THE SOCIAL *Brain*

Humans are primarily social animals, regardless of whether you consider yourself to be introverted or extraverted.

The reason for this is thousands of years ago our physical survival depended on our ability to be part of a group or a tribe. We required the cooperation of our fellow tribe members to find food, find shelter and of course, propagate the species. In fact if you look at infants, they are completely dependent on their parents or caregivers to survive. The caring or nurturing relationship is so critical to the survival of an infant that our brains developed a neurological response to perceived rejection. That reaction is a feeling of pain, discomfort and distress. These strong uncomfortable responses to abandoning or rejecting our own or any child strongly increases the likelihood that parents would continue to protect and nurture their offspring. Studies have demonstrated that this is such a critically important adaptation that the parts of our brain designed to let us know when we are experiencing physical pain are the exact same parts of the brain that fire off when we are experiencing social pain such as rejection, embarrassment or humiliation. The evolutionary advantage to this was to encourage humans to pursue reasonably cooperative relationships with other tribe members to decrease the likelihood we would be rejected from the tribe and therefore increase the likelihood we would survive.

The challenge to this adaptation is in our modern world when we interpret someone or something as a social threat, (manager requests to meet with us) our brain goes into a fight or flight mode. This can affect our ability to think rationally and if we experience extended periods where our Social Brain perceives we are about to experience a social threat then the stress associated with this can create significant physical and mental health concerns. Workplace bullying for example creates tremendous amounts of social pain for individuals that can significantly damage a person's mental and physical wellbeing.

As Leaders this is important for us to know so that we can be conscious of how a team member is "fitting in" with their peers. A lack of feeling connected with others creates psychological pain. Not simply the discomfort of loneliness but symptoms analogous to physical pain. Monitoring not just performance but team cohesiveness is an important way for leaders to identify potential situations that can negatively impact upon individuals' stress levels. Leaders also need to be conscious of not creating a threat response in the people we are trying to support. It can easily be done through a subtle comment or even a quick facial expression that might infer judgment. When people are seeking support they often are already experiencing and/or are fearful of experiencing social pain. When this is triggered it can impact on the level of trust an individual has in you.

Effective and Supportive Leaders understand the importance of building and maintaining respectful and trusting relationships with their teams on an ongoing basis.