

# Leading Together / Retraining the Brain

*Jill Harrison Berg*

## **Leading for equity with the brain in mind.**

With the recent attention in schools to how new advances in neuroscience can inform teaching and learning, it's easy to forget that we adults have brains, too. In my equity work with school leaders, for example, I am struck by how emotionally charged this work feels to adults. Their brains react strongly, either viewing it as a threat or seeing it as an opportunity.

When classroom data show that there are patterns to which students we are *not* reaching, patterns predictable by race, class, gender, or home language, it can set off the amygdala upstairs. I have seen educators fight against unfavorable student learning results with protests about the assessment tools, school culture, and testing platforms. I have seen educators flee from addressing data by aggregating them to hide the truth in the averages, keeping conversations superficial, or changing the subject entirely. But I have also seen educators embrace these same hard realizations with grit and zeal: "If my students are not learning from me, then I have not yet learned how to teach the way they learn, and I better figure that out!" They see these data as opportunities to become aware of a previously hidden gap in their professional knowledge, and as an impetus to dive into an important journey of learning, collaboration, and experimentation.

We can't blame our brains for how they react. Our brains are just following the rules.

## **Brain Rules**

In her book *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* (2014), Zaretta Hammond helps educators to understand how the brain relies on culturally shaped perspectives to determine whether emotionally charged interactions—which are essential to powerful learning—are perceived as threats or opportunities. That is, our brains run on autopilot most of the time, making decisions for us about whether we like or dislike something, feel affinity or aversion to someone, or are excited or repulsed by a new idea, and they use cultural considerations—the attitudes, beliefs, values, and assumptions we have developed—to determine these emotions. Hammond encourages us to think critically about how the actions we take to help our students learn might be seen, from their cultural perspectives, as a threat and inadvertently keep them from learning. We might also consider how our own fear of failure with these students can keep us from helping them build the intellectual capacity, or thinking routines, they need to become independent learners.

In the same way, leaders can reflect on the conditions we create for adult learning, question whether adults' own customs, habits, and achievements are valued within the school's culture, and consider ways to increase the likelihood of constructive, learning-focused responses from colleagues who are addressing student inequities.

Hammond summarizes her research into six core principles that outline the rules our brains follow. As principals and teacher leaders, why not follow these same rules when leading for equity?

## Rule #1

The first and most fundamental rule is that "the brain seeks to minimize social threats and maximize opportunities to connect with others in community" (p. 47). The social structure of schools faces a triple threat from the guarded norms of classroom autonomy, egalitarianism, and seniority (Johnson & Donaldson, 2007), and some schools have not yet shaken these norms loose. Principals can provide time and meeting structures for teachers to have conversations that de-privatize their practice and that help *all* to recognize the value of each colleague's diverse perspectives. Teacher leaders can play formal and informal roles in shaping the culture of these meetings as they foster a community committed to a growth mindset, risk taking, and the courage to have a hard conversation when threats arise.

## Rule #2

A second and related rule is that "positive relationships keep our safety-threat detection system in check" (p. 48). Did you ever notice how there are some people from whom we *openly* receive honest, constructive criticism, and others whose feedback gets us bent out of shape? Our ability to hear the feedback that we most need to hear can often be thwarted by a relationship trigger (Stone & Heen, 2015). Feeling on guard against such "attacks" is a distraction that blocks learning. Principals and teacher leaders can help schools avoid this trap by cultivating a psychologically safe environment. They can develop community norms that name shared values and honor all individuals' cultural perspectives.

## Rule #3

Rule number three states that "culture guides how we process information" (p. 48). So, leaders might also build time into meetings for the faculty to reflect together on how our own experiences shape our core work and on the implications for teaching, learning, and leading. Influenced by whether we come from a culture that values a more communal view of the world or more of an individualistic one, whether we have a strong oral tradition or a written one, our brains develop unique wiring, which may be strikingly different from how our students and colleagues are processing information. Principals and teacher leaders can

help the faculty to view the contrasting perspectives as an opportunity, not a threat to fight or flee from.

## Rules #4 and #5

The next two rules could be seen as a pair. "Attention drives learning" (p. 48) is an important reminder of the learner's role in learning. The learner must do the work of engaging the brain and processing the information, so it's important that their interest and attention are piqued. The next rule describes the mechanism for engaging the brain: "All new information must be coupled with existing funds of knowledge in order to be learned" (p. 48). Principals and teacher leaders can routinely engage faculty in questioning about how something new is similar or different from what they expected, what they previously knew, or what they hoped. They can use meeting conversation protocols that invite and elevate different cultural perspectives and stimulate adults' curiosity about how to either connect the dots to prior knowledge or rethink prior knowledge entirely.

## Rule #6

Finally, the brain wants to keep getting better at getting better. Hammond's sixth brain rule states, "The brain physically grows through challenge and stretch, expanding its ability to do more complex thinking and learning" (p. 49). If this is what our brain wants to do, why hold it back? No one wants to be stuck in a rut; our students need us to be on a journey of continuous improvement. They need us to reflect, build new routines together, share ideas that add up to stronger results, and establish systems that build professional capital and raise the quality of everyone's work. Yet, this is hard to do without support. Teacher leaders can galvanize their colleagues to imagine new ways of doing things, and principals can ensure that all teachers' voices and ideas are heard.

## When the Going Gets Tough

Schools and districts committed to rooting out inequities recognize how their policies, classroom routines, and instructional practices may be holding students back. Such realizations can feel like a sock in the gut! We can either run, fight, stick our heads in the sand, or roll up our sleeves to start working on the changes our students need us to make. When the going gets tough, our brains want to fight or flee. Luckily, the literature that helps us apply research-based approaches to student learning can help us to manage our own brains, too.

## References

Hammond, Z. (2014). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Johnson, S. M., & Donaldson, M. (2007). [Overcoming the obstacles to leadership](#). *Educational Leadership*, 65(1), 8–13.

Stone, D., & Heen, S. (2015). *Thanks for the feedback*. New York: Penguin.

---

**Jill Harrison Berg** is a leadership coach and school improvement consultant. She is the author of [Leading in Sync: Teacher Leaders and Principals Working Together for Student Learning](#) (ASCD, 2018). Follow her on [Twitter](#).