



Brains Favor the Ridiculously In Charge Leader

HENRY CLOUD, PH.D.



You know what's weird?

My client, CEO of a \$20 billion company, looked at me with one of those expressions that smart people sometimes get when something extra smart goes off in their heads, the kind of thought that captures even their own attention. Head tilted and eyes squinted, he said something profound: “You know what’s weird?”

“What?” I asked.

“Everybody out there is always trying to figure out the right plan. They meet, they argue, they worry and they put all of their energy into trying to come up with the ‘right’ plan. But the truth is that there are five right plans. There are a lot of ways to get there. The real problem is getting the people to do what it takes to make the plan work. That is where you win or lose. It’s always about the people.”

He was right. Ultimately, leadership is about turning a vision into reality; it’s about producing real results in the real world. And that is only done through people doing what it takes to make it happen. So, as a leader, how do you get that to happen? What are the things that you have to do to ensure they will do what will make it work? What do you have to do with a team, a direct report, or an entire organization?

In the field of leadership, volumes have been written about those questions, and there are a lot of great answers and examples of people who do it well. Many constructs have surfaced over the years that have been studied, and applied with great results about how to get teams, individuals and organizations moving in the right direction through casting a vision and executing a strategy to realize that vision and get results. But... not always.

And that brings us to an interesting question of “why?” Why is it that some leaders are able to get those results when they implement those principles? When they cast vision, engage talent, work towards execution, create and implement strategy... great results happen. Yet, other leaders do not get those same results, even with good plans? Why?

Why is it that some leaders do everything that leadership requires, and yet still do not get the results that are desired or are needed? When they are both practicing “good leadership,” why do some get results and others don’t?

In my leadership coaching and consulting work, that is often the question at hand that leaders want to address. “What really matters? How can I make all of this effort get results?” Said another way, what are the real factors that make the difference between two leaders who are doing very similar things, while one of them is getting great results and the other isn’t? That is what leaders most often want to know.

The fact is that most leaders are doing their best to create a captivating vision and execute a strategy to get that vision to come to pass. They are working hard. Yet, as my client correctly identified, as hard as a leader might work even when doing the “right things” on the “right plan,” they do not always get the right outcomes. They want to do better. They want to know, “What is it that creates ‘better’?”

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In my experience, which is increasingly supported by the findings of scientific research, I think so much of the answer lies in the brain. Simply said, some leaders practice these same disciplines of leadership in ways that people’s brains can actually follow them, and others don’t. Said another way, two leaders can both be casting vision, implementing strategy, engaging talent, creating teams and driving for results, while one of them doing those things in a way that people’s brains can follow and the other is not. That is often why one leader’s “plan” is working, and the other’s is not. It is really not about the plan at all. It is about how the leader is leading and whether or not he or she is leading in a way that can be followed. Are they leading in ways that cause people’s brains to work better, or worse? That is the question here.

Brain research has given us great insights into what makes people perform and what hinders them from performing well. Much that we have learned from neuroscience sheds light on why some leaders are winning and some are not. And the good news is that these findings are really applicable in day-to-day leadership. My experience has been that when leaders execute the disciplines of leadership, and do them in a way that people can actually follow, results happen. The plan works. And vice versa. So what does leadership look like that is aligned with people's brains?



The Essential “Boundaries For Leaders”

I believe that among all of the things that a leader does, one of the most important is to set “boundaries.” Basically, a “boundary” is a property line. It defines what will exist on a property and what will not. The property line around your home is like that. It defines where your property begins and ends, and you are in charge of exactly what will happen on that property—and, to our point here, within your business or organization.

Leaders must establish some key boundaries in some very key areas if they want to get results. And, thanks to brain research, we now can scientifically get a peek into why the leaders who do establish these kinds of boundaries get the results that they get. Let's take a look at those key boundaries.

BOUNDARY #1

The Boundaries of Focus—“So, What Are We Doing?”

For the brain to accomplish any goal, to move anything from A to Z, it must do three things: attend, inhibit, and establish a working memory. What this means is that for people’s brains to reach a goal or bring a vision to reality, they must attend to what is relevant to making that happen, inhibit what is not, and create a flow of memory so that the brain is not starting over, over and over again.

For example, when you drive from your home to 7-11, you have to attend to the relevant data, such as oncoming traffic, your speed, what turn is next, what lane you are in, etc. You must also inhibit everything else, like not texting, or watching a video while you drive, or having someone scream at you. And you must know what your last turn was as well, i.e. working memory. You are in an attention flow.

This is what the great leaders do. In a multitude of ways, they get their people, teams and organization to attend to what actually drives results, inhibit everything else, and they keep it in front of them on an ongoing basis to create a working memory.

Take Steve Jobs, for example. When he returned to Apple, there were over thirty versions of the Mac. He walked around wondering which one to tell a friend to buy. Then, one day in a meeting, he stood up and screamed something like “This is crazy!”

He walked up to the board and drew a 2x2 matrix. Across the top columns, he wrote “Consumer and Pro” and across the rows he wrote “Desktop and Portable.” And he said that Apple would only make 4 computers, one for each quadrant. The room went silent. (taken from Walter Isaacson, “Steve Jobs,” NY: Simon and Schuster, 2011)

The reason was that clarity of attention had entered the picture. Their brains could then get focused again on what was relevant and what would forever be inhibited. Then they created a working memory of that focus and took over the world. Today, when you go into an Apple store, you will see limited, focused choices—clarity, attention, and inhibition. (Jobs said that he was as proud of what Apple didn’t make as he was what they did.)

Leaders who lead in ways that let their teams and organizations know what to focus on and what not to, and always keep that current and in front of people, are literally making people’s brains function at higher levels. The “executive functions” of the brain are able to work like they are designed to work, with creativity, problem solving, goal orientation, perseverance, adaptability, etc., etc. That is why you hire smart people, right? For their brains. So you have to lead them in a way that they can follow—attend, inhibit, and working memory.

BOUNDARY #2

The Boundary of the Emotional Climate—“What Does It Feel Like To Work Here?”

In my new book, *Boundaries For Leaders*, I tell the following true story:

The founder of a successful manufacturing company was in the process of succession planning and was grooming his son to take over the business. One day, as he walked through the factory, he saw his son angrily berating an employee in front of the person’s coworkers. A lot of yelling, put-downs, and shaming—apparently it was an awful sight.

The father returned to his office and called his son to come see him. When his son arrived, he said the following:

“David,” he began, “I wear two hats around here. I am the boss, and I am your father. Right now, I am going to put my boss hat on. You’re fired. You are done here. I will not have that kind of behavior in my company and will not ever tolerate employees treated that way. I have warned you about this kind of thing before, and you are still doing it. So, I have to let you go.”

Then, he said, “Now, I am going to put on my father hat.” After a moment’s pause, he continued.

“Son, I heard you just lost your job. How can I help you?”

There is so much right with that story, I don't know where to begin. But it does make one wonder what would be so important to this leader that he would fire his own son, and leave himself with no successor, much less some interesting family dynamic to contend with later?

I can give you one great reason: the emotional climate of his company. Why? His people's brains.

Simply stated, our brains work best when in a positive emotional state, and conversely, don't work well at all in a negative emotional state. In fact, when a person feels under threat, their brain releases stress hormones that actually interfere with higher-level thinking, and all of the capacities that leaders want people to have. They instantly go into "fight or flight" mode, and begin either to resist leadership (fight) or move away in some fashion, like avoid engagement or begin sending out resume's (flight).

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There is so much research on what toxic stress does to performance that one of the most important things a leader can do is to ask, “how are my people feeling?” While this may seem soft and sound like psychobabble to many business leaders, it is pure scientific fact. People do not do well when they are afraid, if it is the wrong kind of fear.

There is a good fear, such as fear of reality. An accountant should “fear” April 15th, as it is a very real deadline where bad things happen if he or she does not perform. Leaders need to create a sense of urgency around real consequences of not performing. But that is different than putting people in a state of toxic emotional threat. When leaders do that, they are working against themselves.

BOUNDARY #3

The Boundary Against Disconnection—“Where’s My Buddy?”

I remember when I was in graduate school a study where they took a monkey and put him in a cage and scared the daylights out of him, using loud noises, flashing lights and the like. Then, they measured his stress level by measuring the amount of stress hormones in the brain, specifically cortisol. What we know about cortisol is that it makes you go into “fight or flight” syndrome. In high levels for prolonged periods of time it is not good for thinking, as we saw

above. And a scared monkey, or human, has way too much cortisol to be thinking well. So, the researchers measured the monkeys to get a baseline.

Then, they kept the scary lights and sound levels the same, so that external conditions had not changed any. (Think bad markets, rising tax rates, poor economic conditions and lots of competition and you know how the monkey is feeling.) Said another way, amount of stress was the same as when they took the first reading of the stress levels.

But, they added one more factor: they opened the door to the cage and put another monkey in there with him. In other words, they put his buddy in there so he was not in it alone. Then they took the stress levels again.

The result? The stress levels dropped in half—just because he had his buddy in the cage with him. Incredible, but a huge lesson for leaders: Get your people connected and put strong boundaries in place that keep them from getting fragmented, silo-ed, and alone. Connection and unity fuels strong brain functioning.

Basically, the brain runs on oxygen, glucose and, surprisingly, relationship. So, get your people breathing, eating, and connecting. There is real power in connected teams and buddy systems. It is one reason when a Special Ops warrior, like a Navy SEAL parachutes in to enemy territory,

he asks three questions: “Where am I? Where is the enemy? And....Where is my buddy?” So, what business leaders must ask themselves is, “how am I making sure that everyone has their buddies?”

In the winter of 2008-9, I saw this in incredible circumstances. I was doing a lot of work on Wall St., in financial services and also in the real estate industry. Both of those industries, caught in the middle of the financial meltdown, were feeling like the monkeys in a very scary cage.

But, in different companies, I saw very different leadership behavior.

In some, I saw leaders looking at the numbers and driving people harder to “do something.” They were living out their own fight or flight behavior, and sometimes even fighting the ones that should have been their allies, driving them into hiding and isolation to get away. But in some other companies, I saw leaders who got in line with the ways that brains actually work. They did the opposite and got their people even more connected.

In one project I worked on, the CEO commissioned putting together groups of the highest performers in 20 markets and gave them structured time to process how the downturn was affecting them and their business. We then took all of that data, figured out the key issues and built a program for close to 10,000 brokers to get together, connect, and process it all together. The results in performance were marked. As they got connected, they developed not only

strategies, but energy. Scores of them wrote in talking about what getting together to process around the issues was doing for them and their business.

The lesson here, though, goes way beyond times of crisis. In great companies, leaders make sure connection is happening in ongoing ways. It is not about periodic “team building” although that can be a part of it. Instead, it is about making sure that they have built a culture where people frequently connect in what I call their “need states,” meaning that they are connecting with each other when they need something.

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When they are confused, or losing, or need coaching, or hit a tough deal they need help with, they are connected to a team or a person. When there are obstacles and tough waters to negotiate, they are not alone. The leadership question is “do I have a culture of connecting or one of hiding and isolating? Said in a psychological way, “can people be vulnerable with each other?” In good times and bad?

Monkeys need monkeys, period. Brains need connection, support and energy from outside themselves. Great teams and companies have a lot of “stickiness” that fuels high-performance. Leaders make sure of it.

BOUNDARY #4

The Boundary Against Negative Thinking—“Yes We Can”

If the brain is the computer, and the neurons are the hardware, thinking is the software. Thinking drives the hardware to do its work. Said another way, it tells the computer what to do. And in terms of a leader’s work, “software engineer” is certainly part of the job description.

There are two killer software viruses in the thinking of high performance teams and companies: negativity and powerlessness. But the good news is that we know a lot about them and how to sniff them out when they occur.

In terms of negativity, one paradigm that I like to have companies use is the simple formula of learning to recognize optimism vs. pessimism. Certainly optimism is easy to see, but I find that great gains are made when you teach leaders and high performers to recognize the seeds of the “pessimism virus” when it begins to take root in a team or an organization. As researcher Martin Seligman described, pessimism can be seen in the ways that people “interpret” events.

Pessimistic software interprets distinct events in three predictable ways, called the “three P’s:” Personal, Pervasive, and Permanent.

It works this way. Someone is working on a deal, and it does not go through. He or she wasn’t able to close it. Then, the three P’s kick in to “interpret” that event in a negative way:

Personal: “No wonder it didn’t close... I am not a good closer or dealmaker. I don’t have what it takes.” The event is interpreted to mean something “bad” about their personhood, or even the “personhood” of the company: “No wonder it didn’t close... we don’t have the market share and reputation to close a deal like this. Our competitors are so much bigger and stronger.”

Pervasive: “And it is not just this deal... all of my business is gong bad. In fact, our whole company is lagging behind. And, the industry is horrible too. And, when I really think about it, my whole life isn’t that great.”

Permanent: “And the truth is that it is not going to get any better next month, or next quarter, or next year, either. It won’t ever change. It is just going to be like this. Nothing is going to make it any different. This is the new normal.

Once this software takes over in an individual or a team, then action ceases. I saw various industry leaders in the bad economy grind to a virtual standstill once they began to think this way.

Their negative thinking was just causing them to get stuck in the mud. The brain's drive to aggressive initiation and goal orientation shuts down and performance stops.

But, the good news is that once they began to see it, observe it, challenge it, and change it, performance returned just by changing their thinking.

I had one high performer in financial services who was stuck in the three P's log his thinking as he thought about calling his key customers both before and after the call. What was going through his head in this hard time was incredible: "they are all mad at me for their losses this year because I am an idiot ... they will be bugged when I call ... they are going to find someone else, etc."

Once he began to challenge those thoughts and write down what actually happened, and learn to dispute the negative software with more realistic and positive thinking, it all began to turn around. "I am sure they are not happy. This is a hard time. But that does not mean that it is about me. And they are going to be glad to know that I am still in there with them, figuring it out. And if they are bugged with me, I can enter into that conversation and turn it all around. I can listen and help them through it and change their perception. And if they leave, that is only one client and I will go on to saving the next one. We can turn this around."

When we did this in teams, it was incredible. It is amazing to see what happens when leaders make a time and place to address the thinking of their people. For one, it gets it out in the

open and they find that in hard times, many key people might be giving into negativity. Second, once they name it for what it is, an actual “thinking virus,” they can address it and change it. And third, some of what people are thinking contain very real problems that need to be addressed, and for which there are good answers. I remember one company where we found that a lot of the negativity had to do with their size in relation to a competitor who was doing a huge media buy, and they felt “we are too small to do that, so we can’t win.” Once they got that out in the open, they addressed it with a strategy to sell to their customers with a campaign that convinced the customer that because they were small, they were in a better position to understand their needs and service them. They won.

“If the brain is the computer, and the neurons are the hardware, thinking is the software. Thinking drives the hardware to do its work.”

Powerlessness is just as bad. When the brain goes pessimistic, a syndrome kicks in called “learned helplessness.” What that means is that, when forces that are affecting someone are out of their control, the brain begins to think “well, nothing I do will make any difference, so I won’t do anything.” And initiation, follow-through, and overall performance begin to shut down,

and proves the negative to be right. A leader must always get rid of “nothing we do will matter” thinking and keep everyone in a proactive mode. The prevailing thinking has to be “we will find a way” software. There is always a way—always.

And if there isn't, the proactive mind opens up the new way that the obstacle created the opportunity for. But the helpless, negative mind does not innovate new possibilities. It is too tired.

BOUNDARY #5

The Control Boundary—“What Can I Do That Matters?”

At the heart of the learned helplessness dynamic that we just discussed is the feeling of powerlessness. When people are affected by things that they cannot control—like a bad market, the competition, the home office, or the parent company—they can go into a brain state that works against performance. As I mentioned above, their brain pretty much says “nothing will make a difference.”

But the key for leaders to remember is that powerless thinking comes from people's focus on things that they cannot control, like the list in the previous paragraph. And, as a result, their brain begins to think that it can control “nothing.” So it does “nothing.” Action stops. Dead in the water person equals dead in the water team equals dead in the water company.

But, the reality is that nothing is farther from the truth. Each person does have things under their direct control that they can do to make a difference. The problem is that many leaders do not help them connect the dots to know what they do control that actually affects results. That is one of the key boundaries that leaders are responsible for: structuring people's roles so they know what they have control of that affects results.

I often fly a particular airline that is right now going through reorganization, and has been for a few years. As a leadership coach, I am interested in how their leader is doing with their people to lead this massive change initiative, so I always informally interview flight attendants when I am on the plane. I ask a simple question: "So how's the reorg going?" After probably a hundred interviews, I have not received one positive response. Not one. There is a real disconnect with the CEO and the upper leadership.

But as I look further, I see one of the big disconnects having to do with this dynamic of control. Apparently, no leader has told the flight attendants, gate and ticket agents that while they might not have control of "management's" decisions, and are worried about benefits and pensions, airlines that are thriving have a lot more money to go around to all of their employees' benefits and pensions. And airlines that have money are thriving, and the ones who are thriving are doing so because customers are deciding to fly their airline, instead of looking for a new one to fly (like I am and a lot of other frequent fliers on this negative airline)!

And customers decide to fly thriving airlines because the flight attendants and other customer-facing people are nice to them and make them happy to be there. And... the flight attendants and gate agents are absolutely in control of making that happen. What is under their control?

They could smile.

Or be helpful. Or have an attitude that would make people want to choose their airline over others and do it again. They have more control over whether or not some big company buys millions of dollars of tickets with them than their corporate sales department does, for they are the ones who are taking care of those travel decision makers from the customer companies. So, take control of what you can control, and smile. You will make billions for your company and that is how you will end up with the contract that you want. You are in control of things that affect results. Real dollar results. Trust me... I am shopping.

Leaders in every industry set the boundaries to help people see what they have control of that drives results. Don't count sales, count the number of leads you generate each day and the number of calls you make. Don't just count the acquisitions you make, count the number of targets you identified each week and initiated due diligence on. Count the calls to key accounts you made. As a leader, count the coaching sessions you are having with key performers to

up their performance. In other words, count the behaviors that actually drive results and show people what behaviors they are in control of that are the drivers of actual results.

It turns out that neuroscience is showing us that the brain absolutely loves control. It thrives on it.

So, do not control your people. Instead, give away control to them and empower them to be in control of their area of responsibility, and help them to take control of what they can control that makes a difference. Preach to them about control, and how much they actually have. Then set up the boundaries to hold them accountable to taking control of their areas.

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Ridiculously In Charge Leadership

I was talking to a CEO client who was discussing various issues in his company and the different people who were involved. There were cultural problems, performance issues, speed issues, etc. With each one, I would ask, “and why is that?”

Each time, he would answer and explain how it had to do with such and such a person, or dynamic, or reason. Certainly these were true. But I would ask again, “and why is that?” Soon, he got it.

“I guess I am ridiculously in charge, aren’t I?”

“Yep,” I said. “You are.”

I knew that he had really gotten it. He was the leader, and whatever existed there, on his property, existed for one of two reasons: he either created it, or allowed it. Because, he was ridiculously in charge.

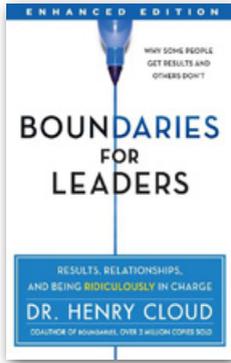
Leaders who get great results realize that. Whatever occurs within the boundaries of their leadership, the property that they are in charge of, exists because they created it or allowed it. They create or allow what exists in their teams and companies. Just look at a few of the things we have discussed here that they are ridiculously in charge of:

- Their clarity and focus of vision
- The emotional climate of the organization and teams
- The unity and connectedness of the people
- The type of positive or negative thinking
- The amount of control people have
- And other factors that we have not mentioned

When leaders realize that they are ridiculously in charge of what happens on their “property,” the lines that exist under their leadership, they ask themselves what they are either creating or allowing. And as we have seen, much of it can be improved if they take charge and establish some good boundaries that help people’s brains work well. They can create good brain cultures.

When that happens with good people, results will follow.

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Dr. Henry Cloud is a clinical psychologist with an extensive background in both inpatient and outpatient treatment programs, and he has a well-established private practice in California. He is also an international speaker and the author of the *The One-Life Solution* (Collins Business, September 2008), as well as coauthor of the bestselling *Boundaries*, *The Mom Factor*, *Raising Great Kids*, and *How People Grow*. He has been a guest on Focus on the Family with Dr. James Dobson, CBN's *The 700 Club*, Fox News Network, and many other television and radio programs.

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