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Leadership that will mess with your head



By Andrew Hill

Get ready for CEOs showing slides of their frontal cortex at job interviews

Tony Hayward's appointment as interim chairman of Glencore Xstrata last week marked his rehabilitation, three years after he told reporters "I'd like my life back", following the fatal Deepwater Horizon explosion.

The comment was particularly brainless. But what if the former BP executive had won his way back to the top not just because he was an experienced resources executive but because he had rewired his neuronal pathways to make himself a more effective, gaffe-proof leader? Would investors be pleased, or worried?

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Get ready for CEOs showing slides of their frontal cortex at job interviews, or sporting multicoloured scalp electrodes to board meetings. Neuroleadership, based on research into the brain activity of leaders and potential leaders, is a fast-growing area. According to one 2011 study, neurofeedback therapy – a way of training the brain while the subject is wired to a computer – could address executives' "brain profile deficiencies", such as anger management problems, and ultimately improve their potential.

I've spoken up for technological enhancement of modern managers in the past. But here's where I draw the line. It is one thing arming them with the latest supply chain software; quite another to tinker with their frontal lobes.

I would not want to hold back the research, even if I thought I could. Although critics believe brain scans are not significantly better at predicting leadership success than more traditional questionnaire-based approaches, the science will obviously advance. But I have plenty of concerns about the implications.

First, it is unduly simplistic to rely on neuroscience alone to determine an individual's ability to navigate the complex and fast-changing social, financial, and political challenges of being a chief executive.

Second, reshaping a leader's brain so he or she becomes a better leader relies on knowing what constitutes leadership excellence – and this is an area open to fierce dispute and rapid evolution. Nigel Nicholson writes in his new book *The T of Leadership*, that people want leaders to have integrity, vision, competence and confidence, but adds there is "no unifying perspective on this topic".

The study cited earlier – by David Waldman, Pierre Balthazard, and Suzanne Peterson – looks at how to identify and develop "inspirational leaders". But the charismatic, lead-from-the-front CEO has been out of fashion since the financial crisis, if not before. Newer research by Sean Hannah and others, including Prof Balthazard and Prof Waldman, does suggest ways to spot and shape "complex leaders", who can adapt to changing conditions. That is a more promising and more up-to-date model for leaders. However it, too, could change: radical management thinking is already looking towards a future phase of self-managed teams and leaderless companies.

As a shareholder, I would not want to subject stewards of my company to constant neuro-reprogramming as market demands shifted. Better to pick different people for different phases of corporate development. Mr Hayward's career is actually a good case in point. He was chosen to run BP as a down-to-earth replacement for the more imperial Lord Browne. His approach failed to match the circumstances of the Gulf of Mexico disaster, but now suits Glencore. No brain-retraining needed.

Finally, I worry it will be hard for ambitious would-be CEOs to resist pressure from their bosses for one more MRI scan or EEG session. Dirk Lindebaum of University of Liverpool's Management School, warns of "covert coercion" by people who could "make or break your career". As neuroleadership catches on, this will be the biggest risk. In fact, it already is. I'm looking at a press release for a management consultancy that claims neuroscience can "help create better leaders in three months".

I would like to think executives and their companies will sift the solid research from the breathlessness and charlatanism that characterises frontier science. But I do not hold out much hope. Remember that early research suggested share-based incentives would keep managers keen and drive corporate performance, aligning outcomes for executives and investors. The idea perverted company behaviour for decades.

One consequence was that executives repriced their stock options, among other abuses, but at least they were not tempted to reprogramme their brains. That is the dark side of neuroleadership that is really messing with my head.

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