



Enough to Be Dangerous

Skills and Professional Development



I recently learned about a neuroscientist named Dr. Carolina Leaf, who conducted over 30 years of research on how a change in perspective can lead to a change in our lives.

Here's my disclaimer before you read any further: I am not an expert in the area of neuroscience. However, from personal experience, I believe that Leaf's theory about perspective rings true. If you are interested in the science, I encourage you to look her up and seek additional information from other neuroscientists.

As leaders, we are the first line of defense for the change that we seek. The people we lead and the environments we create are the direct result of our own perspective. Our thinking, whether positive or negative, has a direct impact on everyone and everything around us. Therefore, if we want to be different, we have to think differently.

You have no doubt heard these before: "We are what we think about and we find what we focus on." If you have a problematic staff, it is likely because you choose to focus on their problems. There are all kinds of scientific explanations about the chemical changes that happen when we start to think.

Leaf asserts that those chemical changes can happen in as little as seven minutes per day. Her theory "explains that everything you do is first a physical thought in the brain. You think, and then you do, which cycles back to the original thought, changing it, and the thoughts connected to it, in a dynamic interrelationship. Therefore, if your thinking is toxic, then your communication and behavior are toxic, and vice versa." Further, Leaf states that "every moment of every day, you are changing your brain with your thoughts in a positive or negative direction. Every time you think and choose, you cause structural change in your brain. Your thoughts impact your spirit, soul, and body. By controlling the direction of your mind, you control the direction of your life."

If instead of constantly noting the negative, we should focus on the positives, both individually and collectively. If we think positively, we will feel positively. When we feel positively, we lead positively. When we lead positively, our employees react positively.

It is so easy to point the finger and blame it on a colleague's inability to take responsibility for his or her work. However, the pointed finger should lead us to a mirror that can give us an introspective look at our own behaviors. We must ensure that the words we use and the behaviors we exhibit align with one another. Not only that, but we must ensure that the standards we value are the standards that we reward.

In Steven Kerr's 1975 article, "The Folly of Rewarding A While Hoping For B," he explains that people do what they think they will be rewarded for doing. If our followers see us rewarding others for behaviors that are contrary to our own mission, then those reward generating behaviors will change, notwithstanding our own standards.

Here are a few common disconnects between the behaviors that we seek and those that are actually reward.

We expect:

- Team work and collaboration;
- Creativity/novel approaches/taking risks;
- Ownership; and,
- High performance risks.

We reward:

- The favored few/top performers;
- Time tested approaches/Not making mistakes;
- Command and control; and,
- Mediocrity.

The Wells Fargo bank fraud scenario is a recent example. While the bank may not have explicitly directed employees to fraudulently open customer accounts, it rewarded them for opening the accounts without asking about the sales process. If ethical behavior matters to your business, then it is important not to reward unethical behavior.

If we want to get different results, we have to try different approaches. It starts with our own thinking and our own willingness to be see what different looks like. Once we start acting in new ways, others will notice and follow suit.

[Whitnie Wiley](#)



Former ACC Docket Columnist

Whitnie Wiley was a long-time columnist for the *ACC Docket*, where she wrote the Lead the Way column for more than seven years. The column provided leadership tips for in-house counsel and others as they pursue their personal and professional goals.