The Brain Instruction Manual for Leaders

What Nobody Told You about Working with Humans

Bruna De Palo

JOHN MURRAY BUSINESS

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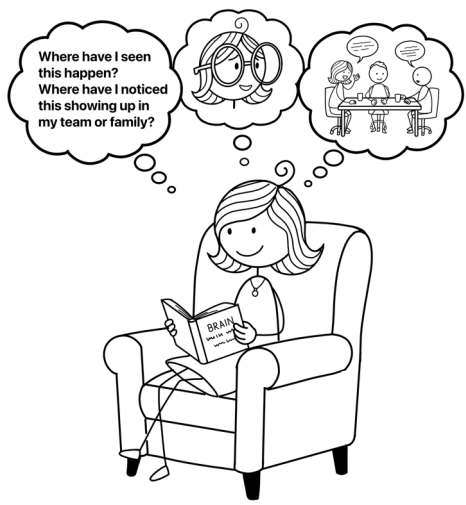
Introduction. Why Do You Get Sick When It's Time to Go on Holiday?

You finally slow down, and your body collapses.

By the end of this introduction, you'll understand why that happens and how working with your brain can save you far more than a holiday.

Scan or visit www.brunadepalo.com/extras for links, Shifts, and additional resources.



1

The Brain, Simplified (and Why It Matters for Leadership)

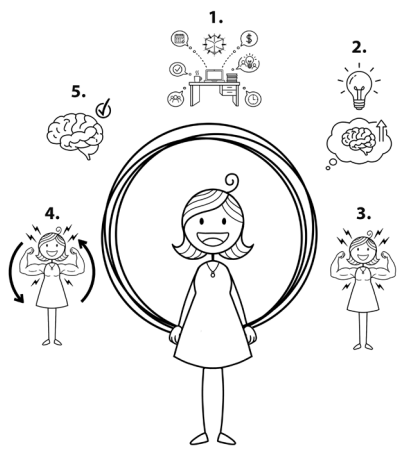
You've tried everything, and it's still harder than it should be.

By the end of this chapter, you'll see why, and why leadership becomes easier once you understand what the brain is really doing.

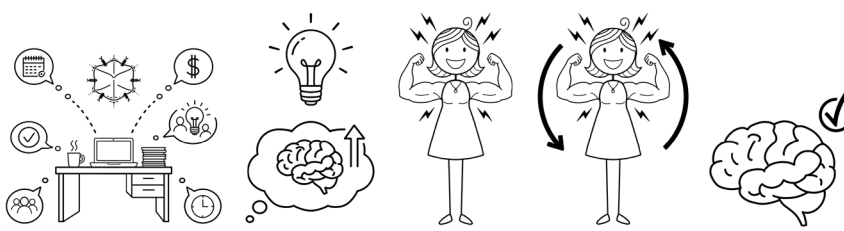
Scan or visit www.brunadepalo.com/extras for links, Shifts, and additional resources.

This is how it works in practice

1. Context →	**2. Prediction →**	**3. Body preparation →**	**4. Interoceptive signals →**	**5. Update**
The brain constructs what's going on using past experience, cultural knowledge, the environment, and expectations, and the body's current state.	It predicts what your body is likely to need next, for example, movement, focus, protection, or effort.	It adjusts the body in advance through changes in heart rate, muscle, readiness, breathing, and energy availability.	Those bodily changes continuously send signals back to the brain about what's actually happening inside you.	The brain compares what it predicted with what it senses and updates its predictions again.



The brain is constantly **predicting what will be needed next** → It **prepares the body in advance** →... and only **later checks** incoming signals to see whether the prediction was useful → If not? It updates the prediction, reallocates energy, and tries again.



Why Roger Federer *looked* effortless on court

Tennis player Roger Federer was often described as effortless on the court. His movements appeared fluid, graceful, perfectly timed, almost calm. He anticipated the trajectory of the ball with remarkable ease and seemed able to anticipate where his opponent would hit the ball next, arriving early and moving with striking efficiency. In his own words, 'I had to work very hard to make it look easy.'[6]

What may have been happening under the hood

Context →	**Prediction →**	**Body preparation →**	**Interoceptive signals →**	**Update**
Based on years of experience, Federer's brain could integrate an enormous amount of context very quickly: the opponent's posture, grip, subtle changes in movement, the score, the surface, the rhythm of the rally, and his own body state	From that context, his brain likely made earlier and more precise predictions about what would be needed next: a small adjustment in footwork, explosive movement, fine motor control, restraint rather than force, or sometimes patience instead of attack	Because the prediction came early, his body could be prepared in advance: muscles primed without excessive tension; breathing adjusted without panic; energy allocated precisely rather than defensively	His body continuously sent signals back about balance, effort, fatigue, and timing. Those signals were not ignored; they refined the prediction in real time	When the ball behaved slightly differently than expected, the prediction was updated. But because the initial guess was often close, the correction required was small

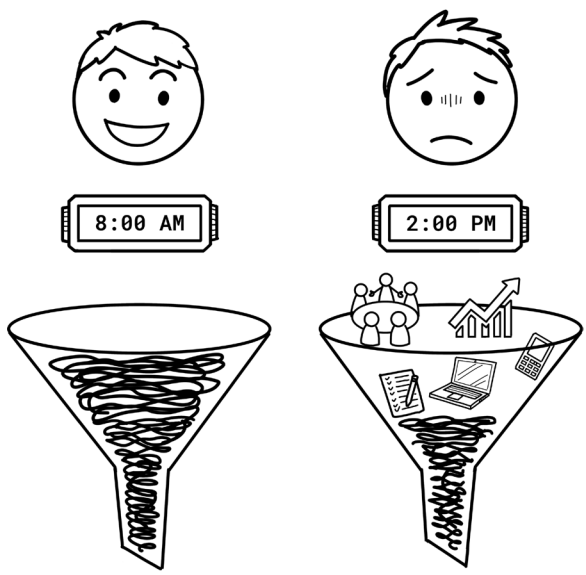
[6] From Federer's 2024 commencement address at Dartmouth College, where he was also awarded an honorary doctorate, a victory he called his 'most unexpected' ever. https://home.dartmouth.edu/news/2024/06/2024-commencement-address-roger-federer#modal

Why this looked effortless

When predictions arrive late or require constant correction, the body compensates by tensing more muscles, mobilising extra force, and reacting defensively, which is what we read as effort. Federer's hallmark elegance on court likely reflected how efficiently his brain anticipated what was needed next,allowing movement to stay light, precise, and economical.

[7] Milos Dimic, 'Anticipatory abilities of expert tennis players', paper presented at European Congress of Sports Science, Rimini, July 2025, avaialable at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/393459225_Anticipatory_Abilities_of_Expert_Tennis_Players

You can imagine your **mental energy as a funnel**. As the day goes by and demands pile up, energy drops. When the funnel is empty, there's nothing left to spend.



2
What Determines Performance?

You've tried to fix behaviour, and it didn't last.

By the end of this chapter, you'll see the switch that actually drives performance (and it has nothing to do with motivation).

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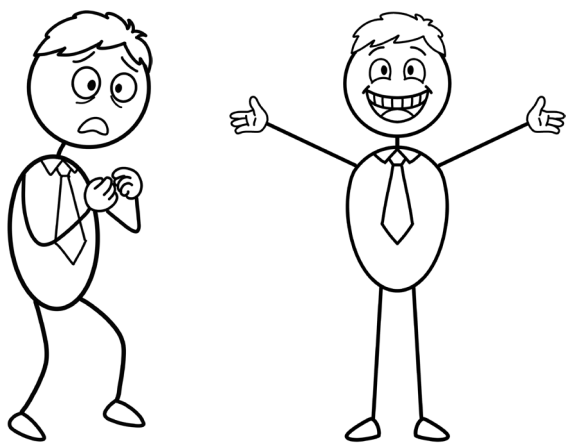
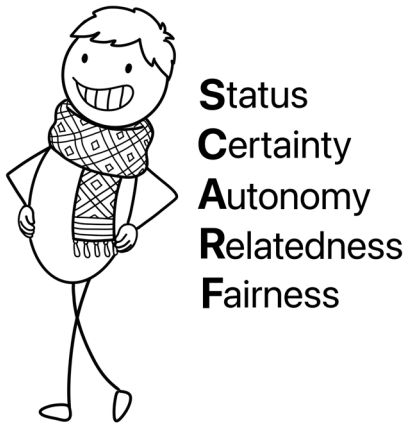
Here's what this may look like in practice when someone's system is operating in a Threat state:

When the system is in a Threat state...	What this means in practice
Energy is prioritised for protection	Less energy is available for thinking, learning, and collaboration
Attention narrows	People focus on the problem and miss alternatives, options, and solutions
Flexibility drops	Thinking becomes rigid; people struggle to adapt or change perspective
Memory and learning are reduced	Information doesn't stick; mistakes repeat
Decision making slows or becomes reactive	People avoid decisions or rush them under pressure
Creativity declines	New ideas feel risky or inaccessible
Collaboration decreases	Empathy, trust, and openness are harder to access
Behaviour becomes defensive	Justifying, withdrawing, blaming, complying, or avoiding
Short-term survival is prioritised	Long-term strategy and growth are put on hold

When the brain predicts threat → behaviour narrows.
When the brain predicts safety → behaviour expands.



These five domains are: **Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness, Fairness.**



[1] SCARF® is a trademark of the NeuroLeadership Institute. The model was first formally outlined in: David Rock, 'SCARF: A brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others', *NeuroLeadership Journal* 1 (2008): 44–59. The SCARF model was developed by David Rock and any interpretations or applications presented in this text are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the NeuroLeadership Institute. The SCARF model is presented here as a conceptual framework, not as a diagnostic or clinical tool.

Here's a quick snapshot of how the SCARF domains typically show up when safety is threatened or supported.

SCARF domain	When safety may feel threatened	When safety is supported
Status	Feeling ignored, undervalued, or diminished	Visible appreciation, recognition, respect
Certainty	Ambiguity, unclear expectations, unpredictability	Clarity, transparency, predictable processes
Autonomy	Micromanagement, rigid rules, lack of choice	Room to decide, contribute, and influence
Relatedness	Feeling excluded, misunderstood, or *not one of us*	Connection, belonging, a clear sense of *we*
Fairness	Perceived unfairness or inconsistent treatment	Transparency, clear reasoning, consistency

3
Why Understanding Emotions Is Non-negotiable for Business

You've been taught to control emotions, or ignore them at work.

By the end of this chapter, you'll see why that's not right, and why emotions are one of the most precise performance tools you have.

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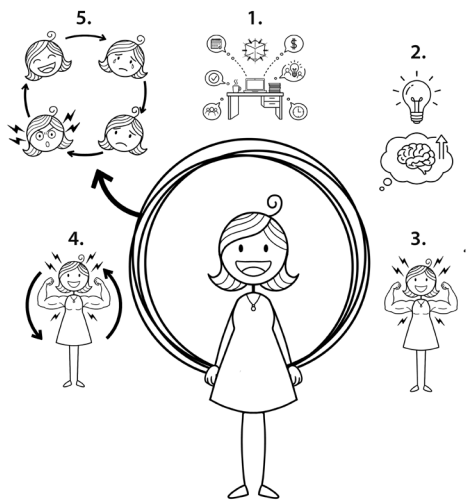
To make sense of emotions in business, there are a few outdated ideas we need to leave behind, because we won't be using them in this book and they won't help you in life.

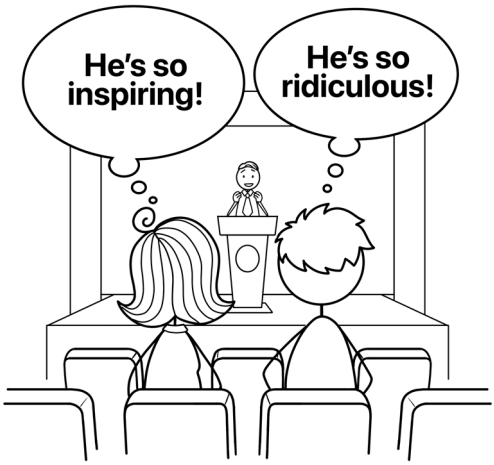
Outdated model (we won't use this)	**Updated model (we'll use this instead)**
Emotions are automatic reactions that happen to you	Emotions are predictions your brain constructs from body signals and context
The amygdala is the fear centre, and when it gets *hijacked* we lose control	The amygdala helps detect relevance and uncertainty; it doesn't create fear on its own; emotions are constructed by whole-brain networks
There's an emotional brain fighting a rational brain	There's one integrated predictive system regulating the body and guiding action
Fight, flight, or freeze is the standard response to stress	There's no fixed stress script; actions are constructed based on predictions about energy needs and context
Emotions come from body chemistry (*I'm happy because of dopamine; I'm anxious because of cortisol*)	Chemicals regulate the body and support prediction; they don't cause specific emotions
Threat versus reward circuits determine behaviour	Behaviour reflects predictions about energy loss or gain, not hard-wired threat/reward circuits
Strong emotions mean weak professionalism or poor leadership	Emotions are data about energy, demand, and what your system needs next
Emotional regulation means suppressing, controlling, or calming emotions	Regulation means improving predictions and managing the body budget
Stress is something that happens to you	Stress is a prediction that extra energy will soon be required
Emotions have universal triggers and fingerprints	Emotions are shaped by learning, culture, language, and past experience

The CFO doesn't wait for the body to tell it something is happening. It predicts, prepares the body, and then uses incoming signals to continuously check and refine whether that prediction makes sense. This way of understanding the brain, where prediction and regulation come first, sits at the core of the **theory of constructed emotion** and of broader predictive and allostatic models.

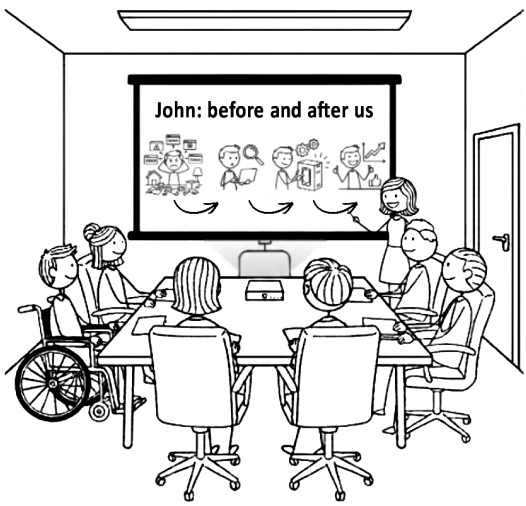
1. Context →	**2. Prediction →**	**3. Body preparation →**	**4. Interoceptive signals →**	**5. Constructed emotion →**
The brain constructs what's going on using past experience, cultural knowledge, the environment, and expectations, and the body's current state.	It predicts what your body is likely to need next, for example movement, focus, protection or effort.	It adjusts the body in advance through changes in heart rate, muscle,readiness, breathing, and energy availability.	Those bodily changes continuously send signals back to the brain about what's actually happening inside you.	That meaning is what you experience as an emotion prediction again.



E**veryone experiences the same situation differently.** The same bodily signals can become fear, excitement, or calm, depending on context, expectations, and past experience. That's why what feels threatening to one person can feel exciting or neutral to another.



A good story creates meaning, introduces curiosity or tension, and gently guides the listener CFO's predictions about what matters next, keeping it engaged and making the experience far more likely to be remembered. Emotion tells the brain, this matters, keep it.



4
Neuroplasticity
Yes, Change Is Hard But Possible

Change feels hard for a specific reason.

By the end of this chapter, you'll know what that reason is, and how to work with it.

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> *'I could never understand the order of things. I couldn't understand complex sentences, and I constantly felt lost and confused. I felt defective.'*

This is how Barbara Arrowsmith-Young described her childhood and young adult life, riddled with severe, diagnosed learning disabilities involving weak spatial reasoning and auditory processing. For decades, experts said that the deficits caused by her brain's structure were permanent.

But Barbara, like John, didn't accept the diagnosis either, and influenced by early research in the late 1970s suggesting that the brain is capable of adaptation, she committed to years of deliberate practice.

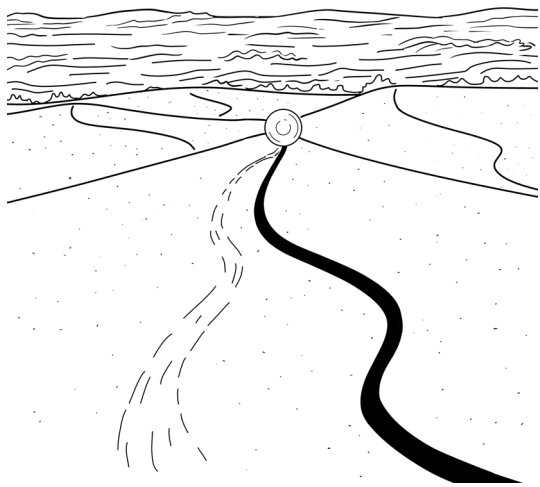
Rather than eliminating her difficulties, this process helped her build alternative ways of thinking and working that reduced their impact on her daily life, so they no longer defined or dominated how she lived.

And, against the odds and hopeless looks of those around her, she succeeded. Through rigorous, sustained cognitive practice, including tasks like repeatedly mapping clocks and working through complex logic problems for many hours a day, she supported her brain in developing alternative strategies and compensatory pathways. Rather than fixing a specific *weak* area, this work helped her function more effectively by reorganising how different brain systems worked together.[1]

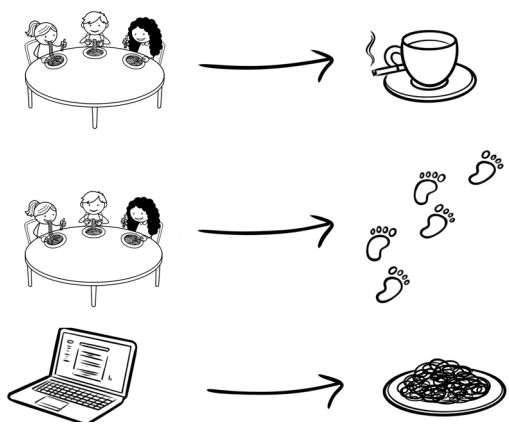
She became so good at this that she founded a school and started teaching the same meeithods to others, contributing to a significant shift in thinking about *learning and recovery* at a time when such ideas were far from mainstream (remember, we're in late 1970s here).

[1] You can read Barbara Arrowsmith-Young's fascinating story in her book *The Woman Who Changed Her Brain* (Simon & Schuster, 2013).

This is why the brain is better pictured as sand dunes rather than as solid rock – shaped by every pass, every repetition, and every push; always changing, yet always choosing the easiest slope.



When I was working in tech, smoking was incredibly common. For my smoking colleagues the *lunch-coffee-cigarette* sequence was an untouchable, almost *sacred* ritual. Some colleagues who wanted to quit broke the chain: instead of stopping a habit entirely, they rerouted the pathway, which resulted in less effort and higher success rate.



And what about **Steve Jobs**? Long before a new product ever reached the launch stage, he was known for mentally rehearsing **the entire launch in detail.** He visualised how the product would feel in people's hands, the exact words he would use to introduce it, the pauses, the reactions in the room, even the objections that might arise.

By the time he stepped on stage, the event itself was no longer unfamiliar. His brain had already walked that path many times. That mental rehearsal helped him stay grounded, precise, and compelling under enormous pressure, and it's one of the reasons those product launches became so memorable and effective.[10]

[10] Carmine Gallo explores these legendary presentations in *The Presentation Secrets of Steve Jobs* (McGraw Hill, 2009), another great book you might really enjoy if, again, you wish to leverage the power of storytelling and effective communication.

5
The Must-Create Condition That Makes Everything Else Work

You can ask people to change, contribute, and innovate, and still get silence.

By the end of this chapter, you'll understand what makes people engage, speak up, and innovate.

Scan or visit www.brunadepalo.com/extras for links, Shifts, and additional resources.

How psychological safety fuels innovation

Amy Edmondson,the person who made a breakthrough study on this, in 1999, says:

> *Teams with high psychological safety reported mistakes... but learn faster.*

Mind you: she didn't say *made* more mistakes, but *reported.*

That makes all the difference.

[11] Amy C. Edmondson is an American scholar of leadership, teaming, and organisational learning. She is currently Professor of Leadership at Harvard Business School. Edmondson is the author of seven books and more than 75 articles and case studies. While she did earlier research in 1996 on hospital teams, her seminal paper defining the term is 'Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams', *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1999): 250–83, available at https://web.mit.edu/curhan/www/docs/Articles/15341_Readings/Group_Performance/Edmondson%20Psychological%20safety.pdf

The silent killer

Groupthink and lack of psychological safety are known as the major causes that led one of the most profitable companies in the world to lose its leadership position: **Nokia**. A famous 2015 study by INSEAD researchers,[8]based on interviews with over 70 Nokia employees, shows that Nokia's downfall in 2007–13 wasn't a lack of vision (they had prototypes of touchscreens and app stores years before Apple). It was **collective fear**

[8] Timi O. Vuori and Quy N. Huy, 'Distributed attention and shared emotions in the innovation process: How Nokia lost the smartphone battle', *Administrative Science Quarterly* 61, no 1 (2015), available at https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0001839215606951, and also the same authors' 'Who killed Nokia? Nokia did', https://knowledge.insead.edu/strategy/who-killed-nokia-nokia-did .

Did you know that ***Toy Story***, created in 1996, was the first full-length computer-animated movie ever made? As such, it was a real gamble. To ensure it worked, Pixar created the **Braintrust**, a group that met regularly with one single purpose: to pick the film apart in a safe, well-regulated way, so they could challenge every weak scene before it was too late.

6
Stress, Unveiled

You may think stress is what's holding you back.

By reading this chapter you will discover the truth about what you usually call stress and how to use it intelligently.

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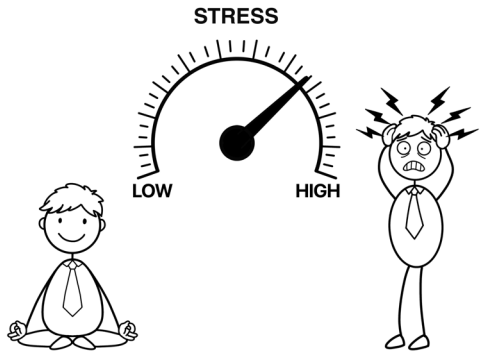
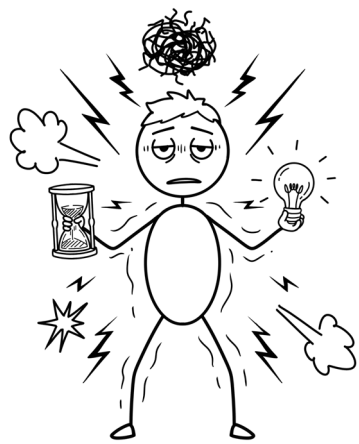
The stress process (which technically is *emergency energy mobilisation*) can get activated even when there's no immediate trigger.



Stress = extra energy mobilisation, when the CFO predicts that more energy will be needed, whether for challenge, effort, or potential threat.



There's no such thing as *good* or *bad* stress, as they're commonly described. Instead, it all comes down to how long the CFO keeps energy mobilised and whether it ever gets the signal that it's safe to stand down.

when demand stays elevated for longer, or recovery becomes irregular, the CFO keeps **energy allocated to readiness**. You're still functioning, still delivering, but the system stays slightly switched on (readiness without release) in the background (the *bzz-bzzzzz* from the fire alarm), which means the effort feels heavier, the flexibility drops, and the recovery becomes incomplete

Serious problems arise when high demand becomes the default setting, leading the CFO to keep predicting that more energy will be needed, so **mobilisation never fully shuts down**. Maintenance, repair, and replenishment stay underfunded, while performance is sustained on reserves.

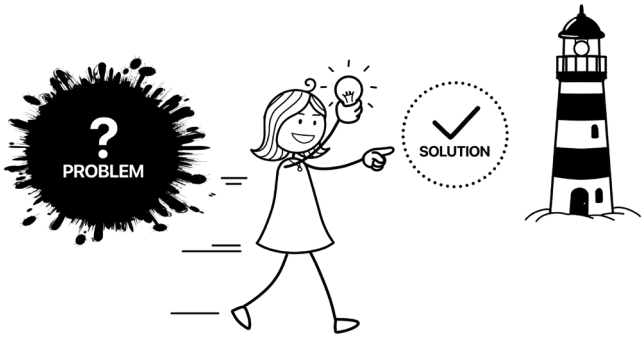
- **Where in my week does effort continue without a clear ending?** (Meetings, decisions, conversations, tasks that never feel fully *done*.)

7
What's the *Real* Problem You Need to Solve?

By reading this chapter you will... stop wasting energy fixing symptoms. You'll identify what's the ***real*** problem, focus on that, and solve the issue within a fraction of the time.

Scan or visit www.brunadepalo.com/extras for links, Shifts, and additional resources.

Once you've analysed the situation and you're clear on what the *real* problem is, stop feeding the problem with attention and deliberately shift your focus to the *solution*. Think about it, imagine it working, talk about it. Do anything that keeps you and your team anchored there.



8

Rethinking Creativity

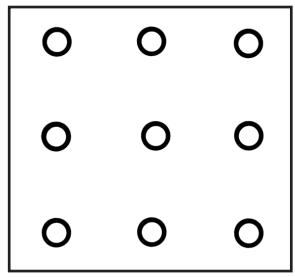
Helping Your Team Think Out of the Box

By reading this chapter you will learn how to break out of familiar thinking patterns, create the conditions for insights, and help your team generate better ideas with less effort. And by practising these techniques, you will start laying the foundations for a high-performing team.

Scan or visit www.brunadepalo.com/extras for links, Shifts, and additional resources.

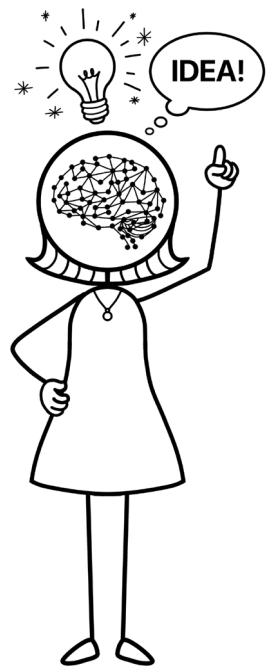
First tool: the Nine-Dot Problem

Draw nine dots on a piece of paper like this, then connect all nine dots using up to **four straight lines without ever raising the pen or retracing any of the lines**.

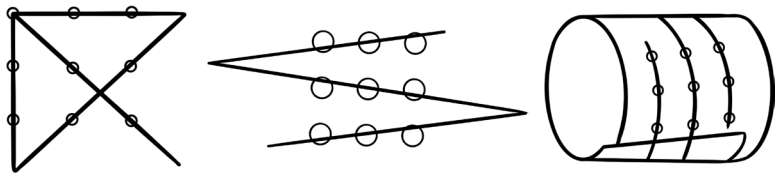


Take your time... and rest assured, there's no judgement, many people get stuck at this point.

I'm sure you'll confirm, your best ideas didn't come up when you were stressed, and not even when you spent hours and hours on that Excel file where things didn't add up. They tend to appear when the CFO feels safe enough to reduce defensive predictions and start exploring what else might be possible.



Solutions to the Nine-Dot Problem



9
Change
Why it Fails (and What Makes it Stick)

By the end of this chapter you will understand why change feels so hard to the brain, and how to make it possible by leveraging how it works.

Scan or visit www.brunadepalo.com/extras for links, Shifts, and additional resources.

10

The Umpteenth Change

Turning Resistance into Engagement

By the end of this chapter you will know how to help your team move through change without spiralling into threat, cynicism, or paralysis, even when the change wasn't their choice.

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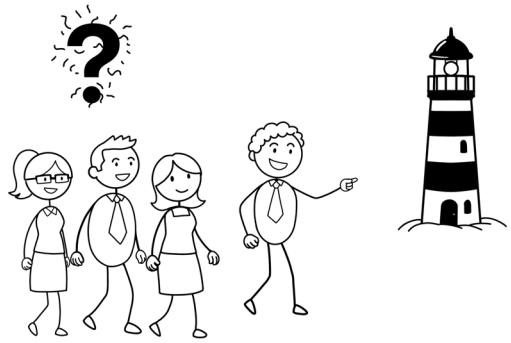
Your job as a leader is to turn that question mark into a clear, tangible outcome to move towards (again, a sort of lighthouse).



When you **ask** a meaningful question, something different happens.

What people usually say	**What to ask instead to generate insight and change**
You should manage your time better	Where does your time usually go when things start getting busy?
Just be more confident in meetings	What happens in your body or thoughts right before you decide not to speak?
You need to prioritise this	What feels hardest to deprioritise when everything seems important?
Next time, do it differently	What would you try differently if this situation came up again tomorrow?
You already know how to do this	What have you tried so far, and what did you notice didn't work?
Stop reacting emotionally	What usually triggers that reaction, and what does your brain expect will happen next?
You just need to focus	What tends to pull your attention away when you try to focus?
Don't take it personally	What meaning did your brain give to what happened?
You should prepare more	What kind of preparation would help you feel more ready next time?
You're overthinking it	What outcome are you trying to prevent by thinking this through?

11
Difficult Conversations

Preventing Defensive Shutdown

By the end of this chapter you will be able to walk into a difficult conversation without the dread, tension, or energy drain.

Scan or visit www.brunadepalo.com/extras for links, Shifts, and additional resources.

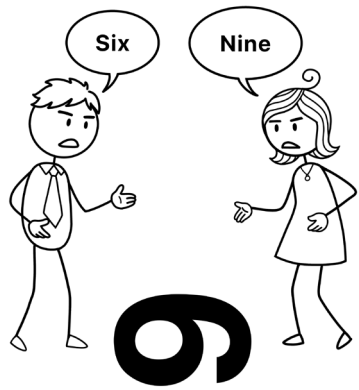
But how do you handle a fully difficult conversation?

What do we mean here by *difficult conversation*? Here I'm drawing on a framework in *Crucial Conversations*, a great book I highly recommend. A crucial conversation is any conversation where:

- opinions differ
- the stakes are high
- emotions are intense.

For the purpose of this book, I refer to them as *difficult conversations* rather than *crucial*.

Who's right and wrong here?



That's right: both and nobody.

And that's easy to admit when it's an illustration in a book. But in real life? Like me and anyone else in the world, you've probably argued for hours around something that, at the core, was just the result of a different, legitimate, perspective coming from each Box and RAS.

12

Generational and Cultural Gaps

Bridging Them to Boost Collaboration

By the end of this chapter you will understand why generational and cultural gaps aren't people problems but perception gaps, and how to work with different Boxes to reduce friction and unlock collective intelligence.

Scan or visit www.brunadepalo.com/extras for links, Shifts, and additional resources.

Diversity of thinking, when handled properly, is your **strongest insurance policy** for a constantly changing future because, as author Marshall Goldsmith famously put it, 'What got you here won't get you there.'[1]

[1] From *What Got You Here Won't Get You There* (Profile Books, 2007), a book that shows how behaviours and thinking patterns that once drove success can become liabilities when the environment changes.

Here's what Alex needed to see clearly:

- **Every person has a brain, a body, and a nervous system**: different Boxes, but the same fundamental challenge, which is keeping the body regulated in an unpredictable world.
- **Every CFO tries to do two things all day long**: every brain is trying to stay regulated in an uncertain world. How that shows up varies by culture and generation, but the dynamic is identical. One person raises their voice, another stays silent, another asks ten questions – all valid attempts to stay safe or feel valued.
- **The core needs are universal, even if expressed differently**: the need to feel respected (Status), the need for clarity (Certainty), the need to belong (Relatedness), the need for Autonomy, the need for things to feel fair (Fairness).

Behaviour doesn't come with built-in meaning: each brain constructs meaning in real time, using past experience, context, and expectation.[3]

[3] If you want to explore this further, see L. Pessoa, 'On the relationship between emotion and cognition', Nature Reviews Neuroscience 9, no. 2 (2008): 148–58, https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn2317; Andy Clark, 'Whatever next? Predictive brains, situated agents, and the future of cognitive science', Behavioral and Brain Sciences 36, no. 3 (2013): 181–204, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X12000477; Nikolaus Kriegeskorte, Marieke Mur, and Peter A. Bandettini, 'Representational similarity analysis: Connecting the branches of systems neuroscience', Frontiers in Systems Neuroscience 2 (2008): Article 4, https://doi.org/10.3389/neuro.06.004.2008

13
Stress and Energy

Creating Conditions for Sustainable High Performance

By the end of this chapter you will know how to use stress deliberately to sharpen performance, regulate your nervous system, and stop pressure from leaking into your team.

Scan or visit www.brunadepalo.com/extras for links, Shifts, and additional resources.

Flow sits between those two extremes.[1] In fact, it's not the absence of stress: what happens when:

- demand is clear
- energy is available
- the level of challenge is well matched to your capacity.

In other words, there's still energy mobilisation, but it's well calibrated. Enough energy to stay absorbed and focused; not so much that it tips into urgency, tension, or noise. That's why flow is fragile. It disappears quickly when:

- demand becomes vague or endless
- energy is already depleted
- pressure stacks without recovery

And this is where leaders often get it wrong. They try to create flow by removing pressure or pushing harder, when what matters is designing demand and protecting energy.

[1] If you want to dive deeper into this, a fascinating read is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Harper, 1990).

What leaders often label as *difficult behaviour* is usually a **mismatch between how work is designed and how a brain processes information**. Seen through a brain lens, these behaviours stop being problems to fix and start becoming signals to use. The table below shows how common frictions can be reframed and deliberately leveraged at team level.

The Friction **What it looks like**	**The Filter** **How they process**	**The Strength** **How to use it**
The *pedantic* colleague (focuses on tiny details/ definitions)	**High-precision filter:** their brain prioritises accuracy to avoid the *trap* of bad predictions	**The quality anchor:** use them to *falsify* plans or catch errors before they scale
The *distracted* creative (jumps between ideas, ignores process)	**Associative filter:** their brain sees connections between distant dots that others miss	**The innovation engine:** use them for *generative* phases, but give them clear *definition of done* boundaries
The *stubborn* sceptic (questions every change or new idea)	**Risk-detection filter:** Their brain is hypersensitive to inconsistencies in the *evidence*	**The stress-tester:** Ask them: *What are the 3 ways this plan fails?* This turns *negativity* into *insurance*
The *silent* processor (doesn't speak up in the moment)	**Deep-processing filter:** their brain requires time to move data from the *back office* to the *storefront*	**The insight miner:** Give them 24 hours. Their delayed response will often be the most robust and considered

Appendix
The Field Guide

To help you turn these insights into immediate action, I have included a practical Field Guide. Use it whenever you need a quick shift in the heat of the moment.

It comprises:

The Instant Recall: If a concept or metaphor slips your mind during a busy day, come here for a high-speed refresher on the core terminology.
Connecting Theory with Practice: If you're facing a challenge and need an immediate brain-enhancing tool, find your *symptom* and flip to the corresponding chapter for the full Instruction or Shift.
The Emergency Manual: When time, pressure, or life get in the way, this is where to come for a quick refresh.
The Upgrade Hub: This provides you with links to the online resources connected with this book and shows how you can continue and deepen your journey.

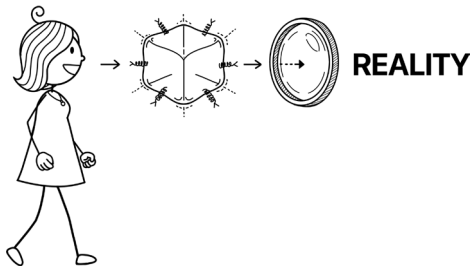
The Instant Recall

If a concept or metaphor slips your mind during a busy day, come here for a high-speed refresher on the core terminology.

Allostasis: The process by which the brain predictively regulates the body's energy over time. It allocates resources where they're needed

most to keep you alive, prioritising survival over performance by anticipating future energy needs. See Chapter 1.

Box: Your brain's internal library of past experiences, cultural norms, beliefs, and expectations. It shapes how you interpret events and what you predict will happen next. It's like a lens in front of your eyes which you can recalibrate over time through experience, reflection, and prediction error. See Chapter 1.



Brain–Body loop: A continuous cycle where the brain predicts, prepares the body, receives bodily signals, and updates its predictions. Behaviour emerges from this loop, as part of predictive regulation, **not** from conscious choice alone. See Chapter 1.

CFO (Chief Financial Officer): A metaphor for the distributed predictive processes through which the brain allocates the body's energy to maintain allostasis and support survival. It is not a real brain centre, nor the prefrontal cortex, and its job is to continuously predict needs, prioritise energy use, and adjust the body in advance. See Chapter 1.

Confirmation bias: The tendency to look for evidence that confirms existing predictions and ignore what doesn't. It saves energy but reduces objectivity and reinforces self-fulfilling patterns by minimising prediction updating. See Chapter 1.

Default Mode Network (DMN): A brain network active when attention is not focused on a task. It's involved in self-reflection, meaning making,

and mental time travel. Under stress, it can fuel rumination and unproductive loops. Its activity reflects ongoing predictive and conceptual processing rather than a *resting* or passive state. See Chapters 1, 2, 6, 7 and 8.

Departments competing for your energy:

Operations & Maintenance, keeps the body running and repaired. It regulates breathing, digestion, movement, immune system, recovery, sleep. If this department struggles, *you feel it physically*.

Innovation & Growth, helps you think, learn, create, and connect. It manages decision making, problem solving, creativity, collaboration, relationships. If this department slows down, *work and relationships suffer.*

Security/Defence,* protects you when something feels risky, and determines stress responses, alertness, readiness to act. When this department takes over, *everything else goes into the background.*

* The Security/Defence department is a metaphor, not the amygdala or any single brain structure. What looks like threat detection or defence reflects distributed predictive processes that prioritise energy for protection, based on anticipated cost, rather than the activity of a dedicated alarm centre. See Chapter 1.

Emotional granularity: The ability to notice and name emotions with precision. Higher granularity gives the brain better data, and more precise concepts, leading to more accurate predictions and more flexible responses under pressure. See Chapter 3.

Emotions (construction process): Experiences the brain constructs in the moment by combining predictions, body signals, experience, and context. Emotions are not automatic reactions or fixed programs, but

context-specific predictions that categorise bodily sensations to guide action and regulate energy. See Chapter 3.

Eustress, distress, and chronic stress: Common descriptive terms for different patterns of energy demand. **Eustress** is short-term, manageable stress that mobilises energy. **Distress** is overwhelming stress that reduces performance. **Chronic stress** is prolonged pressure that drains resources and disrupts health, focus, and behaviour. These are not distinct biological systems, but labels applied to different allostatic states. See Chapter 6.

Exteroception: Information coming from the outside world (what you see, hear, and pick up from others, including tone, silence, and body language). The brain combines this with interoception as part of prediction, to decide what's going on and what to do next. See Chapter 1.

Familiarity zone: The range of situations the brain considers known and predictable. Staying inside it is metabolically cheap. Stepping outside it requires more energy and often triggers resistance, even when change is positive, because it increases uncertainty and potential prediction error. See Chapters 1 and 4.

Interoception: The brain's ability to sense what's happening inside the body (heart rate, breathing, tension, fatigue, hunger). These signals are a major input for predictions and drive mood, energy, and behaviour, often before conscious awareness. See Chapter 1

Mental energy funnel: A simplified way to visualise limited cognitive resources. As energy drops, fewer things make it into awareness and action, especially complex or effortful tasks. See Chapter 1.

Neuroplasticity: The brain's ability to change through experience, repetition, and reflection. Change is possible, but it requires repeated

prediction updating under the right conditions, not willpower alone. See Chapter 4.

Optimal state: The internal state where perceived safety allows energy to flow towards thinking, learning, collaboration, and performance along with bodily functions. This is where good decisions and effective leadership happen because defensive predictions are not dominating energy allocation. See Chapter 1.

Prediction: The brain's core operating mode. It continuously anticipates what will happen next and prepares the body in advance, then updates based on incoming signals to minimise future energy cost. See Chapter 1.

RAS (Reticular Activating System): A filtering system that decides what gets noticed and what gets ignored. It amplifies what the brain predicts is relevant and filters out the rest, shaping what you pay attention to and experience as reality. See Chapters 1 and 5.

SCARF model: A framework describing common social triggers that influence perceived safety: Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness, and Fairness. When these are threatened, the brain shifts into protection mode by reallocating energy towards defence. See Chapters 2, 4, 7, and 10.

STATE 2.0 model: A brain-safe framework for difficult conversations that reduces threat and keeps people engaged. It focuses on creating clarity, safety, and shared understanding to minimise unnecessary defensive predictions before pushing for change. The steps are:

S – Share the facts.
T – Tell your interpretation as a hypothesis.
A – Ask for their pathway.
T – Track emotions and energy balance.
E – Establish a way forward together.

See Chapter 11.

The CONFLICT Shift: Build a conflict contract: It makes disagreement safe and useful so conflict becomes fuel, not friction. By reframing conflict as a tool, you reduce defensive predictions and turn debates into better thinking and stronger alignment. Co-create simple rules for how to disagree and check if enough challenge is happening. See Chapter 5.

The DISSENT Shift: Make it super safe to dissent: It makes disagreement safe so ideas are tested instead of protected. By explicitly inviting challenge, you reduce defensive predictions and prevent groupthink, improving decision quality and innovation. Ask what the strongest argument against the idea is, or what a competitor would challenge, and hold the space with no judgement. See Chapter 5.

The INSIGHT TRIGGER Shift: Get helpful insights when needed: It creates the conditions for insights instead of forcing solutions. By setting a clear outcome and stepping away, you reduce cognitive overload and allow useful connections to emerge. Define what you want to achieve, briefly visualise it, then step away and let your mind wander before capturing any insight that appears. See Chapter 8.

The LIGHTHOUSE Shift: Anchor the real problem: A practice to anchor the real problem and reduce ambiguity so thinking stays clear and strategic. By clarifying what's actually going on, you reduce unnecessary defensive predictions and avoid getting lost in details or emotion. Ask what the real problem is, what evidence you have versus assumptions, and what outcome you need to reach. See Chapter 7.

The POISE Shift: A quick reset to regulate your state before it shapes the room: By interrupting automatic predictions and adjusting your body and attention, you reduce unnecessary tension and lead with clarity. Pause, soften the body, check what's real, shift physically, and notice your energy. See Chapter 13.

The READINESS Shift: Align before you speak: It prepares your state and thinking before a conversation so your message lands clearly. By aligning facts, intention, and emotional state, you reduce unnecessary defensive predictions and keep both brains open. Pause to separate facts from assumptions, stay curious, and enter with a clear outcome in mind. See Chapter 11.

The RESET Shift: Stop the ugh... spiral before it starts: it interrupts negative predictions before they drain your energy. By naming the mental script and making a small pattern break, you reduce unnecessary defensive predictions and enter conversations with more clarity and capacity. Notice the prediction, change one small thing, and focus on one useful outcome. See Chapter 11.

The SAFE Shift: Make change possible: It makes change feel doable by increasing perceived payoff and reducing perceived risk. When the brain sees change as worth the energy and safe enough to try, resistance drops and action becomes easier. Clarify the benefit, break the change into manageable steps, track progress, and turn key actions into habits. See Chapter 8.

The SHARED MEANING Shift: From guessing to understanding: It reduces misunderstandings by moving from assumptions to shared understanding. When meaning is co-created instead of guessed, defensive predictions drop and collaboration becomes smoother. Align on the real problem, define a shared outcome, and agree on how you work together. See Chapter 12.

The TEAM CHANGE Shift: Lead others through the new: It helps others move through change by increasing clarity and reducing perceived risk. When the payoff is visible and uncertainty is contained, resistance softens and people re-engage. Make the benefit clear, break the change into phases, show progress early, and create space for concerns. See Chapter 10.

Threat state: The internal state where perceived risk dominates. Energy is diverted to protection, reducing access to creativity, learning, and collaboration due to predicted increases in future metabolic cost. See Chapter 1.

Tom: My loyal CFO, always trying to keep me alive, constantly allocating energy where it's most needed. He's always looking ahead, forecasting what I might need next, and shifting my body budget in advance (even when I don't consciously agree with his choices).

Connecting Theory with Practice

If you're facing a challenge and need an immediate brain-enhancing tool, find your 'symptom' below and flip to the corresponding chapter for the full Instruction or Shift.

If you feel...	Then probably...	And you could...	What NOT to do
I want to be right at all costs, even though I sense they might be right.	You're trapped in your own Box, stuck on your 6. (Chs 1, 11)	Ask: How did they get to their 9?	Don't argue harder or collect evidence to prove you're right – this only reinforces your existing prediction.
They start seeming aggressive – this may spiral into an argument.	Their CFO is feeling threatened. (Chs 2, 3)	Acknowledge their emotion to make them feel seen.	Don't match their intensity or push logic – it increases perceived cost and escalates defence.
I can only see the problems and everything feels like a disaster.	Your RAS is tuned to Threat and filtering out solutions. (Chs 1, 4, 7, 8)	Count your breathing for a few seconds then look for one win to retune your filter.	Don't keep scanning for more problems – you'll further narrow what your brain can see.

I feel blocked: the harder I think, the less creative I am.	You're stuck in the mental funnel of high-stress focus. (Chs 2, 6, 7, 8)	Step away to allow broader, associative predictive processing to resume.	Don't force concentration or demand creativity from yourself – effort here increases cost and resistance.
I'm overwhelmed by a hundred tasks and can't decide which one to do.	Your CFO is running a depleted body budget; energy is too low to support choice. (Chs 1, 6)	Stop. Do a five-minute energy audit before choosing.	Don't push for decisions or multitask – decision making under low energy is metabolically expensive.
I feel like a passenger in my own body, reacting on autopilot.	You turned into a *human being doing* instead of a *human being*. (Ch. 13)	Use the POISE Shift to re-engage the *being* side.	Don't judge yourself for reacting – judgement adds cost without improving prediction.
I'm judging them as lazy or incompetent without any data.	You're projecting your Box onto their behaviour. (Chs 1, 6)	Ask: What facts am I missing?	Don't label or diagnose – labels feel certain but block updating your Box.
I feel a physical rush and a need to win the conversation NOW.	Defensive predictions are dominating energy allocation. (Ch. 7)	Pause. Don't speak until your heart rate drops.	Don't speak fast or escalate – speed locks in defensive predictions.

Use this table to help you quickly identify the best Shift to use:

If you feel (any of these)...	**...then use this Shift:**
Everyone is nodding, but I suspect they have hidden concerns. *The room feels tense, yet no one is willing to be the 'difficult' one.* *I'm worried my own authority is accidentally silencing the best ideas.*	The DISSENT Shift: Make it super safe to dissent Ch. 5

We have been talking for an hour, but I still don't think we've identified the real problem we are trying to solve. *I'm overwhelmed by the complexity and the drama, and I've lost sight of the actual outcome I need to reach.* *At home, everyone is upset, but nobody can articulate what they wish would happen instead*	The LIGHTHOUSE Shift: Anchor the real problem Ch. 7
I can't understand how they reached that conclusion – it feels totally illogical. *I'm starting to think they are just being stubborn or difficult on purpose.* *We are stuck arguing over 'the truth' instead of solving the actual problem.*	The 6 & 9 perspective and State 2.0 model Ch. 11
I know I need to change, but I keep finding excuses to put it off. *This transition feels too big, too risky, and I don't know where to start.* *My team (or my kids) are resisting the change because they can't see how the effort will pay off.*	The SAFE Shift: Make change possible Ch. 9
Disagreements are starting to feel like personal attacks rather than work debates. *People are staying silent in the room only to complain in private later.* *At home, a simple difference of opinion keeps turning into a battle over who is right.*	The CONFLICT Shift: Build a conflict contract Ch. 5
We are using the same words but mean different things. *We all agreed in the meeting, so why is the execution totally different?* *I thought we were on the same page, but we're actually in different books.*	The SHARED MEANING Shift: From guessing to understanding Ch. 12
Energy is leaking into gossip and speculation because people are terrified of the unknown. *The team is so focused on what might happen that they've stopped doing what needs to be done.* *I can sense my team feels lost or 'pushed' into a new direction without a map or a reason to care.*	The TEAM CHANGE Shift: Lead others through the new Ch. 10

I'm already annoyed by a conversation that hasn't even started yet. *I'm predicting a waste of time, and my brain is already poisoning the interaction with negativity.* *I'm expecting the same old mess, so I'm showing up defensive instead of curious.*	The RESET Shift: Stop the *ugh...* spiral before it starts Ch. 11
I'm about to jump into a tough conversation while my heart is racing and my energy is 'messy. *I'm so convinced I'm right that I've already stopped being curious about how they see the situation.* *I'm entering the room to 'win' or 'correct' them, rather than to solve the actual problem together.*	The READINESS Shift: Align before you speak Ch. 11
I'm feeling tense or rushed, and I know my stress is about to contaminate the whole room. *My jaw is tight and my breath is shallow. I'm physically primed for a fight I don't want to have.* *I can see my team (or my family) starting to get defensive just by looking at my face.*	The POISE Shift: Lead yourself before you lead the room Ch. 13
I've been staring at this problem for hours, but my brain feels like it's stuck in a loop with no new exits. *I'm trying to think harder to find a solution, but the more I push, the further away the answer seems to get.* *At home, my child is frustrated and 'blocked', and no amount of logical explaining is helping them find a way through.*	The INSIGHT TRIGGER Shift: Get helpful insights when needed Ch. 8

The Emergency Manual

When time, pressure, or life get in the way, come here for a quick refresh.

A FEW TO KEEP IN MIND

- Your brain's first job is not performance, it's survival.
- Behaviour is driven by energy, prediction, and perceived safety.
- Under pressure, no one has access to their best thinking.
- Emotions are data, not a problem to fix.
- When behaviour feels stuck, look at the conditions, not the person.
- The brain predicts first, then checks reality.

What feels *personal* is often just a nervous system doing its job.

THIS IS WHAT IT ALL COMES DOWN TO

Your job as a leader is to create the conditions where brains can do their best work, including yours.

A WHEN-IN-DOUBT MICRO-PROTOCOL

When things feel hard:

- Assume a brain is under pressure (including yours).
- Reduce threat before adding logic.
- Change the conditions, not the person.

You don't need to get this right all the time. You just need to notice a little earlier and adjust a little sooner.

The Upgrade Hub

The book gives you the map, but these resources will provide the fuel. Choose the path that best supports your **journey in developing brain-enhancing leadership**.

Scan or visit www.brunadepalo.com/extras for links, Shifts, and additional resources related to this book.

NOTE: This book was written to give you everything you need to start. These additional resources are here if you want to go faster, deeper, or with more structure. You can find all links and current offerings at www.brunadepalo.com

STAY IN THE PRACTICE

This is the low-energy, high-impact way to keep you on track.

- **Newsletter** | ***The Shift: Brain Fuel for Leaders*** A bi-monthly newsletter delivering Shifts like the ones you've just learned. Short and to-the-point emails to help you be more effective with less effort.

  Sign up at www.brunadepalo.com

- **The Daily InspirAction Service** | Read a daily quote and commit to one small action that turns that inspiration into reality. You'll receive a reminder to follow through straight to your inbox.

  Access at www.brunadepalo.com/inspirAction

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  Download at www.brunadepalo.com/resources

EVOLVE YOUR LEADERSHIP

This is for you if you want to scale these Shifts across your life, career, or your entire organisation.

- **One-to-One Neuroscience-based Executive Coaching:** Navigate complexity with clarity and ease.
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- **Cultural Transformation Programmes:** Shift the collective brain of your company towards an empowering leadership style.

- **Keynotes & InspirActional Talks:** High-impact sessions combining inspiration and pragmatism to spark immediate, actionable change.

A final note from me

This manual ends here, **but the practice is just beginning**.

Your brain is a high-performance organ that responds to how you treat it, every day. When you start **creating the conditions your brain needs to work at its best**, life becomes easier. At work and at home too.

I'd genuinely love to hear what happens when you apply these Shifts in the real world – in meetings, at home, under pressure, on the days that matter most. So don't stop here: keep noticing, keep practising.

And most of all, keep **Shifting**,

The Science Behind This Book

THE ESSENTIAL LIBRARY

Ackoff, Russell L., and Patrick Rivett. *A Manager's Guide to Operations Research*. New York: Wiley, 1963.

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To all of you, thank you. This book carries a piece of your influence.

Who You're Learning From

Bruna De Palo is a neuroscience-based executive and team coach who helps leaders understand what most leadership training ignores: how the human brain drives behaviour at work.

A global keynote speaker partnering with clients on four continents, she has delivered more than 140 keynotes and coached over 300 senior leaders worldwide. Bruna works chiefly with Fortune 500 organisations in finance, banking, tech, and luxury automotive sectors, where results are non-negotiable, resistance to change is high, and leadership guesswork is costly.

Her work began with an observation: without understanding how the brain shapes behaviour, leaders are often left reacting instead of leading.

That insight became the foundation of the **B.R.A.I.N. Leadership Model™**, the framework behind her leadership programmes, executive coaching, and team interventions, all grounded in *modern neuroscience*.

Today she works with organisations around the world to build what she calls **brain-enhancing cultures**: environments where people spend less energy on being protective and more on thinking, learning, and performing at their best.

KEYNOTES & SPEAKING

Many organisations first encounter Bruna's work through her keynotes, where leaders discover how understanding the brain can transform how teams communicate, decide, and perform under pressure.

Leaders often recognise patterns they have struggled with for years and leave with a clearer understanding of what drives behaviour in their teams, along with practical shifts that improve collaboration, decision-making, and performance.

Organisations typically call her when capable leaders keep repeating the same behaviours under pressure, change initiatives stall, conflict persists, or silos form between senior leaders.

Her work makes the hidden brain dynamics behind these challenges visible, helping leaders understand why resistance, misalignment, and friction appear even in strong organisations.

CREDENTIALS

Bruna is a Faculty Member at the NeuroLeadership Institute and has completed advanced programmes at MIT and Harvard, alongside further studies in psychology.

Before becoming a coach in 2015, she spent two decades in corporate and technology environments, shaping the structured, practical approach she brings to leadership today.

Born in Rome and based in London since 2012, she combines Mediterranean directness with British pragmatism in her work with leaders worldwide.

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