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DID you know that your brain scans your environment for danger, threat or reward five times per second? This understanding comes from the work of neuroscientist Dr Evian Gordon, who found that the brain's organising principle is to minimise danger and maximise reward. This happens at an unconscious and fast pace.

THREAT VERSUS REWARD STATE

While we don't look out for wild animals in our environment anymore as our ancestors did, there are still many perceived dangers in our everyday existence. Negative emotions such as frustration, fear, anxiety, anger or impatience create a threat state.

This causes us to become less focused, have fewer insights, become more risk averse and feel less connected. The flip side of this is that positive emotions create a reward state, creating clearer thinking and more effective production. The aim, therefore, is to create a calm, happy, interested, curious and appreciative team of staff.

Of course, not all people are the same. The prefrontal cortex needs the right mix of neurochemicals for peak performance. We need to find out what each person requires to attain their reward state.

For example, if I want to get the best performance from Ben, I need to know what state he works best in. Some people need more stretching and challenging; others need to feel stable and comfortable to be at their best.

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UNDERSTANDING YOUR PEOPLE

KNOW YOUR STAFF'S MENTAL STATE TO GET THE BEST OUT OF THEM

GET THE RIGHT MIX

John is an accomplished sales person and enjoys the thrill of the biggest challenges. His best moments are in selling to large international 5-star resorts, clients that are considered a long shot, but the deals are big and the pay-off is good.

John's manager needs to ensure his territory and opportunities include these bigger clients. John was instead handed a territory of a whole lot of already existing small hotels, and was asked to grow this territory. There were no big deals or negotiations, just more administration.

The people he was dealing with were not as sophisticated when it came to the use of this technology, and didn't have the budget to upgrade.

John became frustrated, disappointed, and felt undervalued – which resulted in low engagement and motivation, and poor subsequent results. John ended up on extended stress leave, costing the company productivity and money, and impacting John's health.

This was as a result of him being given a territory that, from one perspective, should have been easier and less stressful for John. However, the demands of his manager and the lower level of challenge impacted his performance by underutilising his talents.

John has now left this company and works for a competitor that recognises his talents. He is once again on the hunt for the challenging large opportunities in the market, pitted against the company that didn't have the foresight or management capability to utilise him in the best way.

CHANGING WORKPLACES

The workplace is changing. In the past, many people went to work each day without much thought about whether they were happy or fulfilled in their work. Or at least, if they weren't happy, there would be less likelihood of making changes because it was a job that paid the bills and there were not as many opportunities to make changes.

Then along came the millennial generation and the internet. This generation integrates their work and life, which is made possible thanks to the internet and digital technology. They expect more from their employers and are not content to work harder to make their boss richer.

This means that the workplace is a much more integrated situation (or has potential to be) than ever before.

This is where good communication is paramount in determining what each team member needs to perform at their best. Ask them what would make their work more interesting, raise the bar if they need to be challenged or create tighter deadlines if they are not good at organising their workload.

By communicating with individuals, you make them feel appreciated and allow them to have some ownership of their role in the team.

To read the rest of Kristen's article and her advice for how leaders can help their employees deal with stress, visit bit.ly/staffmentalstate

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