



Social Intelligence and the Biology of Leadership

by **Daniel Goleman** and **Richard Boyatzis**

The Idea in Brief

Your behavior can energize—or deflate—your entire organization through **mood contagion**. For example, if you laugh often and set an easygoing tone, you'll trigger similar behaviors among your team members. Shared behaviors unify a team, and bonded groups perform better than fragmented ones.

Mood contagion stems from neurobiology. Positive behaviors—such as exhibiting empathy—create a chemical connection between a leader's and his or her followers' brains. By managing those interconnections adroitly, leaders can deliver measurable business results. For example, after one executive at a *Fortune* 500 company worked with a coach and role model to improve her behavior, employee retention and emotional commitment in her unit soared. And the unit's annual sales jumped 6%.

How to foster the neurobiological changes that create positive behaviors and emotions in your employees? Goleman and Boyatzis advise sharpening your **social intelligence** skills.

The Idea in Practice

Identify Social Strengths and Weaknesses

Social intelligence skills include the following. Identify which ones you're good at—and which ones need improvement.

Skill	Do you...
Empathy	Understand what motivates other people, even those from different backgrounds? Are you sensitive to their needs?
Attunement	Listen attentively and think about how others feel? Are you attuned to others' moods?
Organizational Awareness	Appreciate your group's or organization's culture and values? Understand social networks and know their unspoken norms?
Influence	Persuade others by engaging them in discussion, appealing to their interests, and getting support from key people?
Developing Others	Coach and mentor others with compassion? Do you personally invest time and energy in mentoring and provide feedback that people find helpful for their professional development?
Inspiration	Articulate a compelling vision, build group pride, foster a positive emotional tone, and lead by bringing out the best in people?
Teamwork	Encourage the participation of everyone on your team, support all members, and foster cooperation?

Craft a Plan for Change

Now determine how you'll strengthen your social intelligence. Working with a coach—who can debrief you about what she observes—and learning directly from a role model are particularly powerful ways to make needed behavioral changes.

Example:

Janice was hired as a marketing manager for her business expertise, strategic thinking powers, and ability to deal with obstacles to crucial goals. But within her first six months on the job, she was floundering. Other executives saw her as aggressive and opinionated—as well as careless about what she said and to whom.

Her boss called in a coach, who administered a 360-degree evaluation. Findings revealed that Janice didn't know how to establish rapport with people, notice their reactions to her, read social norms, or recognize others' emotional cues when she violated those norms. Through coaching, Janice learned to express her ideas with conviction (instead of with pit bull–like determination) and to disagree with others without damaging relationships.

By switching to a job where she reported to a socially intelligent mentor, Janice further strengthened her skills, including learning how to critique others' performance in productive ways. She was promoted to a position two levels up where, with additional coaching, she mastered reading cues from direct reports who were still signaling frustration with her. Her company's investment in her (along with her own commitment to change) paid big dividends—in the form of lower turnover and higher sales in Janice's multibillion-dollar unit.



In 1998, one of us, Daniel Goleman, published in these pages his first article on emotional intelligence and leadership. The response to “What Makes a Leader?” was enthusiastic. People throughout and beyond the business community started talking about the vital role that empathy and self-knowledge play in effective leadership. The concept of emotional intelligence continues to occupy a prominent space in the leadership literature and in everyday coaching practices. But in the past five years, research in the emerging field of social neuroscience—the study of what happens in the brain while people interact—is beginning to reveal subtle new truths about what makes a good leader.

The salient discovery is that certain things leaders do—specifically, exhibit empathy and become attuned to others' moods—literally affect both their own brain chemistry and that of their followers. Indeed, researchers have found that the leader-follower dynamic is not a case of two (or more) independent brains reacting consciously or unconsciously to each other. Rather, the individual minds become, in a sense, fused into a single system. We believe that great leaders are those whose behavior powerfully leverages the system of brain interconnectedness. We place them on the opposite end of the neural continuum from people with serious social disorders, such as autism or Asperger's syndrome, that are characterized by underdevelopment in the areas of the brain associated with social interactions. If we are correct, it follows that a potent way of becoming a better leader is to find authentic contexts in which to learn the kinds of social behavior that reinforce the brain's social circuitry. Leading effectively is, in other words, less about mastering situations—or even mastering social skill sets—than about developing a genuine interest in and talent for fostering positive feelings in the people whose cooperation and support you need.

The notion that effective leadership is about having powerful social circuits in the brain has prompted us to extend our concept of emotional intelligence, which we had grounded in theories of individual psychology. A more relationship-based construct for assessing leadership is *social intelligence*, which we define as a set of interpersonal competencies built on specific neural circuits (and related endocrine systems) that inspire others to be effective.

The idea that leaders need social skills is not new, of course. In 1920, Columbia University psychologist Edward Thorndike pointed out that “the best mechanic in a factory may fail as a foreman for lack of social intelligence.” More recently, our colleague Claudio Fernández-Aráoz found in an analysis of new C-level executives that those who had been hired for their self-discipline, drive, and intellect were sometimes later fired for lacking basic social skills. In other words, the people Fernández-Aráoz studied had smarts in spades, but their inability to get along socially on the job was professionally self-defeating.

Do Women Have Stronger Social Circuits?

People often ask whether gender differences factor into the social intelligence skills needed for outstanding leadership. The answer is yes and no. It's true that women tend, on average, to be better than men at immediately sensing other people's emotions, whereas men tend to have more social confidence, at least in work settings. However, gender differences in social intelligence that are dramatic in the general population are all but absent among the most successful leaders.

When the University of Toledo's Margaret Hopkins studied several hundred executives from a major bank, she found gender differences in social intelligence in the overall group but not between the most effective men and the most effective women. Ruth Malloy of the Hay Group uncovered a similar pattern in her study of CEOs of international companies. Gender, clearly, is not neural destiny.

What's new about our definition of social intelligence is its biological underpinning, which we will explore in the following pages. Drawing on the work of neuroscientists, our own research and consulting endeavors, and the findings of researchers affiliated with the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations, we will show you how to translate newly acquired knowledge about mirror neurons, spindle cells, and oscillators into practical, socially intelligent behaviors that can reinforce the neural links between you and your followers.

Followers Mirror Their Leaders—Literally

Perhaps the most stunning recent discovery in behavioral neuroscience is the identification of *mirror neurons* in widely dispersed areas of the brain. Italian neuroscientists found them by accident while monitoring a particular cell in a monkey's brain that fired only when the monkey raised its arm. One day a lab assistant lifted an ice cream cone to his own mouth and triggered a reaction in the monkey's cell. It was the first evidence that the brain is peppered with neurons that mimic, or mirror, what another being does. This previously unknown class of brain cells operates 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.

Mirror neurons have particular importance in organizations, because leaders' emotions and actions prompt followers to mirror those feelings and deeds. The effects of activating neural circuitry in followers' brains can be very powerful. In a recent study, our colleague Marie Dasborough observed two groups: One received negative performance feedback accompanied by positive emotional signals—namely, nods and smiles; the other was given positive feedback that was delivered critically, with frowns and narrowed eyes. In subsequent interviews conducted to compare the emotional states of the two groups, the people who had received positive feedback accompanied by negative emotional signals reported feeling worse about their performance than did the participants who had received good-natured negative feedback. In effect, the delivery was more important than the message itself. And everybody knows that when people feel better, they perform better. So, if leaders hope to get the best out of their people, they should continue to be demanding but in ways that foster a positive mood in their teams. The old carrot-and-stick approach alone doesn't make neural sense; traditional incentive systems are simply not enough to get the best performance from followers.

Here's an example of what does work. It turns out that there's a subset of mirror neurons whose only job is to detect other people's smiles and laughter, prompting smiles and laughter in return. A boss who is self-controlled and humorless will rarely engage those neurons in his team members, but a boss who laughs and sets an easygoing tone puts those neurons to work, triggering spontaneous laughter and knitting his team together in the process. A bonded group is one that performs well, as our colleague Fabio Sala has shown in his research. He found that top-performing leaders elicited laughter from their subordinates three times as often, on average, as did midperforming leaders. Being in a good mood, other research finds, helps people take in information effectively and respond nimbly and creatively. In other words, laughter is serious business.

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