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Can We Build Nurturing Leadership Models?

Ori Brafman, *Author*

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Author Ori Brafman presents the question of whether it's possible to build more nurturing leadership models that function through trust-based networks. Brafman relates how the US Army is trying to tackle this issue, in light of so many service personnel struggling with the combat fatigue of the past decade. Brafman discusses the biology of the fight or flight mechanism and explains how the chemicals cortisol and oxytocin play a role in building connections.



Transcript

And I want to talk to you for a second about fight or flight. I want to talk to you specifically about the biology behind these two. There's a chemical in our brain called cortisol. And cortisol is, amongst so many others, a stress chemical. When we get a hit of cortisol, it makes us more amp, it give us a huge glucose up in our bodies and makes us be able to deal with the fight or flight situation. And when you look at fight or flight, this is how it looks like in society. This is how it looks like in history-in military history. But what happens after that cortisol injection, that hit of cortisol. It often times makes us feel like this. It's a taxing hormone on us.

It makes us feel tired. It's bending our bones. It's a chemical that afterwards leaves us exhausted. And it's just cortisol in mind that a few months ago, actually several months ago, a general from the army got in touch with me and said he read one of my books. And this is the weird thing about writing books. You can be kind of a liberal living in California and all of a sudden, people read your books. And this guy writes me and I didn't exactly know who he was. It turns out he is the general who's in charge of leadership for the army and he's right now in charged of the entire army. And he said that they're basically facing a huge problem and the problem that they're facing is that this is the first time in a very long time that for ten years we've had back to back combat. People who had been deployed three, four, times in the course of ten-year career.

And as they come back, how do you create an army that isn't feeling the effect of cortisol. And cortisol tends to take, tends to have an effect like post-traumatic stress disorder, like problems adjusting. How do you build a trust-based network in the army? And regardless of your politics for a second, think about the implications that the head of the army right now is thinking about how do you built a trust-based network. How do you leverage something that the army isn't known for? Something called soft power. And for the last year, I've gone to actually have a lot of conversations and I've been meeting a lot of these soldiers and army officers who had this combat experiences. People like are Keaton who's a helicopter pilot, saw back to back tours. People like Elliot, saw back to back tours, 20 years in service. What we've done and what I just came back from Kansas, of all places, is I took these guys and put them here. Put them in a circle and I got them to talk amongst other things about their feelings. And I got them to relate about what it's been like to have this experiences overseas and what it's like to come back.

And I got them to relate in what I would argue is a more humane human level and what we've noticed is that a very weird thing that happens when they get in to the circles. There is a sort of intimacy. And that's a word you don't often times see in business. It's not a word you often times hear in the army that develops. And here you'll see at the very edge, there's a chair that's empty. The reason that chair is empty is because it's the person taking the picture, and the person taking the picture I brought with me. Not in a usual suspect in army circles. This is Kelly. And the thing to know about Kelly is that amongst other

things she practices soft power. Amongst other things, she's very soft.

She likes to nurture human relationships. And if the amygdala works on cortisol levels, I would say, on a different chemical, oxytocin. Oxytocin is released primarily when mothers give birth. And what it does is it actually creates an instant trusting relationship. When people are given oxytocin in lab situations, they trust their partners more. When a new born is born, its sight of vision is just a few inches. When you think about that, that is exactly the distance from the mother's chest to her eyes. Oxytocin is responsible for those levels of connection. And what I want to talk about a little bit today is a bit of oxytocin and about how you can have a leadership model that isn't based in traditional cortisol but is based on oxytocin instead.