

Introduction

Dynamic leadership impacts every facet of a school; it's the propelling force behind curriculum and instruction, the supervision of teachers, and the education of students. In fact, the proactive, informed, and energetic leader determines the quality of teaching and the level of student learning in the building (Schiff, 2002). Inspiring! Traversing this ever meaningful and yet complicated road of leadership is made easier with knowledge of the brain and a strengths based leadership stance. Combining discoveries from these two fields, neuroscience and strengths based educational leadership, is a prickly process; it doesn't fit neatly into the typical box of thinking. However, although these two strands of research rarely intersect, when the connections are explored they hold rich and rewarding possibilities.

The responsibilities of a school leader are extensive and wide ranging; teachers, students, parents, and society have high expectations. The leader's job is no place for the weak of heart, mind, or spirit. First and foremost, the school leader is the driving force behind instruction and curriculum. Everything—from ensuring research-based instructional strategies to complying with special education regulations to tracking standardized testing—falls at his or her doorstep. And by no means do the responsibilities stop there. Leaders also set the tone for the building, establishing a climate of belonging, an atmosphere where everyone is accepted. Discipline policies are set, parent involvement is encouraged, and lines of communication are established and served by the leader. Then comes supervision. A significant responsibility of school leaders is to mentor and evaluate staff, assisting in their professional growth and at times separating the wheat from the chaff, never an easy task. Finally, there are the budget, the facilities, staff development, and community outreach, all resting firmly on the school leader's shoulders.

This book is written as a resource for those who accept the challenge and opportunity to fine-tune their leadership style. School leaders, principals, assistant principals, curriculum coordinators, and teacher leaders

2 • The Brain and Strengths Based School Leadership

alike will learn, benefit, and grow. Cognitive knowledge of brain function, paired with new insights of strengths based leadership in schools, will help school leaders develop strategies that will enhance student learning in an environment that maximizes student and faculty potential.

Leaders come wrapped in unique packages of gray matter, emotions, physical attributes, cultural imprinting, and social integration, with each bringing a unique mix of strengths to the job. The premise behind this book is that awareness of these strengths is the path to effective leadership.

Most of us know intuitively where our dominant leadership strengths lie (we're good at communicating, organizing, envisioning), and researchers at Gallup proved our hunch. They conducted extensive scientific research on what makes an effective leader and identified four main styles: Executer, Relationship Builder, Influencer, and Strategic Thinker, with 34 subset themes. Researchers found that most leaders had a dominant strength in one of the four styles; however, everyone had strengths interspersed among each of the four leadership styles.

Brain research adds another layer to the leadership puzzle, explaining higher-level thinking skills, emotional control, and the role of experience in the learning process. The connection between mirror neurons, plasticity, and dendrite branching and the real world of strengths based leadership, traced in these chapters, adds new insights and, just as important, confirms past practice. The connection couldn't be more innate; links between learning and neural wirings are strong and undeniable, making neuroscience a natural place for educators to seek information that informs instructional practice, behaviors, and leadership.




Just as the brain grows and develops pervasively throughout childhood and adolescence, the adult brain is also refining and learning. In an enriched environment where reading, discussing, and implementing are mainstays, the adult brain is able to learn, grow, and lead.

Applying research from neuroscience to strengths based leadership allows leaders to maximize and capitalize on their skills. This book is designed to incorporate these concepts in an easy-to-follow format. Chapters start with talking points that clue the reader into the heart of the subject matter. The first five chapters deal with pressing issues faced by every school leader, such as school climate, developmentally appropriate education, and results-oriented schools. Ground-breaking (along with basic) brain research is blended with strengths based leadership and real-life applications to form a solid base for school leadership.

Chapter 6 takes school leadership to the next level, focusing on shared leadership and leading teachers' strengths. Application of the strengths based model is extended to working in leadership teams and to strategies for the effective leader to work with the strengths of teachers.

To expand points of interest and pique curiosity, Think On It! boxes are embedded in each chapter. “Too Much Homework?” and “Mind and Body” are examples of topics included for leaders to reflect on. Finally, each chapter concludes with Discussion Questions that challenge readers to personally apply the material presented in the chapter. These questions may be used for individual reflection or as a guide for book clubs, staff development resources, or school community discussions. Leadership need not be—and indeed should not be—solitary; groups bring diverse thought and collegiality to the table.

Throughout the book, strengths based domains (Executer, Relationship Builder, Influencer, and Strategic Thinker) are identified with icons that clue the reader into a specific strength style:

-  = Executing
-  = Influencing
-  = Relationship Building
-  = Strategic Thinking

So sit back, relax, grab a highlighter, and synthesize a powerful philosophy for effective school leadership. Enjoy the book!