

# Let's Talk Leadership with Coach Paul

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## Brain Fitness for Leaders

It turns out that a lot of what we previously thought about the brain isn't true.

We've discovered, for example, that the brain continues to grow well into our later years through a process called "neuroplasticity." Our brains help us keep learning by producing new neurons, cells that help transfer information.

With physical training, your body responds to demands by strengthening muscle groups. Similarly, the brain will expand (or not) depending on the challenges you tackle. That's the good news. The bad news? *If you don't use it, you'll lose it.*

We've also learned that neurons need not die as we age. In fact, several regions of the brain that control motor behavior and memory can actually expand their complement of neurons as we get older. This process is called "neurogenesis." Neurogenesis is profoundly affected by your lifestyle. Your experiences and interactions can help strengthen your brain's neural networks and cognitive abilities.

Brain-imaging studies indicate that acquired expertise in diverse areas—playing the cello or speaking a foreign language—helps expand our neural systems. In other words, *you can physically change your brain by learning new skills.*

### On-the-Job Brain Fitness

In a November 2007, Harvard Business Review article, professors Roderick Gilkey and Clint Kilts describe the benefits of cognitive fitness for leaders:

*The more cognitively fit you are, the better you will be able to make decisions, solve problems, and deal with stress and change. Cognitive fitness will allow you to be more open to new ideas and alternative perspectives. It will give you the capacity to change your behaviors and forecast their outcomes in order to realize your goals. You can become the kind of person your company values most. Perhaps more important, you can delay senescence for years.*

The 11 following strategies can help you maintain an engaged, creative brain:

**Expand your experiences.** There are two parts to this step: First, learn more about your area of expertise. Second, learn more about outside areas. The brain stores knowledge through exposure to experiences. The more emotional the experience, the more you remember and retain.

**Learn through observing.** "Mirror neurons," activated when we observe someone performing an action, help us learn new tasks and behaviors. Athletes often acquire skills by watching teammates drill, score and fumble.

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**Read the signs.** Mirror neurons can also pick up on facial expressions, gestures and signals. You develop empathy by learning how to read other people's body language.

**Learn through mentoring.** Being mentored by others helps you acquire some of their knowledge and experiences. Conversely, you fortify your own learning when you teach others.

**Use case studies.** When you read a case study that describes real customers and their experiences, you activate your mirror neurons to raise your level of understanding. The human brain is social, finely tuned to seek opportunities to connect and understand.

**Take advantage of direct experience.** One of the most powerful ways to gain direct experience, while also flexing your cognitive muscles, is taking a "walkabout" (also known as "management by walking around"). Taking time to talk with staff is one of the smartest leadership practices and well worth the invested time. When you share experiences, you gain a more comprehensive understanding of what happens at other organizational levels.

**Use both sides of your brain.** Leadership involves both brain hemispheres. The left hemisphere is the primary source of neural information for routine tasks. The right deals with novelty and innovation, including experiences and data that are less structured. The right hemisphere is more image-based and operates in the realm of metaphors. Think of this division as big-picture vs. small-picture thinking. You'll need to master both hemispheres to successfully navigate complex business systems, even if you prefer one way of thinking over the other.

**Use pattern recognition.** Your brain scans your environment for patterns, discerns order and creates meaning from large amounts of data. Your organization depends on you to sift through this data quickly and assess the situation so you can determine appropriate actions. Superior pattern recognition is a major competitive advantage for consolidating learning and simplifying information (without being simplistic).

**Play as hard as you work.** If you're not enjoying yourself, you won't stay with a task long enough to master it. Find ways to bring enjoyment to your work. Studies show that being in a good mood sets the stage for enhanced creativity and decision-making. Play improves your ability to reason and make sense of the world.

**Seek out new experiences.** The right brain is dedicated to discovery, exploration and processing of new experiences. Newly acquired knowledge is transferred to the left hemisphere, where it is organized, encoded and made available for routine use. The more you actively engage in new experiences, the more proficient you become at learning, thus preserving cognitive fitness. When you're receptive to novelty and innovation, you tend to be better in a crisis because instead of panicking, you spot opportunities for growth.

**Develop a beginner's mind.** Practice stepping back from current thinking and conventions to cultivate new solutions. When you don't feel compelled to have all the answers and allow for doubt, you encourage fresh perspectives.

### **The Brain Advantage**

Make an ongoing commitment to immersing your management teams in new systems and new ways of thinking. Cognitive fitness can prove to be your most sustainable competitive advantage.

Promote a rich working environment where healthy brains thrive and your people can achieve their full potential.