

How Project Managers Can Get the Best out of their Teams



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Louise Morrisey

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Ref Michelle Bihary Workplace Resilience Australia

Anyone who is responsible for managing large numbers of workers on the jobsite knows the challenges that must be dealt with on a daily basis: everything from client demands, to missed deliveries, to amended deadlines. These stresses can have a real effect on decision making, and lead to more problems down the line.

Adequate and effective collaboration plays a massive role in easing complicated workflows, and part of this involves leveraging the most important tool we have to hand: our brains.

Jobsite ANZ spoke with Michelle Bihary about how project managers can better understand the needs of their team and themselves through a close examination of different brain functions.

Bihary has extensive experience as a mental health and leadership consultant. She has previously worked for Beyond Blue and is now the Managing Director of [Workplace Resilience](#), a training institute that helps employees to thrive through individual resilience skills. Unpacking the various brain functions is a handy step project managers can take when learning to manage large teams on jobsites.

The ‘Reptile Brain’

Bihary refers to the brain stem as the ‘reptile brain.’

“The primary function of the brain stem (reptile brain) is survival. This part of the brain is constantly monitoring the environment to make sure you are physically and psychologically safe. Psychological safety is less of a challenge than it might have been a hundred years ago, but psychological safety has become much more prominent.”

This brain function is essential for survival and avoidance of danger. However, it is more reactive than proactive. On the jobsite, quick reactive movements can often mean the difference between safety and injury – one of the many reasons staying alert is so crucial.

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The Limbic System

Moving up from the brain stem is the middle part of the brain which is referred to as the limbic system.

“Those regions are all about processing emotions and storing memory. When we are going through a lot emotionally this is where we can get a little bit stuck,” said Bihary.

These thoughts can become a real distraction for managers or workers on the jobsite who may not be functioning at their highest levels, potentially leading to not only decreased performance, but increased risk of accidents.

“It’s really good to talk about our feelings and to write them down, or whatever it is to process it so they take up less space in our head,” says Bihary.

Taking the time to talk with workers who may be going through personal issues, or removing yourself during times of emotional stress, can help unburden the mind and allow managers to make better use of the next level: the executive brain.

The ‘Executive Brain’

Bihary stresses the importance of getting into the habit of making use of the ‘executive brain.’

“The highest part of our brain which is behind our forehead is the middle pre-frontal cortex or the ‘executive brain.’ That’s where you bring together your highest cognitive abilities. It controls your ability to think strategically, laterally and creatively, where you have psychological ability, emotional awareness, and allows you to be more driven by your values.”

Project managers who are able to use the executive brain often are more in tune with their team and are able to proactively employ strategic long-term thinking.

Bihary uses the analogy of road rage to describe danger of ignoring the executive brain.

“When people are triggered, like with road rage, their executive brain is just completely offline and they are not performing at their peak.”

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Managers need to understand their personal triggers and the triggers for their team. This may be anything from dealing with difficult clients, struggling with unreasonable deadlines or combating a feeling of being overworked. Identifying these triggers and taking the time to use the executive brain to work through solutions will yield the best results.

Improving Decision Making

The executive brain is something that can be developed over time.

“Our brain is continually sculpting and changing through our relationships, through the things we are thinking about, and through the environment. It gives people a greater sense of control and influence.”

Bihary concludes by suggesting three daily practices to develop the executive brain.

- 1 Take five deep breathes, five times a day to disconnect from the outside world and strengthen the inside world
- 2 Each morning, think about how we want to show up in the world
- 3 Each day consider what sort of energy do we want to bring along to work

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