



Part 1: The Distance Between Them and Us

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For the last 15 years, I've been working as a sparring partner helping scores of individuals to develop and grow. Each person had their own unique set of needs and hurdles to meet and overcome. Some of those discussions were a marathon and others were a walk in the park. Irregardless of the challenges each of those individuals had they eventually walked the road to where they wanted to get.

WORKING WITH TEAMS

As hard as it was to sometimes help individual clients to move forward that was nothing compared to helping teams move forward. My biggest challenge over the years has always been working with teams trying to help them to be more cohesive. It comes as no surprise that there are many more variables at play when working with groups of individuals. The dynamics can always be fluctuating depending on the personalities in the room, the issue being discussed and any number of other elements.

In my opinion, one of the greatest ways to consolidate teams is teaching them about the social brain. There is something about teaching the structures and functions of the brain that underpin the social psychology of teams that really resonates with professionals. For even the most skeptical of clients when you translate what they deem to be abstract and flimsy psychological theory into the nuts and bolts of the brains functioning they begin to open up and relate. The knowledge is concrete and pragmatic.

Video:

Ep5 Part 1: MINDtalk - The Social Brain & Dysfunctional Teams

WHAT IS THE SOCIAL BRAIN?

Our brains evolved to thrive in a tribe. When our relations with those close to us are functional our brains literally thrive and grow. The opposite is true when key relationships are dysfunctional. Our brains begin to decline in function as brain cells wink out when we feel disengaged, disconnected and disheartened in those relations.

Our brains function in two distinct ways depending on where along the spectrum between functional and dysfunctional we feel our relationship are

situated. One of the major determining factors is based on the elements of social reward and social pain.

Social rewards are the positive emotions that are a result of deep and healthy relationships. These are feelings such as contribution, value, security and connectedness. On the other hand, social pain are the feelings we experience when our relationships are fragmented and fragile. The nature of these types of relationships are unpredictable, uncertain and insecure.

There is a part of the brain called the insula or also referred to as the insular cortex. Its function affords us the ability to have interoceptive awareness such as feeling the beating of our heart, the pressure of a full bladder, the rise and fall of our breath, the pangs of hunger and pain in general.

When the insula is subjected to brain scans it lights up when we when feel empathy for others, are given the cold-shoulder, and when we see disgust painted on someone's face. The insula is also activated we think about, feel or anticipate pain. In other words it is the part of the brain where we feel and experience social pain.

A curious finding from 2004 discovered that our brain's social pain network is directly linked to the physical pain network. This means that evolution saw the wisdom of linking our social well being to the same network as our physical survival.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

When we feel social pain it lights up our physical pain network. This means when I experience social pain, a negative-emotion linked to relationships, I am actually feeling physical pain.

If I took an aspirin to ease the pain of a throbbing headache, the aspirin would have the same effect if I was feel the social pain of rejection. The pain would be alleviated for a period of time. Unless I took measures to deal with the underlying reasons for my headache, such as relaxing my stiff shoulders, the pain will return once the the aspirin effects wear off.

For instance, this is exactly what happens when I feel rejection. The pain of rejection deadens with the aspirin, but comes back to haunt me once the medicine fades from my blood stream. If I know a relationship is going south, I will continue to experience pain unless I take measures to address the underlying issues.

WHAT IS THE REALITY ON THE GROUND?

Talking about the insular cortex, the social brain, social reward and social pain are concepts that most people have never heard of. But once it is described to them there is an immediate recognition as they relate to their own experiences. Unless specific tools are used to address these issues, any effort will have only a short-term effect and then the team will eventually return back to the dysfunctional default.

I think many of the professionals reading this are familiar with having attended a vibrant workshop and everyone is motivated to change, but by Monday everything returns back to pre-workshop mode. The right tools for the right job!

In the second part of *The Distance Between Them and Us* I will elaborate on the phenomenon of Cognitive Bias, but specifically on those biases related to the cohesion of teams.

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You can also find our online course to better understanding how to manage your brain at:

<https://www.udemy.com/managing-with-the-brain-in-mind>