FEELING OVERWHELMED? WHY MULTITASKING ISN’T ONE OF OUR STRENGTHS INSIGHTS FROM NEUROSCIENCE PART 2

By Dr Patricia Bossons, Director of the Henley Centre for Coaching and Behavioural Change and co-author of a new book on the impact of neuroscience on leadership coaching

In this series of articles, I will be taking some of the insights we now have available to us about activity in our brains, and relating them to practical experiences in the coaching and leadership development field.

Don’t know where to start with your to-do list, and feeling overwhelmed and muddled?

Is your work–life balance a mess, resulting in distress and panic?

Finding it difficult to prioritise things?

Can’t see the wood for the trees?

If these symptoms sound familiar, you may be able to take some comfort from the fact that these are among the most common issues confronted by coaches.

The emotion attached to not getting everything done can be overwhelming and results in paralysis, displacement activity, denial or whatever other coping strategies the individual has devised over time, which also then create their own problems.

The coaching challenge

The coachee seems to be a victim of his own success, having been recognised by his employer as dedicated and competent. And, as a result, he has been given a more demanding role, with a much bigger leadership element. He is used to focusing on the technical aspects of his own job, but finds the demands from his new team outside the immediate range of his personal experience.

He regards his role as problem solving on behalf of everybody, rather than helping his team solve their own problems. So he works harder, longer hours and does everything himself.

The coaching approach

One of the first interventions the coach made was to express understanding of the number of things that the coachee was trying to cope with, and reflect on his feelings of being overwhelmed.

The coachee visibly relaxed once his situation was acknowledged; even taking a few moments to think was a real change to his normal daily experience. By giving him this time, he could start to prioritise, see the bigger picture and plan ahead.

Next, specific pieces of work were done to untangle the different tasks in front of him, create plans, prioritise and manage his time more effectively. Finally, the coach helped him visualise how he would like his life to actually be, and how to manage stress and motivation.

Case study

Our coachee is an HR Team Leader at a prestigious university in Asia, who sets the scene:

‘I work very long hours; there is so much to do. I have a team of 12 people reporting to me and they all look to me to tell them what to do. I feel like I have 12 other jobs to work out each day. I have two young kids, and my wife is getting upset and says she feels like a single parent. My boss, the HR Director for the whole university, thinks I can go far, but unless I can get some control over my life, I am going to make mistakes and let everybody down, including myself. I don’t know where to start; there is never time to think or plan.

‘I need to be able to step out of the madness and rise above it to see the whole picture of what needs to be done. What I really want is to get some balance and have a life with my family, even some time for myself.’
The neuroscience

There are a number of ways that the coachee’s brain is not working at its best.

His chronic stress from the sense of being overwhelmed and his inability to complete all of his responsibilities at work and at home leads to anxiety (amygdalar activity), which results in difficulty in focusing on tasks.

This is compounded by the number of different tasks that he is trying to accomplish. The prefrontal cortex is the area of the brain that is responsible for focusing on tasks, while it has some ability to focus on more than one thing at a time, tasks that require similar types of processing (verbal, visual, hypothetical or logical) will compete for space. We are not good at multitasking!

He also experiences conflict between his different roles, as a leader at work and a husband and father at home. Working during the time that he is supposed to be a husband and father is likely to conflict with his values leading to increased activity in the anterior cingulate cortex and insula – areas of the brain associated with fairness (de Vries, Byrne & Kehoe, 2014). The coaching tools that will be useful in this case are those that help him to prioritise and plan his time. This will also reduce the load on his prefrontal cortex and improve task performance by limiting the detrimental effects of multitasking.

He can also be provided with techniques to manage stress, thus increasing his ability to think creatively about new solutions to his problem. And by considering what resources might help to make the job more possible, it is likely that his sense of stress and being overwhelmed will decrease.

This case study is taken from The Neuroscience of Leadership Coaching by Patricia Bossons, Patricia Riddell & Denis Sartain was published in August 2015 by Bloomsbury.

Coaching Centre relaunch raises the bar

On 22nd April, the Henley Centre for Coaching and Behavioural Change was formally relaunched.

The Centre is a vibrant learning community that shares leading-edge thinking around coaching and behavioural change.

Henley has been offering its Professional Certificate in Coaching for 12 years and 2,500 participants have passed through the various programmes on offer at the Centre, which include a Masters degree course.

According to Dr Patricia Bossons, Director of the Henley Centre for Coaching and Behavioural Change, ‘the strongest feedback we have received over the years is that each cohort wants to maintain regular contact with us and each other, and become a learning community. This has become the driver for the relaunch of the Centre, which has always delivered this passively, but will now focus very clearly on providing a platform for interaction.

‘We’re committed to offering affordable individual membership (£45+VAT) that will give our community access to online discussion groups, news streams, insightful newsletters, podcasts and webcasts, journals, expert research and analysis, and opportunities for coaches to get their work shared and published.

‘Of course, we’ll continue to provide CPD, coaching supervision and a register of coaches, but we’re seriously raising the bar now. The agenda will be set by the members themselves at the start of each year, ensuring that it remains at the forefront of the industry and a real focal point for thought leadership in the field of coaching and behavioural change.’

For more information please visit www.henley.ac.uk/coachingcentre

This year’s Coaching Conference theme: Leadership coaching – needed more than ever

This year’s Coaching Conference is being held on Friday 17th June 2016 on the theme of leadership coaching.

At a time when many of the traditional ways of looking at leadership are being challenged and the world is in a state of continual upheaval, the uptake of executive coaching is increasing year-on-year.

Being in a leadership position in an organisation has never been more complex: manager, leader or follower, the boundaries are becoming as blurred as the definitions. We, as coaches and practitioners in the business world, need to be well informed about what happens to human beings when they are faced with leadership challenges.

This year’s conference will look at the latest thinking and research on the nature of the challenges and how coaching can be most effective.

We are delighted that Professor Adrian Furnham will be our lead speaker on the day. Adrian is a business psychologist who has written over 50 books, is a newspaper columnist and a regular commentator in the media, known for his stimulating views!

Adrian is a Fellow of the British Psychological Society and is among the most productive psychologists in the world. Since 2007, he has been nominated by HR Magazine as one of the 20 most influential people in HR.

Places are filling fast – to book yours, visit www.henley.ac.uk/conf