

Attention Density: New Big Thing?

By David Rock and Jeffrey Schwartz

There is now an increasing amount of science behind the old adage that you are what you think about. The fields of neuroscience and quantum physics have teamed up to reveal that it is possible to actually change the circuitry of the brain by focusing on something long enough, often enough, and hard enough.

Every leader knows that it is hard to effect long-term change in people and organizations. That may be because change inflicts physiological pain, something most people try to avoid. But if we can enable people to give sufficient quality and quantity of focus to something, the circuitry in the brain will be stabilized in a new pattern.



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The mechanism that describes this is *attention density*, and it has profound implications for leaders, managers, trainers, coaches, parents, and politicians—in other words, anyone who wants to influence others. Attention density is the quantity and quality of attention paid to a particular circuit in the brain.

When you think about something, a circuit is activated that crosses many centers in the brain. One word or idea may trigger responses in visual, emotional, kinesthetic, auditory, or language centers, among others. There is in your mind a map, or circuit, for every word, picture or concept for which you have any associations at all.

Attention density is the **sum or product of the quality and quantity** of focus. (We say “or” because no studies have yet been done to verify whether this is multiplicative, but we sense it is, and we expect such studies will be undertaken before long.) **Quality of focus** is the number of other circuits that are activated in connection to the original circuit, as well as the amount of energy coursing through that circuit. For example, there will be more energy in a circuit if you

have an emotional reaction to the topic.

There is a Ladder of Intensity that an influencer may use to increase attention density.

Here’s an example:

When I say, “Think of an elephant,” the flash of energy through “elephant circuits” in your mind may last a fraction of a second, involving a picture, a sound, a memory, or all three.

If I were to say “Tell me about elephants,” the circuit would be held much longer, requiring as it does that you summon information and pictures from your memory, put words to them, and phrase sentences to describe them. You might speak about elephants for a minute, which is many times longer than the fraction of a second you might have spent just thinking about an elephant. All the while you are speaking about the elephant, you are



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holding in place the ‘elephant circuit.’ (Unless you have a ‘senior moment’ and forget what you were talking about!)

If I were to say, “Write down how you feel when you see elephants,” more circuits would be involved, and the circuits would be held active for even longer as you take the time to summon the information and pictures connecting to elephants, and now link it to your emotions, and to the effort it takes to write about Elephants.

In the case of writing about your emotions and elephants, you may have increased the amount of focus on elephants from a fraction of a second to many minutes, and that focus might be linked to many centers of your brain. The quality of attention has gone up, as many more circuits were activated. You have become “more elephant aware,” and will be more likely to link other ideas and experiences to elephants.

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This can be multiplied further because of the social nature of our brains. If you go back to your office and talk to people about elephants, the same circuits will be activated each time you repeat the story. On top of that, you may activate “the elephant circuits” as you and those same people have additional conversations, or even as you consider having conversations with those people. So “elephant circuits” get reinforced, and move from “gravel back road” toward “paved highway.”

“Simple.” a leader may say, “All I have to do it repeat myself enough, hang enough posters, and we’re there.” Not likely.

We are dealing with the human brain, which is not simple. It is complex and sophisticated, and yet can behave like a two year old:

- Tell it what to do and it pushes back.
- Ask questions with a judgmental tone (“Why did you do that?”) and defenses go up.
- Threaten or seem to threaten status, and the brain is focused on preservation, not on clear thinking.

Interestingly, safety and status are closer to the surface of our thinking than you might imagine. The brain is quite able to calculate our relative status in a rather large group. When that status is actually or potentially threatened, perhaps by being seen as being wrong, or by having problems solved for us that we were able to solve, then our fear circuits are activated. Stress increases; dopamine levels drop; blood pressure and cortisol levels increase. Clear thinking is reduced.

So what is a leader to do if they want to get the message across? We mentioned the Ladder of Intensity above, describing ways to increase attention density. It is possible to direct attention to the topic desired, and to maintain a high attention density until circuits have some permanence.

A couple of key principles should help:

Maintain the quantity of focus. If something is important, make it known, and show it in every way possible. Repetition is fine, providing it isn’t under-

mined by inaction, or worse, action that is inconsistent with the message. All channels — one message.

Raise the quality of focus. Increase the number of circuits involved. Get their brain circuits making connections at many levels. Let them think about it, write about it, connect it to emotion, work with it. Let them tell others about it.

Provide the “problem-solving rush.” Solving puzzles involves creating new circuits in the brain, which is generally highly energizing. Facilitate an experience that allows people to make the connections themselves. When they have seen the data, come to the conclusions, and decided on the actions, they will be more committed to those actions. When *they* have solved the problem, and had the attending rush, they will be inclined positively toward the solutions.

Leadership authorities agree. Peter Drucker said, “People tend to support that which they help to create.” Aristotle said “What is

expressed is impressed.”

There is power in focus. Where we choose to put our attention changes our brain, which in time can change how we see and interact with the world. ☞

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For more information on the work of David Rock and Jeffrey Schwartz, or on the new discipline of Neuroleadership, check www.neuroleadership.org