

# The New Competitive Edge: Rewiring The Brain For Success

by Don Joseph Goewey

*Author of Mystic Cool, A proven approach to transcend stress, achieve optimal brain function and maximize creative intelligence*

“I wanted my people stressed,” a former president of a company once told me. “If I thought someone was losing their focus, feeling overwhelmed, or complaining about being overloaded, I turned up the heat. I pushed the deadline up or added more to their plate. It usually got me what I needed.”

At the same time, he admitted, he was plagued by interpersonal dysfunction with his senior management team. The atmosphere at meetings was tense and competitive, generating an emotionally negative energy in the room. People seemed to have little regard for one another and showed little interest in helping each other succeed.

Eventually this leader hired a consultant to try to shift the attitudinal climate. The first thing the consultant did was help people understand their emotional reactivity, restrictive thinking, and limited self-interest as a brain locked into survival mode. A brain chronically under stress is prone to imagine threats and enemies around every corner. A brain habituated to *fight or flight*

- The new competitive edge is all about the brain.
- More specifically, it is about an ability of the brain -- called neuroplasticity -- to expand, reorganize and better integrate higher brain function.
- The result is a brain that can sustain peak performance.
- Companies that relate to this breakthrough will overwhelm their competitors through the sheer creative brain power they will tap.
- The icing on the cake is that the ROI is enormous.

produces a reactive and, at times, paranoid human being.

Fortunately, we can train the brain to change modes. It takes a fundamental shift in attitude, from stress to calm, from fear to peace. *Yes, peace.* Believe it or not, peace is the essential psychological condition that optimizes higher brain function. As people on the management team made this shift, personally and interpersonally, the old negativity and dysfunction subsided and an attitudinal climate took hold that was positive, creative and engaging. There was fewer stress hormones in people's brains, and, as a result, the higher brain lit up and more was accomplished.

Even leaders who disagree with using fear as a motivator may not realize how often their own stress and anxiety causes them to *crack the whip*. It produces an unwanted effect. A brain under stress subjected to yet another pressure will start to shut down and work less, not harder. Stress hormones dampen higher brain function. Brain chemistry becomes imbalanced, especially dopamine and serotonin, leaving people depressed, uninspired, and unmotivated. Adrenaline and cortisol drain the body of energy. Stress hormones impair memory, attention span, and decision-making.<sup>1</sup> The greater the stress the greater the likelihood immediate survival goals will replace long-range considerations. Creative thinking declines and aggression and escape behaviors raise their ugly heads.<sup>2</sup>

This is hardly the picture of a high performance team. Yet it is alarmingly widespread. Four out of 10 Americans experience extreme stress chronically. Another four are a major stressor away from joining that group.<sup>3</sup> Imagine a team of 10 people, eight of them impaired in this way. According to surveys conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership, the majority of organizations fail to provide the tools managers need to effectively manage stress.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Solution: Neuroplasticity**

There is a solution. It involves a process that rewires the brain called neuroplasticity. Neuroplasticity can shift control away from the amygdala, the primitive network that triggers stress reactions and fight or flight, to the prefrontal cortex where the brain generates the intellectual, creative, and emotional intelligence people need to succeed. As odd as it may sound, this change is achieved by being at peace. Actually, this discovery is quite logical, when you consider that the dynamic state of calm produced by an attitude of peace is the polar opposite of stress, anxiety and the reactivity stress generates.

### **Sustaining Peak Performance**

In the last 10 years, research has established that a dynamically peaceful attitude builds a brain that can sustain peak performance. Neurologically, "peace" means we are not afraid, threatened, or stressed by whatever we face. As a result, our brain is free of stress hormones. Peace generates the brain function that finds the zone great coaches teach gifted athletes. It is the *calm under siege* the military

cultivates in soldiers. In business, it sustains the brain power that keeps people at the top of their game. Here is what brain scans and EEG's reveal about brain activity of those who, through deliberate practice, learn to sustain a positive, peaceful attitude.

- The usual networks that generate the brain's executive functions are larger and more fully integrated, with increased blood flow to these neural networks. This means a person is skillful at planning, decision making, error correction, and troubleshooting. They have strong cognitive ability and can think abstractly.
- Gamma wave activity is far better organized and coordinated, signaling the higher mental activity and heightened awareness found in peak performers.
- Activity in the left prefrontal cortex, the seat of positive emotion, swamps activity in the right prefrontal cortex, the seat of negative emotion. This condition achieves a level of emotional intelligence that makes a person virtually immune to stress.
- There is greater activity in the center of the brain, especially the caudate and right insula, generating the social intelligence that sustains interpersonal resonance.
- Immunity functions at optimum, securing a high level of health and energy.<sup>5</sup>

Who in corporate leadership would not want an employee base with this level of brain function? It may be hard to believe that a peaceful attitude is what achieved it. *It did*. It may be even harder to believe that such an attitude is possible to sustain in a competitive work environment. *It is*.

### **The Workplace Study**

Researchers decided to put the power of this attitude to the test. The University of Wisconsin teamed up with the University of Massachusetts to conduct a study that focused on stressed workers in a high-pressure biotech business in the mid-west.<sup>6</sup> They selected a performance team where the level of stress was causing problems in performance, relationships and health.

Before the training, employees underwent brain scans and tests. The readings on the workers, on average, revealed a negative, stressful attitude.

Employees were then trained in a mindfulness-based approach to shift attitudes. The training involved three hours of practice a week for two months.

After the eight-week training program, however, on average their readings indicated a shift to the positive. Simultaneously, their moods improved; they reported feeling engaged again in their work, more energized, less anxious and

more productive. There was also a significant improvement in immune function that accompanied the shift in attitude.

Making this shift is simpler than we might think. It involves four qualities anyone can cultivate through a set of proven tools that are easy to apply<sup>7</sup>. The first quality to cultivate is engaging challenges with a quiet mind that is fully present. It's the cure for the attention deficient stress causes. As we practice this quality, we flex a brain muscle that strengthens our ability to focus.

The second quality is remaining calm inside, regardless of what is happening on the outside. As we practice this quality the brain builds the GABA fibers that extinguish fear. Extinguish fear and you eliminate stress.

The third quality is connection. It involves listening better, judging less and forgiving more. As we practice this quality, our brain strengthens networks that produce an effective team member and a great leader.

The fourth quality keeps us in touch with the big picture instead of getting trapped in the narrow perspective stress engenders. Practice this quality and we strengthen a neural network that enables us to move beyond a limited self-interest to see a greater good.

Neurologically, success is inner peace; succeeding is letting go of stress. It's the new business paradigm that these four qualities reach.

### **The Return On Investment**

It is safe to say that, at present, neuroscience understands competitive edge better than most businesses do. The new competitive edge is all about the brain. More specifically, it is about an ability of the brain -- called neuroplasticity -- to expand, reorganize and better integrate higher brain function. The result is a brain that can sustain peak performance. Businesses that take advantage of this breakthrough will eventually overwhelm their competitors.

The icing on the cake is that the ROI for implementing this process is enormous, solving old problems like turnover, health care costs, worker's comp, and absenteeism

### **Turnover**

40% of turnover is due to stress.<sup>8</sup> Lower stress and you recover this losses. Profitability increases by 2% for every 1% reduction in turnover.<sup>9</sup>

According to a 1999 benchmarking study conducted by a consortium led by the MEDSTAT Group of Ann Arbor, MI, turnover costs, on average, \$3,693/worker/year.<sup>10</sup> Other estimates of the costs of turnover have ranged from 25% to over 250% of the employee's salary. At the top end, Xerox has reported that it cost them \$1 Million - \$1.5 Million to replace a senior executive.<sup>11</sup>

## Healthcare

Twenty-two percent (22%) of group health insurance costs are stress related, with annual expenditures of nearly \$400 billion.<sup>12</sup> Heart patients attending stress management programs have 42% lower health care costs.<sup>13</sup> Other studies have documented 50% reduction in medical services utilization in companies that offer stress reduction.<sup>14</sup>

## Workers Comp:

Thirty-three percent (33%) of Workers Compensation costs is attributed to stress.<sup>15</sup> Subjects who reported stress at age 23 were 2.5 times more likely to report back pain at 33 than subjects who did report stress at age 23.<sup>16</sup>

Under low stress conditions, subjects reported no back pain and the pattern of EMG activity indicated no spinal strain; under high stress conditions however, subjects did complain of back pain and exhibited an aberrant EMG pattern consistent with spinal strain.<sup>17</sup>

## Absenteeism and Presenteeism:

A major survey of 333 Human Resource executives in US companies found that 12% of absences from work are attributable to stress.<sup>18</sup> This translates into 1 million people out of work every day in America due to stress.<sup>19</sup>

The persistent issue of absenteeism costs small companies, on average, \$60,000 per year and larger companies approximately \$3,600,000 per year.<sup>20</sup>

Stress related “*presenteeism*” (workers present but functioning below expectations) costs 32 times the cost of absenteeism. This can amount to a staggering \$115 million per year in large corporations.<sup>21</sup>

Making the investment to tap the neurological power that stress drains away is a *no-brainer*.

**Byline:** Don Joseph Goewey has worked for more than three decades helping people reach their potential, including war refugees, prisoners, patients with life-threatening illness, business leaders, and others in high-stress occupations. His new book, *Mystic Cool*, combines the latest research in neuroscience and psychology with practical spiritual insights on how to reduce stress and unlock creative potential. To learn more, visit his Web site: [www.proattitude.com](http://www.proattitude.com) or contact us at [info@proattitude.com](mailto:info@proattitude.com).

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