

FORMAL PAPER

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This is in response to Wendy Barnard's emailed request sent December 4, 2015 asking for experts to present on a selection of topics. Deadline: December 9, 2015.

FROM:

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TITLE: Stop Telling Me What to Do: Brain-Based Methods to Get Others to Think

TRACK: School Administrators and Board

TARGET AUDIENCE: School administrators, team leaders, board members

ABSTRACT:

Principals must bring out the best performance of others, and also shape a school to work as a coordinated team. In both cases, these goals often necessitate changing the way others think. We look at relevant brain research on people's natural response to coaching and demonstrate that we can achieve far more success if we understand how the brain processes advice. Then we look at a brain-friendly way to "get others to think" to solve problems, face decisions, and take on challenging thinking work.

GOAL: Session attendees will learn how the brain reacts when processing traditional advice or feedback. Then we will model the line of questioning supported by recent brain research.

ATTACHED: Powerpoint presentation to show the audience

Stop Telling Me What to Do: Brain-Based Methods to Get Others to Think

As principals, we are responsible for building a team of staff members who are hired for their expertise in a particular area, whether as assistant principals, subject or grade-level specialist teachers, or office administrators of various levels. We orchestrate this diverse group to function as a team for the betterment of students. We must bring out the best performance in others by coaching them, and we are called upon to solve conflicts between others.

Traditional advice given to handle “difficult” employees is typically focused on training the thinking of the supervisor: “remain calm,” “define goals and expected results,” “clarify actions required for proper completion of goals,” “define the ideal solution.” But this focus often does not work—not for challenging personalities, not for millennials, and frankly not for anyone we expect to be engaged in their work.

We have found a resource that has a successful track record and is based on brain research regarding how coaching or advice is processed by our brain. *Quiet Leadership* is a 6-step format developed by neuroleadership coach, teacher, and public speaker David Rock, CEO of Results Coaching Systems.

We have used this approach with “difficult” employees and others, and have found that this respectful, non-confrontational, yet effective approach has the potential to increase productivity, morale, and job satisfaction. *Quiet Leadership* techniques have the advantage of gaining time as principals avoid getting into the details and drama of a variety of school scenarios, while at the same time empowering staff to be more metacognitive in their thinking, and gaining insights themselves that push them more quickly towards solutions they are motivated to undertake.

Our first step is to see how the structure and purposes of the human brain lead us to the *Quiet Leadership* approach. **What is the goal of our brain?** In asking a random sampling of educator colleagues this question, we typically receive answers focusing on thinking, logic, and rational thought. Although we humans like to think that we are primarily rational, thinking creatures, we actually are not. We are *feeling creatures* who think, NOT *thinking creatures* who feel. The emotional regions of the brain are the oldest in terms of human development, the largest, and the most active. When we keep in mind that the primary purpose of the brain is the **survival** and **reproduction** of its owner, we see that the brain’s functions that are the most deeply embedded reside in the limbic system, which is the oldest area of the cortex, the area that triggers *fight or flight* instincts essential to human survival.

Brain-based research reminds us of *Fitra*, the natural disposition of humankind, because it discovers the structures and patterns of the brain that Allah SWT created in each of us. Subhan'Allah, the notion that the primary purpose of the brain is survival points to the primary rights given to us by Allah SWT in our Islamic Law—rights of life, security, justice, dignity, etc. When we see the primacy of reproduction in our brain structure, we understand better why modesty, chastity, and privacy are so highly regarded in Islamic values and culture. Each of these primary brain purposes is worthy of a workshop or entire conference on its own, but we will note for our current purpose that humans instinctively, unconsciously, and uniformly react defensively and emotionally to actions of supervision, management, critique, or advice. People cannot help it, and though intentional training can mitigate it, most education leaders working in a fast-paced school environment must adjust their style in order to evoke the most productive response from their colleagues.

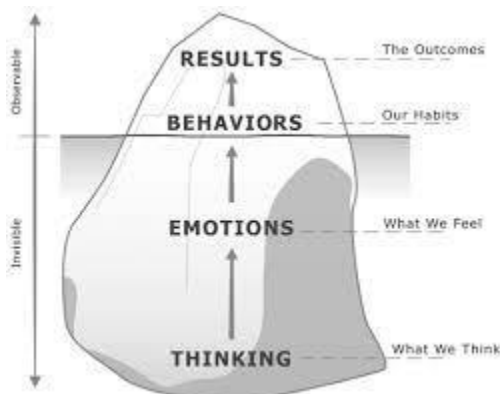
Rather than telling our staff what to do, we must find an efficient method of improving the thinking of our staff. Curriculum designers have long strategized coming up with “teacher-proof” resources, basically scripting out each step of a lesson plan and each element of differentiation that goes with it. Yet these curricular resources lack data to prove that such micromanaging has led to any increase in effectiveness. As professionals, teachers are trained and paid to think, lead, initiate, and evaluate, but many supervisory district and school practices provide only rigid directives that discourage experimentation or the generation of insights through flexible, customized approaches.

Another imperative in managing staff is the generation gap in evidence today between principals who are “baby-boomers” and teachers who are “millennials”. The younger adults who are filling in the ranks are expressive, confident, and open to learning and change. They have grown up in school environments that develop collaborative project-management skills. They have passion and an upbeat attitude regarding their profession of education, taking on challenges like a mission. In contrast, more traditional settings structure schools in imitation of large organizations, with restrictive policies and heavy-handed control. We must encourage the younger generation of professional educators to join our schools by matching their work ethic traits with a more empowered and accountable ethos, one that respects professionals as people who can think and evaluate without dictates and rigid controls.

Today's Islamic schools, despite their booming numbers and soaring enrollment, face a great obstacle in the dearth of school leaders. We need to support ready staff members to make the transition from managing a classroom of students to managing adult colleagues. Despite the uptick in education professionals in our community gaining

Educational Leadership degrees and certificates, little in the required coursework of graduate school prepares mid- and top-level school executives for the effective leadership of staff, especially in nurturing a culture of continuous improvement and strong motivation. Looking into the development of leadership in business organizations brings more advanced and cutting-edge research into view. For example, many Fortune 500 organizations have abandoned performance evaluations using ranking tools in favor of frequent yet brief conversations. The March 2015 edition of the *Harvard Business Review* reports, “The move away from conventional, ratings-based performance management continues to gain momentum. By November this year, at least 52 large companies had shifted from the practice of once-yearly performance appraisals; estimates are that hundreds of other companies are considering following suit. A wide range of industries are represented, from technology (39% of the 52) to business services (19%).” Coming from the business management world, Quiet Leadership provides a viable leadership skill that can be taught and transferred to teacher leaders as they gain experience coordinating colleagues, thus preparing the way for a smooth transition into a full-time leadership role that they step into with success.

Improving the performance of a staff of adults requires improving thinking. If we use the simple metaphor of an iceberg, we see that performance Results are merely the tip of the iceberg; thinking happens at the deepest level. Observable Behavior is the feature that leads to the Results, but in order to change behavior and improve thinking, one has to deal with miles and miles of deep Emotions, the strongest feature in our human brains.



How can we navigate through these deep emotions? With techniques that allow your staff to step around old fixed habits and develop new neural connections to solve problems. We need to find how exactly thinking leads to action—we are bombarded with great advice and ideas, but getting these ideas implemented to fruition is the obstacle.

There is actually a physiological “anchor” in Motivation! Motivation doesn’t come from your heart, as many would have it. Here’s how David Rock explains the alternative to getting people to follow your advice or directives. The brain is a connection machine, making order out of chaos. Brains must come up with their own insights in order to create new neural connections, or “maps”. To take committed action, people need to think things through for themselves, not be told what to do. This is very hard work; a new solution, or map, requires comparing, associating, and matching ideas with existing maps. People exhibit some inertia in thinking for themselves due to the high energy required. A thinking model is needed, and Quiet Leadership provides a questioning strategy that avoids details, drama, and an unproductive focus on the problem. With this questioning strategy in action, the individual answering the questions is directed towards the bigger picture, allowing him/her to realize patterns s/he would not have normally seen had the person stayed wrapped up in the details or drama of a problem. A match in the neural connection is made, and this releases neurotransmitters, or hormones, along with a change in brain waves. The way we move ideas forward is assisted by this chemical burst in our brains at the moment of insight. This energy burst pushes us to activate that new bright idea, making us willing to take action.

The brain tactics that underpin Quiet Leadership prove one key strategy. Pushing for insights can be accomplished by creating new wiring, rather than by trying to convince people to change their habits, or hardwired patterns of thinking. Rock warns of the challenges assumed when one tries to deconstruct long-set thought patterns. A stark example is that even when the risk of heart attack is high, over 85% of people cannot eat less and exercise more to prevent such a fate. The most simple and brilliant advice goes unheeded. Instead, focus on solutions, not problems, to prevent firming the hardwiring even more. Use the subject’s strengths in formulating a solution, and get data on the person’s thinking in order to push them for insights. This is achieved by the questioning—avoiding specific details of the problem, and questioning about thinking, gets people to realize insights.

Advice is a threat to our brain, says Rock, based on brain research regarding the strong response shown the limbic system, the emotional foundation in the brain. These are the brain’s survival needs, and they are known by the acronym SCARF:

Status: Our brain always assesses how a social encounter enhances or diminishes our status. We spin our story all the time. Advice makes us feel “lesser” than the person giving it. Our inner voice tells us to wonder: “Don’t you trust me to figure this out?”

Certainty: If there is any risk involved in advice, our memory decreases and the brain is more likely to focus on all the things that could go wrong.

Autonomy: Our brain registers a threat when our options are narrowed. With no ability to choose, we sense an emotional threat.

Relatedness: Our brain is always assessing who is a friend or a foe. Before giving advice, build a relationship.

Fairness: There is a cognitive drive to seek fairness. Perceptions of favoritism blocks acceptance of advice.

How to prevent the violation of one of these five limbic elements? Rock advises us to be aware of the model of thinking we are currently using in any conversation. He argues that leaders must allow their people to think by supporting them in actually staying out of the details, not dwelling on the problem itself, and certainly not inviting a retelling of the drama of any negative situation, which only reinforces feelings of insecurity and powerlessness. Instead, focusing on the vision of the goal, as well as on the big picture planning (not details), will get the other party to identify priorities in how to solve his/her problem. Rock calls this the Choose Your Focus model. It is easier said than done, because when we do get into details, problems, and drama, that is the realm of the “interesting.” But to be useful as a mentor and supervisor who is urging his knowledge workers to think, it is more useful to focus only on the big picture of the vision and planning elements.

The heart of the Quiet Leadership approach is in the questioning tools advocated by Rock to keep the focus on getting others to do the thinking, and gaining insights to spark motivation and action. Along with *Quiet Leadership*, Rock has authored another book entitled *Your Brain at Work*. Both offer many dialogs to illustrate how Rock’s questioning techniques force people towards metacognition—thinking about their thinking. These techniques prove that having conversations not around the content of the problem, but rather around the process of understanding. The tools used in such conversations include seeking permission to discuss to avoid ambushing anyone and thus losing trust, establishing “placement”, or in other words delineating the parameters of the conversation to prevent any threat, asking only thinking questions which focus on the “what”, not the “why”, to establish objective facts, and clarifying, another way of pushing towards helping the other person gain insight. These tools are characterized by respect, prevent what most humans avoid or dread in terms of confrontation, and coach the subject to effectively control thinking efficiently.

We offer these techniques to school leaders because by applying them ourselves, we found that we could have more welcomed and productive conversations with our colleagues, without any defensive reactions. We have also found that staff members are able to take on greater responsibilities and solve problems more independently when shown that we trust them and depend on them to do the thinking needed in the myriad

decisions educators must make in the course of a typical day. Finally, in nurturing leadership so that a growing school can develop staff that can move from teaching to managing teachers, or from completing administrative tasks to managing full projects, the Quiet Leadership techniques have proven beneficial for us. Insha'Allah we hope to share these ideas that align with our values of teamwork, shared vision, and respectful collegiality with all our Islamic school colleagues.