bigger machine. As a result we ‘take it personally’ before we think it through.

QTIP technology helps clients dilute their egos so they can do the heavy lifting that is required to rewire the brain. If you get the ego out of the way, you get to solve your problems. Coaching is right at the heart of that.

“QTIP technology helps clients dilute their egos so they can do the heavy lifting that is required to rewire the brain. If you get the ego out of the way, you get to solve your problems.”

Market research sees solid support for neuroscience in coaching. Clinical research says: “Coaching can change the brain.” As the marriage of coaching and neuroscience approaches, new research is breaking every day. Stay tuned. Things are happening.