

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Leadership Role Models: The Brain Is Wired To Look For Them

by Dr. Mike Armour

Early in the computer revolution someone coined the acronym GIGO, which means "garbage in, garbage out." The term highlighted the principle that the output of an automated system can never exceed the quality of the information put into the system.

GIGO is also a great term to describe personal and corporate life. If the inputs into our individual and collective psyche are garbage, then we should not be surprised when garbage starts showing up in our conduct, attitudes, and speech.

I remember arguing this point one day in 1969 as a graduate student in a seminar on social ethics. The discussion centered on a community's right to limit the dissemination of books, films, and media products that grossly offend common standards of decency. Almost unanimously the class endorsed absolute and unhampered freedom for people to say whatever they wish through whatever channels they wish. I was the lone holdout in defending a community's right to set and enforce standards of decency.

One particularly vocal student looked at me and said, "No one was ever corrupted by reading a book." To which I replied, "If books can't corrupt people, then it follows logically that neither can books change someone for the better."

There was no rebuttal to my argument, although it left the class consensus unfazed. The group remained supportive of unbridled freedom to disseminate garbage. Indeed, it seems that our society is far more upset with activities that pollute the environment than those which pollute the mind and spirit.

Leadership and the GIGO Principle

When it comes to creating motivated organizations, extraordinary leaders have been far less cavalier than my fellow graduate students about thoughtless inputs into the community psyche. Long before GIGO was part of our vocabulary, exceptional leaders instinctively understood that in terms of creating positive morale, high expectations, and superior performance, the quality of cultural input determines the quality of cultural output.

That's why effective leadership puts a premium on two priorities. The first is to use uplifting communication to create a positive atmosphere and a spirit of optimism within the team. The second is to excel personally as a role model, embodying the very values and attitudes which the leader wants to see in his or her people.

Recently, while reading the very excellent book *12: The Elements of Great Managing* by Rodd Wagner and James Harter, I came across an intriguing piece of scientific research that underscores the power of personal example in shaping personal behavior. The research originally had nothing to do with the power of example. Instead, it aimed at monitoring the brain activity of monkeys whenever they picked up objects.

Monkey See, Monkey Do

Using tiny electrodes planted in the monkeys' brains, scientists were able to monitor neuron firings associated with the handling of objects. But the researchers were soon surprised by an unanticipated development. If a monkey saw one of his own or even a lab worker perform some act, the sensors monitoring the monkey would be triggered, just as though the monkey himself had been performing the action.

Once the researchers were convinced that this pattern of neuron firings was not an anomaly, they went on to discover what they call "mirror neurons," cells dispersed through key regions of the monkey's brain that mimic everything the monkey sees others do. It's an entirely new twist to the old adage, "Monkey see, monkey do."

Even more significant was the subsequent discovery that mirror neurons also populate the human brain. Thus far they have been found in the premotor cortex and in the inferior parietal cortex. As a result, we take part far more "actively" in the things we observe than previously understood. For instance, part of the vicarious benefit of watching a sporting event is that the observer "lives" the experience internally through the firing of mirror neurons. (Now I know why my father, when watching a boxing match, would always sit with his fists doubled, jabbing the air ever so slightly as the fighters threw their punches. In a sense, he was in the ring with them.)

Mirror Neurons and Leadership

The discovery of mirror neurons has significant implications for leadership, as the researchers pointed out to *The New York Times*. To use their own words, "If a company wants its employees to quickly assimilate 'best practices,' there is no faster conduit to a protégé's brain than watching a good role model in action." Mirror neurons, they add, "allow us to grasp the minds of others not through conceptual reasoning, but through direct stimulation."

As leaders, then, when we model what we want people to become, we make it easier for them to identify with the ideal and to begin to internalize it personally in their actions. This also underscores why it's vital for people to see their leader in action. If we are to harness the potential power of being a stellar role model, we cannot lead from a corner office, where our people do not see us modeling desired behavior both regularly and firsthand.

The constant firing of mirror neurons also means that it's impossible for people not to be influenced by whatever behavior patterns they witness. The people around us do indeed shape us. With role models, as with computers, it's "garbage in, garbage out." Thus, if leaders do not present themselves as role models for their people to emulate, they leave the door wide open for someone else, perhaps with less than helpful attitudes and behavior patterns, to become a de facto role model for the team.

And contrary to my distracters in that philosophy class, the discovery of mirror neurons suggests that what people see and observe via media cannot help but affect them, whether for good or ill. Even if they only live the experience vicariously through the firing of mirror neurons, they are actually living what they witness. The activity is becoming part of their makeup. Part of their being.

All those books on personal success are thus right on target when they encourage us to build our circle of friendship around people who are paragons of great attitudes and proper behavior. The old proverb that "you are what you eat" can now be supplemented by another that says, "You become what you watch."

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