

# Amrop Leadership Series

## Leadership and the Brain Brain Olympics

By  
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**Amrop**

Leaders For What's Next

# Leadership and the Brain

## Brain Olympics

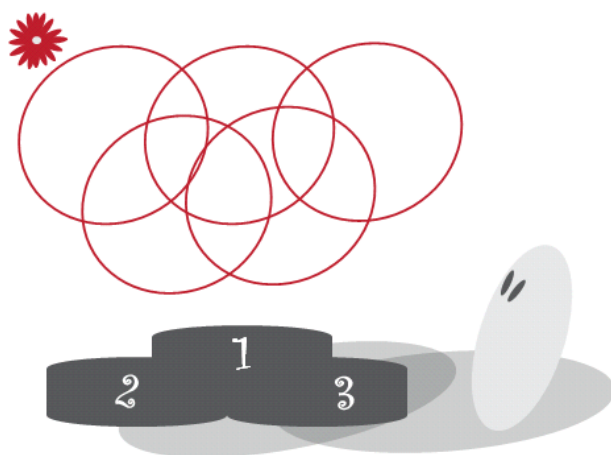
In the third article in our series 'Leadership and the Brain', Amrop guest writer, neuroscientist Dr. Tara Swart, shares some science-based, intriguing and effective ways to lift our business brains from bronze, to silver, to gold-medal standard.

If businesses are more focused than ever on excellent performance and competitive edge, might there be such a concept as brain Olympics? If, in the corporate world, high-calibre self-awareness and self-belief are increasingly valued, how can we maintain - or improve - our brain fitness?

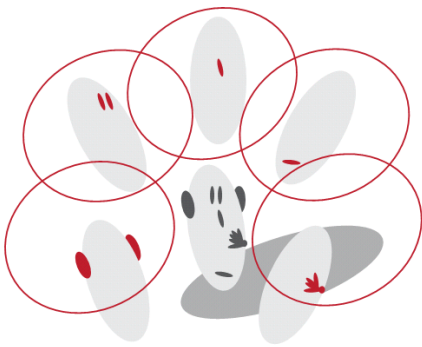
For, as sport psychology consultant Seth M. Quealy puts it: "Having the mental edge is about being able to think just enough to be mindful but not so much that your mind's full!"

In the sporting Olympics, the five rings represent the five continents. The five rings of our *Brain Olympics* represent the five senses: smell, taste, touch, vision and hearing. It is via these five senses that our brain knows what is going on in the world – receiving vital information from our nose, tongue, skin, eyes and ears. In today's business environment, we are increasingly aware of the importance of integrating logic and emotion via the left and right hemispheres of the brain. Yet the brain-body axis is equally vital.

Let's take a tour of the senses – their relationship with our brain functioning, and the ways in which we can work with them to become Business Olympians.



There is a map of the body in the sensory cortex of the brain called the *homunculus*. It appears somewhat distorted, as the parts of the body with the most sensory neurons are most highly represented.



**Smell** is the most emotive of all the senses. The olfactory nerve travels directly from the nose to a part of the brain close to the emotional centres - the *limbic system*. (All the other senses involve nerves that travel around the cranium before carrying information back to the brain). The *hippocampus* is the part of the brain where emotions are linked to memories and some of the most vivid are strongly associated with smells. The salty tang of the sea, the fresh scent of newly-cut grass or the damp smell of earth after rain can invoke strong childhood memories. Which smell is most redolent for you? How could you work with this to create positive thoughts and emotions?

**Taste** can optimize our brain functionality, too. Truly savoring a fragrant cup of tea or a rich piece of dark chocolate will give your brain a minute between meetings and bring you back to the present. This is a form of *mindfulness*. When we are not mindful, challenges can deplete our resilience more markedly. When an interaction with another person leaves a 'bad taste in your mouth', what could it mean?

**Touch**, in terms of brain-body connection, is about considering the information with which your largest organ – the skin - is providing you. In the sensory cortex of the brain lies a map of the body called the *homunculus*. It appears somewhat distorted, as the parts of the body with the most sensory neurons are most highly represented. As such, the lips and fingertips appear much larger than the arms and legs. When you feel the hairs on the back of your neck stand up or experience goose bumps, what is your ancient neural architecture telling you?

**Vision** is probably our most-used sense. Novelty is good for the brain, so 'look out' for something fresh every day and actively work with the positive potential of vision. The social neurosciences tell us that the most eye contact occurs between two women, the least between two men, with moderate levels between a man and a woman. Notice what happens if you really look someone in the eye when you shake their hand. Bill Clinton was particularly good at making eye-contact and utilized it to build trust and rapport.

**Hearing** is more powerful than we might think. Next time you have a list of goals you are trying to achieve or behavioral habits to embed, try reading them out loud. When you do this, you are using three parts of the brain: *Wernicke's area*, which understands written and spoken language, *Broca's area*, which has functions linked to speech production and the *temporal lobe*, which holds the auditory centres of the brain. This is why vocalizing your goals reinforces the message to your brain much more strongly than silent reading alone.

## Going For Gold

With the basics in place, what can we do to attain Bronze, Silver or Gold in the Brain Olympics?

- Bronze - Energy
- Silver – Resilience
- Gold – Higher Purpose

**At bronze level**, healthy nutrition and basic exercise requirements should be met. This involves performing 30 minutes of cardiovascular exercise on most days of the week. The serotonin-boosting effect can be equivalent to the effect of a low dose of an anti-depressant. It has been reported to boost productivity at work by as much as 15% on the days exercise takes place in the morning

How about exercising outdoors? When combined with the beneficial effects of fresh air and exposure to sunlight, the brain boosting power of sport is increased even further, as oxygen and glucose are vital fuels for the brain. The pineal gland needs sunlight to regulate our sleep-wake cycle - with cascade effects on mood and stress levels.

A healthy, balanced diet, rich in antioxidants and supplemented with vitamins and omega oils, is vital. The brain, although only constituting only 2% of body weight, consumes 20% of its glucose intake in a critical 'just in time' delivery system and cannot store glucose for later use. Bearing this in mind should encourage you to practice regular, nutritious eating to avoid defaulting to unconscious biases and low trust levels. The brain is constantly scanning for threats and if there is not enough fuel available, it will not be used to generate trust, but saved to ensure survival.

**The silver level** is about doing all of the above, as well as regularly ensuring enough good quality sleep. Six to eight hours are recommended - although this will vary from person to person. As long as you are waking up refreshed, having dreamt enough, you are probably allowing sufficient resting time to allow your brain to build up resources for resilience.

The main reasons that this does not occur are:

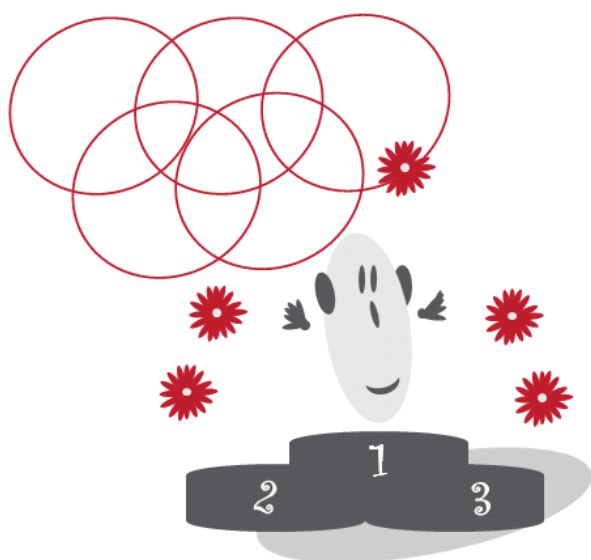
- Misuse of caffeine (caffeine should be avoided after 2pm)
- Use of substances such as nicotine and alcohol. These should be minimized generally and avoided altogether for two hours prior to bed time
- Use of digital media should be ceased at least one hour before going to bed

The serotonin-boosting effect of exercise can be equivalent to a low dose of anti-depressant.

When the brain is resilient, people perform more proficiently under pressure and are better able regulate their emotions, multi-task, think flexibly and creatively, solve complex problems, be responsive to behavioural demands and make the best decisions or choices in the short and long term.

**Gold standard** – with energy and resilience in place, and having invested in personal and professional development to integrate logic and emotion, there is now time to focus on fine-tuning intuition, unleashing innovative capability and thinking about leaving a legacy. To achieve this, like any Olympian, the talented and ambitious Leader For What's Next can be helped by a brain-based coach.

As Alvin Toffler says, "the illiterate of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will not be those who can't read or write but those who cannot learn, unlearn and re-learn." An understanding of neuroplasticity and the practical application of neuroscience to coaching is revolutionizing leadership development, producing more Gold medal-winning executives all around the world.



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Bearing this in mind should encourage you to practice regular eating to avoid defaulting to unconscious biases and low trust levels.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

If the five rings of the Brain Olympics represent the five senses, here is how we can work with the senses to become true Business Olympians.

- 1 In the *hippocampus*, emotions are linked to memories. The most vivid are strongly associated with smells. Use fragrances from positive childhood moments to stimulate positive thoughts and emotions.
- 2 Take a moment to savor a healthy treat between meetings. This creates mindfulness, and as such, increases your resilience to challenges and difficult interactions.
- 3 The *sensory cortex* contains the *homunculus*, a map in which the body parts with the most sensory neurons – the lips and fingertips – are the most highly represented. When you feel the hairs on the back of your neck stand up, or goose bumps, ask yourself what your ancient neural architecture may be telling you...
- 4 The most eye contact occurs between two women, the least between two men, moderately, between a man and a woman. Notice the trust- and rapport-building effect of looking someone in the eye when you shake their hand.
- 5 Vocalizing a list of goals or desired new habits activates three parts of the brain – *Wernicke's* and *Broca's* areas, and the *temporal lobe*. Try reading out loud rather than silent reading if you want to make a change.
- 6 Take simple steps to get to gold standard:
  - **BRONZE** On most days, take 30 minutes of cardiovascular exercise to boost serotonin, lifting your mood and potentially boosting your productivity by 15% (if you exercise in the morning). Try exercising outdoors to feed your pineal gland with sunlight and regulate your sleep-wake cycle, and relish the positive effects on your mood and stress levels.
  - As the brain immediately consumes 20% of its glucose intake and is constantly scanning for threats, regular eating, rich in antioxidants, supplemented with vitamins and omega oils to avoid defaulting to unconscious biases and low trust levels.
  - **SILVER** Ensure 6-8 hours of good quality sleep. Avoid caffeine after 2pm, minimize nicotine and alcohol and avoid altogether for 2 hours prior to bed time. Stop digital media use at least 1 hour before going to bed. Waking up refreshed, having dreamt enough, will allow your brain to build up resources for resilience.
  - **GOLD** Having integrated all the above into your routine, you can now focus on fine-tuning your intuition, innovative ability and focus on your legacy. To do this, you can seek the support of a brain-based coach.

## About the Author

*With a PhD in neuroscience and a successful career as a medical doctor behind her, Dr. Tara Swart is a unique leadership coach who stands at the forefront of the application of neuroscience to business.*

Tara is an Oxford University-trained doctor who specialized in psychiatry for seven years. Coupled with a PhD in neuroscience and experience in leadership, culture and strategy consulting, this enables Tara to apply a profound understanding of human performance and behavior patterns to the transformational and sustainable coaching of business leaders and their teams around the world.

She has 20 publications in journals of neuroscience and coaching and is co-author of the book on creativity and productivity 'An Attitude for Acting'. A key note speaker on the brain in business, she delivers talks at blue chip corporations and educational institutions including Stanford Graduate School of Business, Columbia University, Oxford SAID and MIT Sloan. Topics include: 'Neuroscience in Business' (learning, neuroplasticity, empathy, teams) 'Your Brain on Money' (risk-taking, resilience, innovation) 'Sex on the Brain' (gender differences at work, unconscious bias, diversity) 'Look At Me, Don't Just Like Me' (emotional intelligence, smart media, technology) and 'The Neuroscience of Human Error' (safety, decision-making, leadership).

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## About Amrop

With 77 offices in 55 countries, Amrop provides services in Executive Search, Leadership Assessment and Board Consulting. It is the largest partnership of its kind.

Amrop's Context Driven approach to executive search helps our clients find Leaders For What's Next - top talent, adept at working across borders in markets around the world.



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