

Inside the Leader's Head...

By Giles Burch & Emma Soane

Over the last two decades there have been major developments in our understanding of the neuro-biological mechanisms underlying personality; most notably driven by the work of the late Professor Jeffrey Gray (Institute of Psychiatry, London), Professor Neil McNaughton (Otago University) and Professor Philip Corr (Swansea University), who have all contributed to thinking on the psychophysiology of personality and what has become known as Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory (RST). In its simplest form, RST suggests that individual behaviour is regulated by three systems in the brain, two of which are: (1) the behavioural approach system (BAS), which is concerned with the *activation* of behaviour towards a positive reward or the avoidance of punishment; and (2) the behavioural inhibition system (BIS), which is concerned with *inhibiting (or stopping)* behaviours

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that will result in punishment and/or loss of a positive reward. There is growing evidence that these systems are underpinned by specific brain structures and systems (in particular, the septo-hippocampal system and amygdala).

This knowledge has developed alongside (but separate to) an increasing

understanding of how personality may be related to a range of work-related behaviours. For example, it has been found that high levels of extraversion and low levels of neuroticism are related to effective leadership. There is currently a growing interest amongst management psychologists – none more so than ourselves – to bring together these two strands of research and to develop a more comprehensive understanding of personality and motivation in the workplace than has existed previously.

As part of our research programme into leader behaviour, personality and motivation, some recent initial results – based on questionnaire data from a sample of New Zealand managers completing The Auckland MBA™ – suggest that both transformational and transactional leadership behaviours are positively related with managers' BAS sensitivity, while *laissez-faire* leadership behaviours are positively related with managers' BIS sensitivity. These findings make theoretical and “intuitive” sense in that both transactional and transformational leadership are forms of proactive leadership and therefore more likely to be associated with the brain

mechanisms that *activate* behaviour, e.g. these managers are proactively driven to achieve success and avoid failure for themselves and the wider team/organisation. Meanwhile, *laissez-faire* leadership, being a very passive form of leadership, is more likely to be associated with the brain mechanisms that *inhibit* behaviour. *Laissez-faire*



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leaders are likely to be those who avoid managing difficult situations/people for fear of the consequences. These findings therefore suggest that increased BAS sensitivity may be associated with more effective leadership, whilst increased BIS sensitivity is more likely to predict ineffective leadership.

These are early findings, yet provide a useful initial attempt to link brain mechanisms with leadership styles, and as the rapid developments in brain imaging and genetics research advance our understanding of the neuro-biological basis of personality, so too may they help unlock the door to our understanding of the mystery of leadership...watch (inside) this space.