

Daniel Goleman *Developing emotional intelligence*

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You may have heard that we're born with a huge amount of brain cells, and then we lose them steadily until we die. Now, the good news: that's neuromythology.

The new understanding is what's called 'neurogenesis': Every day the brain generates 10,000 stem cells that split into two. One becomes a daughter line that continues making stem cells, and the other migrates to wherever it's needed in the brain and becomes that kind of cell. Very often that destination is where the cell is needed for new learning. Over the next four months, that new cell forms about 10,000 connections with others to create new neural circuitry.

The state of the art in mapping this will be coming out of labs like Richard Davidson's that have massive computing power, because new, innovative software tools for brain imaging can now track and show this new connectivity at the single-cell level.

Neurogenesis adds power to our understanding of neuroplasticity, that the brain continually reshapes itself according to the experiences we have. If we are learning a new golf swing, that circuitry will attract connections and neurons. If we are changing a habit – say trying to get better at listening – then that circuitry will grow accordingly. On the other hand, when we try to overcome a bad habit, we're up against the thickness of the circuitry for something we've practiced and repeated thousands of times.

So what are the brain lessons for coaching, or for working on our own to enhance an emotional intelligence skill?

First, get committed. Mobilize the motivating power in the left prefrontal areas. If you're a coach, you've got to engage the person, get them enthused about achieving the goal of change. Here it helps to draw on their dreams, their vision for themselves, where they want to be in the future. Then work from where they are now on what they might improve to help them get where they want to go in life.

If you can, at this point it's helpful to get 360-degree feedback on the emotional intelligence competencies. It's best to use an instrument that measures the emotional intelligence abilities, and lets you ask people whose opinions you value rate you anonymously on specific behaviors that reflect the competencies of star performers and leaders. A trained consultant can help you use this feedback to determine what competencies you would most benefit from strengthening.

Next, get practical. Don't take on trying to learn too much all at once. Manage your goal at the level of a specific behavior. Make it practical, so you know exactly what to do and when. For example, say someone has "smartphone syndrome". You have to break the habit of multi-tasking. So the person might make up an intentional learning plan that says something like: at every naturally occurring opportunity – when a person walks into your office, say, or you come up to a person – you turn off your cell phone and your beeper, turn away from your computer, turn off your daydream or your preoccupation and pay full attention. That's gives you a precise piece of behavior to try to change.

What will help with that? Noticing when a moment like that is about to come, and doing the right thing. Doing the wrong thing is a habit that you have become an Olympic level master at – your neural wiring has made it a default option, what you do automatically. The neural connectivity for that is strong. When you start to form the new, better habit you are essentially creating new circuitry that competes with your old habit in a kind of neural Darwinism. To make the new habit strong enough, you're got to use the power of neuroplasticity – you have to do it over and over again.

If you persist in the better habit, that new circuitry will connect and become more and more powerful, until one day you'll do the right thing in the right way without a second thought. That means the circuitry has become so connected and thick that this is the brain's new default option. With that change in the brain, the better habit will become your automatic choice.

For how long and how many times does an action have to be repeated until it's actually hard-wired? A habit begins to be hard-wired the very first time you practice it. The more you practice it, the more connectivity. How often you have to repeat it so that it becomes the new default of the brain depends in part on how strong the old habit is that it will replace. It usually takes three to six months of using all naturally occurring practice opportunities before the new habit comes more naturally than the old.

Another practice opportunity can occur whenever you have a little free time: mental rehearsal. Mental rehearsal activates the same neural circuitry as does the real activity. This is why Olympic athletes spend off-season running through their moves in their brain – because that counts as practice time, too. It's going to increase their ability to perform when the real moment comes.

Richard Boyatzis has used this method with his MBA students for years at the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University. And he's followed these students into their jobs as much as seven years later – and found the competencies they had enhanced in his class were still rated as strong by their co-workers.

Learn more about the latest scientific research on EI in my book *The Brain and Emotional Intelligence: New Insights from More Than Sound*.