

# HOW TO LEAD WITH THE BRAIN IN MIND



Sue Langley



Explore the practical applications of neuroscience,  
emotional intelligence and positive psychology  
to lead yourself and others to success

# Introduction

To lead people we first need to be able to lead ourselves. Leading with the brain in mind helps us bring out the best in ourselves so we can do the same with others.

Understanding how the human brain works and how we function at our best is both fascinating and critical if we want to continue to grow and improve as leaders.

New research into neuroscience, emotional intelligence and positive psychology points the way toward better strategies for understanding and leading people.

Applying this research helps us improve our effectiveness and wellbeing, increasing productivity and performance. It helps us develop the self-awareness, people skills, mindful habits and emotional resources that lead to successful outcomes.

This ebook introduces you to practical strategies you can apply in work and life. You will learn:

- What the brain needs to function well and support efforts to change and grow
- How to manage emotions and create a positive emotional climate in your team
- How to use your strengths to be a more positive leader and effective leader

I look forward to helping you get to achieve your own level of excellence as a leader!

**Sue Langley**



"In an increasingly complex world...the leader's only task may be to promote and harness 'distributed' mindfulness."

**Ellen Langer**



## Neuroscience

Our brains gear us for life-long learning and growth. We are constantly creating new connections and adapting to experience.

Understanding how the brain works enables us to harness its potential and be more mindful and effective leaders.

Your brain needs fuel—certain neurochemicals that give you the energy to function at your best. When we feel threatened, uncertain or exhausted from a day of complex decisions, our thinking processes are reduced. When we feel upbeat after receiving great feedback or bonding with our team, our brains release energy that allows you to make good decisions, think creatively, appreciate the big picture or try new behaviour.

Think of a fuel gauge for your brain. If your fuel is low it's not the best time to make a big strategic decision, have a difficult conversation or lengthy planning session. When your fuel is high, it's a great time to get started on a new project or idea, knowing you can last the distance and get great results.

When you need to engage your team or motivate them to adopt new behaviours, consider what conditions would make them more likely to listen and take action.

Remember that changing the brain and reshaping habits takes time. We need to put awareness, effort and commitment into making it happen. Managing our brains day to day helps us move positively and productively toward these goals.

“The brain is a far more open system than we ever imagined, and nature...has given us a brain that survives in a changing world by changing itself.”

**Norman Doidge**

While individuals may be motivated by different factors, a fundamental organising principle of the brain impacts everyone's behaviour.

Neuroscientists call the urge to minimise threat and maximise reward the 'walk towards, run away' theory.

When we feel threatened, such as when faced with a proposed merger or restructure in the organisation or having to deliver a presentation to a large audience, we are inclined to avoid what seems threatening, rather than embrace it.

We need to work harder to maximise the reward principle to approach this new situation with an open mind. Positive emotions and positive relationships are two powerful attractors that engage our reward systems and open us to change, new ideas and strategies for thinking and action.

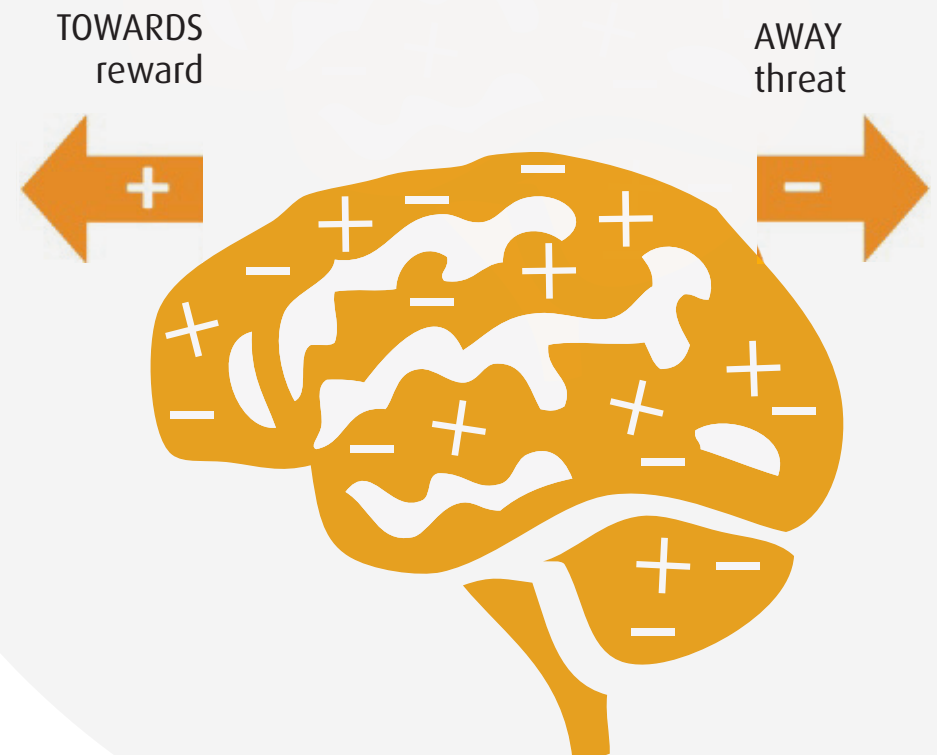
Social neuroscience also shows us that our brains like people like us. As social animals we tend to find it easier to make connections and approach people we perceive as similar. With similarity comes the ability to better infer what someone may be thinking or feeling and tap into our mirror neurons.

So if you can find something in common with a team member or client, you are more likely to empathise and connect with them, which in turn helps you converse and build a relationship, leading to more cooperation and teamwork. On the other hand, if you perceive a person as significantly different, it may be harder to find common ground and you can be less likely to make an effort to get to know them.

While our brains may gear us to immediately assess a new person as friend or foe, we can adjust our own reactions with proactive strategies to build a conscious connection.

"The more we build these [neural] networks and enrich our stores of memory and experience, the easier it is to learn."

Dr John Ratey



# Emotional intelligence

Emotions play a far greater role in determining business outcomes than many leaders realise. They guide our thinking and behaviour—what we think, how we think, how we make decisions and how we act on them.

Even when we've made a rational decision, chances are our emotions made it first. We then establish reasons to justify our gut reaction. Emotions contain data about ourselves, other people and the world around us. They are critical to our survival. Remaining open to feelings gives us valuable early data points that help us think and act more intelligently.

Imagine, for example, you're in a hurry driving to work. A change in the environment—the sound of a police car siren—triggers a rapid emotional response. The emotion makes you pay attention and generates thought. You realise you have been speeding, possibly endangering the lives of others. This motivates behaviour and you slow down.

You are using your emotional intelligence whether you are aware of it or not. Yet, the thinking and emotional centres in the brain do not always communicate as effectively. We miss vital cues, lose our cool under pressure or snap at our team. Or block our emotions and suffer longer term consequences.

Learning to perceive, use, understand and manage emotions intelligently enables us to make better choices, manage stress, work well with others and perform at our best.



## Awareness

Be aware of what is going on in your body and brain. Where do you feel tension? What are you feeling or telling yourself? Awareness is the critical first step toward mindful action.

## Acceptance

Acknowledge what you feel. Emotions are a natural response to experience. Accept the situation and what you can and can't control. Explore and let go of judgement.

## Adjustment

After acceptance comes choice. What changes can you make to improve the situation? How can you shift your body, energy and thinking? What beliefs would be more helpful and accurate?

## Action

Take action and do something. Do it consciously and intelligently. Even if your choice is not to act immediately, use emotional awareness to consider how you can resolve the situation in the future. What did you feel the moment you last made a decision and acted successfully on it?

# EI Strategies

1

## Perceiving emotions

Perceiving emotions is about being able to accurately recognise emotions in ourselves, in others and in the environment.

Think about how you are feeling now. Look at the person nearest you and notice how they may be feeling. Can you read their facial expression? How does the environment make you feel? Does your home or office layout or colours make you feel upbeat or calm, distracted or bored? How can you hone your ability to pick up cues or use your awareness to increase your effectiveness at work?

2

## Using emotions

Using emotions is where the cognitive process begins. Here we integrate our emotions into the way we think, enabling us to consider how we can shift or change emotions to suit the situation and our goals. This ability enhances strategic thinking, reasoning, problem solving and creativity. We also use it to tap into the physical sensations of emotions and to empathise with others.

What strategies can you use to lift your mood or emotions, or to calm and focus yourself when required? Lift or shift the mood of others? How can you use your ability to notice physical sensations so you can better empathise and understand what others are feeling?

3

## Understanding emotions

Understanding emotions relates to understanding the complexity of emotions and what causes and triggers them. Think about the emotions, values and beliefs that drive people below the surface. This ability helps us predict emotions and how they may change over time.

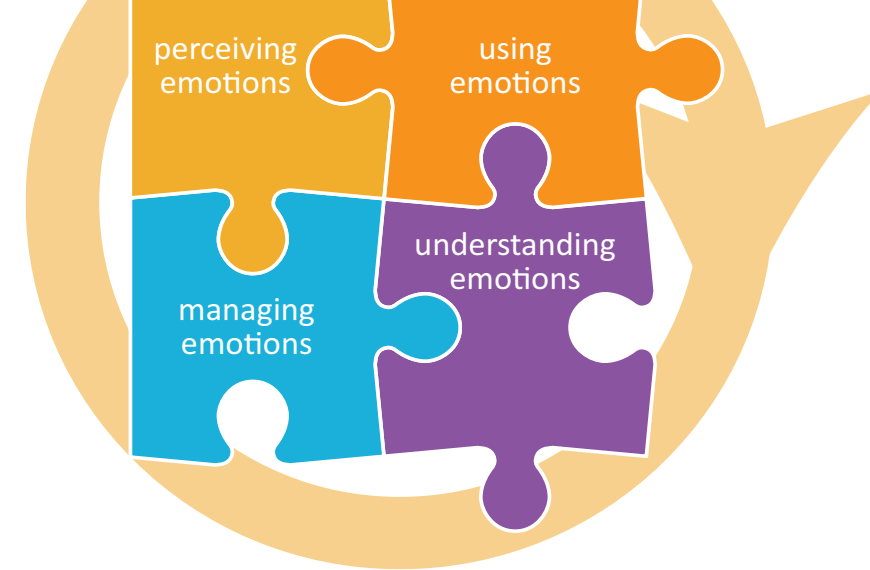
Consider how you or others react emotionally when important values are compromised. How can you increase your understanding of your emotional triggers and the underlying drivers of your team?


4

## Managing emotions

Managing emotions is the ability to manage how we react and respond, drawing on emotional data about ourselves and others. This is especially important when experiencing stronger emotions. Choosing the most effective strategies to manage emotions in ourselves and our relationships helps us manage outbursts, calm fears and behave appropriately to show care and understanding.

How will you manage the tension in your body to reduce the effect of anger? What can you do to manage your anxiety or nervousness next time you are out of your comfort zone? How can you increase positive emotions?





## Positive psychology

Positive leaders emphasise what elevates people, what they do well, and how they can be inspired to deliver extraordinary performance.

They focus on cultivating positive climate, building positive relationships, facilitating positive communication and connecting people to positive meaning and values. They also focus on strengths—their own and the people they lead.

When you are using a strength, you enjoy doing it, are energised by it, produce higher quality work and reach goals more quickly. You feel happier, more confident and engaged. You are less stressed, more resilient, and more effective at self-development. This all significantly benefits your business.

Consider how to draw on strengths at work.

- Which strengths are your go-to resources that enable you to produce great work or rise to a challenge? How can you marshal them more mindfully?
- What things do you do well yet don't find energising? How can you moderate how often you use those?
- What are your weaknesses? How can you minimise their impact? Who in your team has compensatory strengths?
- Which strengths are under-accessed in yourself or your team? How can you develop them?

“Positive leadership enables positively deviant performance, fosters an affirmative orientation in organisations, and focusses on the best of the human condition.”

**Kim Cameron**

Positive emotions allow our brain to function at its best, providing the fuel we need to think clearly and take positive actions to get the most from ourselves and others.


Frequent positive emotions is one of the hallmarks of wellbeing. When we feel good, we are more able to perform at our best. We think more flexibly and creatively. We are more willing to try new strategies, reach out to others, and spread positivity to our team. The psychological and social resources we build buffer challenges and keep us optimistic and curious about the future. The positive energy we generate is attractive to our colleagues and clients. That's great for us, for them, and for our business.

Focus on increasing the duration and intensity of your emotional peaks and shortening the duration and intensity of your lows. Do this in every domain of your life. Bringing more positive emotions into your day-to-day life will help you develop the resources and skills to lead yourself and be a positive successful leader. It also acts as a reset to negative emotion. Generating positive emotions will help you create a positive climate in your organisation and team, increasing performance, engagement, wellbeing—and business results.

Both positive and negative emotion spreads rapidly through workplaces. Which do you want to pollinate?

## Hint

Start a team meeting by asking everyone to share one really good thing that happened recently.



"Positivity transforms us for the better. By opening our hearts and minds positive emotions allow us to discover and build new skills, new ties, new knowledge and new way of being."

Barbara Fredrickson

# More Strategies

1

## Creative thinking

Positive emotions are beneficial for generating new ideas, big-picture thinking and creative output. Neutral and slightly negative emotions create more accuracy, bottoms-up processing and problem finding.

Consider the tasks you have to perform in the day and check in with your emotions. You can proactively generate the emotions you want yourself and others to feel to suit tasks and ensure the best outcomes. Will you be brainstorming with your team and engaging them in providing input? Or will you be reviewing a report, requiring care and detailed attention?

2

## Energy

Using your strengths gives you energy. If you are feeling exhausted by tasks that drain you at work or find you are not making progress, think about the strengths you can apply that will give you a boost.

What activities do you find really engaging? How are you using your strengths that makes it so rewarding? When are you most in the flow? Most optimally challenged? What opportunities do you have right now to do some of this? Try allocating tasks so you can sandwich something that energises you between more hum-drum activities.

3

## Empathy

Our brains are designed to connect to and form relationships with people. Mirror neurons help us understand what someone is doing or thinking about doing. We can use that attunement to listen more deeply to what people are saying. Make eye contact, smile and stay focussed on the whole person. Observe their body language and facial expressions. Tune in to what your own emotions are saying.

4

## Positive language

The words we say may be less important than how we say them, yet we need to be aware of their impact. Some words create emotional barriers. If you find yourself saying “should”, “must” or “can’t” a lot, what message are you telling yourself and others?

With small changes to our language, and a higher ratio of positive to negative or neutral comments, we can create more positive emotional connections with our team and a culture that enables higher performance.

5

## Gratitude

Gratitude is one of the most powerful antidotes to negative emotion. The more we regularly reflect on what we are thankful for, the more we broaden and build our psychological and social resources, and connect to a greater sense of meaning in life and work.

Expressing gratitude and appreciation to the people we work with significantly improves relationships and fosters a sense of belonging. Keep a weekly gratitude journal. Better yet, create a place to post and share your thoughts with your team.



Sue Langley is a speaker, facilitator, master trainer and researcher who inspires people to apply emotional intelligence, positive psychology and neuroscience to become the best they can be.

Founder and CEO of the Langley Group, including Emotional Intelligence Worldwide, Growing Great Schools and the Langley Group Institute, she is considered the leading advisor in Australia on the practical workplace application of these fields.

Sue's gift is synthesising science into simple, practical tools anyone can use. A consultant to consultants, she has taught thousands of business leaders, change agents and human resources professionals to harness the brain's potential to improve performance, solve problems creatively and engage others. She has chaired conferences and presented her work internationally and developed large-scale multi-year projects to build positive workplace cultures, emotionally intelligent leaders and high performing teams.

Sue is the lead developer and facilitator of the world's first government accredited Diploma of Positive Psychology and Wellbeing. She is Master Trainer for leading emotional intelligence, brain-based and positive psychology tools including R2 Strengths Profiler, Mayer-Salovey-Caruso EI Test, EQ-i 2.0 and i4 Neuroleader.

Sue holds a Master in Neuroscience of Leadership from Middlesex University, BA in Psychology and Management from Monash and has studied positive psychology at Harvard. A sought-after media expert, she has appeared in Smart Company, The Australian and ABC radio and featured as the emotional intelligence expert in the hit ABC TV series **Redesign My Brain**.

A Director of Wellbeing Australia, she is the author of "Positive Relationships at Work" in **Positive Relationships** by Sue Roffey (Springer 2012) and two children's books based on positive psychology principles.

Sue Langley



"The quality of your life is directly related to the quality of your emotions."

Sue Langley



Langley  
Group

The Langley Group is a positive people development company.

We apply positive psychology, emotional intelligence and neuroscience to get the best from people, organisations and communities. Our team live and breathe this approach, synthesising science into simple tools anyone can use.

Our companies:

**Langley Group**

Positive solutions for leaders  
and organisations.

**Emotional Intelligence Worldwide**

Assessment, certification  
and professional development.

**Langley Group Institute**

Qualifications in positive psychology.

**Growing Great Schools**

Wellbeing for teachers and schools.

For more information visit our website:

[www.langleygroup.com.au](http://www.langleygroup.com.au)

Or contact us:

+61 2 9399 3989

[contact@langleygroup.com.au](mailto:contact@langleygroup.com.au)

245 Carrington Road, Coogee, NSW 2034

Australia

