

Brief Encounter with the Taos Institute

May 2015



Relational Leading, Neurons, and Grandmothers

By Allen Moore, Ph.D.

What memories come to mind when you hear the word *grandmother*? I knew my maternal grandmother only during my youngest preschool years, so the memories are few and yet they remain intimately near. Her soft gray hair swept back into a bun, her wrinkled skin, her gentle eyes, calming voice, and kind spirit. She smelled like her kitchen; was an alchemist of cornbread, fresh churned butter, garden greens, fried chicken. Memories of my grandmother, stored away and reviewed countless times over these many years.

But where, exactly, are these memories stored? Is there a specific small set of neurons in my brain – like a cabinet drawer -- dedicated to these memories? If some injury damaged or removed these neurons, would my memory of grandmother be lost forever?

Neuroscientists frequently engage in this debate over “grandmother cells.” Some, in an idea appropriately known as *sparseness*, advocate that each memory is held within a few local neurons – like a cabinet drawer or office file folder. More widely accepted, however, is the opposing concept of *distributed representation theory*. From this stance, the memory of grandmother resides in a wide, diverse ensemble of neurons across various cortical areas, bringing together the wrinkles, face, gray hair, smells, and events into a complex conceptual representation – and as this wonderful distributed ensemble synchronously fires together, grandmother vividly emerges.

In my work as a consultant, I am often asked to engage with an organization to help “improve their leadership.” Entering the engagement, I am tempted to ask just where exactly they think their leadership exists. Is it locked away in a cabinet drawer? Following sparseness theory, do they assume that leadership resides only in a few critical senior executive neurons at corporate headquarters? As one who chooses a relational perspective, I’m much more biased toward the distributed representation camp.

From a relational perspective, Leadership is not held within any one leader, just as cognition in a relational neuro theory does not reside within a single neuron. Leadership and cognition both emerge through a beautiful synchronous dance of relational interaction across a wide array of contributors. Neuroscience makes use of an fMRI – an imaging technology that allows us to see this dance of neurons “lighting up” as they synchronously fire together in response to stimuli. As a consultant, I try to look for the same in organizations – what do I see “light up” as leadership in response to the stimuli of environment shifts, market opportunities, competitive threats, employee needs? Where are the synchronous,

interactive relationships of leadership that are needed to activate, energize, and move into co-action?

Neurotheory describes our brains as having the wonderful capacity for neuroplasticity: they can change the relationships between neurons, strengthening some, pruning others, to dynamically create new patterns of interaction and thus new forms of cognition. My view of an organization's leadership is similar: since leadership is relational interaction, it has plasticity -- it can be dynamically re-formed, strengthened, pruned, and edited to create new possibilities that did not previously exist. Where should it "light up" into co-action; what relational changes would better support the interaction required to generate new possibilities and new outcomes?

Leadership is far too wondrously complex to fit into a model labeled sparseness; it is much more than just the sum of individual leaders. Viewing Leadership as distributed throughout the organization, an abundant set of dynamic relationships emerges. This *capacity* of leadership is observed as the organization's ability to make sense of environmental challenges or opportunities, to invoke shared practices, and to continually learn and adapt toward shared purpose. When this capacity is reduced, there are a few areas the practitioner can seek to strengthen: the webs of relationships, the emphasis on community and clarification of shared purpose, the quality of dialog, the adoption of shared practices, and the courage to iterate forward into the unknown.

Relational theory, grandmothers and neurons all support an understanding that knowing exists in relating.

Allen Moore is the Senior Partner and Global Head for executive coaching at Korn Ferry. He is also a Founding Fellow with the Institute of Coaching at Harvard's McLean Medical School. He received his PhD from Tilburg University with a dissertation on Relational Leadership, and is part of the Taos faculty for the MSc program in Relational Leading. As a Taos Associate, Allen welcomes any feedback, questions, or communication. Email: Allen.Moore@kornferry.com