



White paper

# Your brain on purpose

The neuropsychology of  
leadership purpose

 **Truist Leadership Institute**



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## The neuropsychology of leadership purpose

What if there was a tool that would guarantee greater leadership effectiveness? One that would help you be more effective in stressful situations, help you make better leadership decisions, help you build important work relationships, help keep you from derailing your leadership during stressful moments, and help prevent professional burnout.

### Is that a tool you would like to have in your leadership tool belt?

Obviously the answer is yes and the good news is that such a tool does indeed exist, but there is a problem. The problem is that this tool appears to be simple – deceptively so – causing many leaders to be skeptical of its value and discarding it without further thought. The tool is called a leadership purpose, which is a set of beliefs that provides the fuel to exceptional team and organizational performance. It does this by keeping your leadership actions on track and pointed toward achieving optimal results through the development of better work relationships. A well-designed leadership purpose is derived from understanding yourself – your own beliefs, values, emotions, and behaviors. The objective of this article is to explore the science behind a leadership purpose and lift any skepticism you may have about spending the time and energy needed to develop and lead by a well-designed purpose statement.

It's been estimated that we've learned more about the human brain and mind in the last decade than we learned during the rest of human existence.

### The birth of a renaissance

Just as the invention of the microscope several hundred years ago paved the way for new discoveries and created a renaissance in the field of biology, today's advances in brain imaging technology are having similar impacts in the field of neuropsychology. This new technology allows us to watch the brain think, solve problems, make decisions, and emote, all of which helps us understand how a leadership purpose has its impact.

### Two sciences are better than one

Neuropsychology is the blending of 2 sciences – the science of the brain (neuro) and the science of the mind (psychology). Think about a computer as an analogy. The brain is analogous to the computer hardware made up of the circuitry and silicon chips. The mind is analogous to the computer's software. The beliefs you operate under is the software that runs the hardware in the

## Personality, brain, and mind

Ultimately, the practical benefit of a leadership purpose is the achievement of optimal results for your team and organization. That result is obtained through the interrelated and mutually supportive brain and mind processes that create your unique personality. All three of these are influenced by a leadership purpose. Let's start with understanding the components of your personality and how they contribute to your leadership effectiveness. These components include your beliefs, emotions, and behaviors. A great leadership purpose will be designed in a way that serves to summarize and focus each of these components of your personality to get optimal results. The impact that a well-designed leadership purpose has on each of these components is as follows:

- 1 Beliefs** – Keeps your beliefs and mindset focused on productive thoughts and reduces negative thinking that can interfere with success.
- 2 Emotions** – Creates positive emotion and helps manage/channel negative emotion in a more productive manner.
- 3 Behaviors** – Helps build and support the leadership behaviors needed to create positive teamwork and get things done in a way that balances task completion with relationship building.

The outcome of getting all of those personality components aligned and working in the right direction is the achievement of optimal results on initiatives critical to the success of your team and organization. There is a growing body of science supporting what is described above, and for many leaders this is all the information they need to know in order to dedicate the time and energy required to create and then lead by using their own leadership purpose statement. However, even with this understanding, many leaders remain skeptical, view it as a mystical process, and legitimately ask, "So how does a leadership purpose work?" The answer lies in how a well-designed leadership purpose leverages the operation of your brain and mind – your neuropsychology.

form of the various structures of your brain. A leadership purpose focuses those beliefs and serves as the software, which once loaded and executed on, runs the hardware of the brain to obtain optimal leadership results.

### The hardware and software interactions

There are three brain structures/systems (hardware) that are relevant to our discussion, and they interact with the mind/beliefs (software) in ways that can either increase or decrease leadership effectiveness:

- **The cortical structure = reasoning/problem solving system**

This structure makes up the outer covering of our brain and is where much of our thinking and memory systems operate. One particular part of the cortical system known as the pre-frontal cortex, gives humans their unique higher order thinking skills including abstract reasoning, concept formation, problem solving, decision making, and planning/organizational capabilities. Obviously, this is a system that is critical for leadership effectiveness as it leads to the behaviors needed to create a vision for the organization, develop strategies for achieving that vision, and create an environment that aligns everyone in order to execute on those strategies.

However, the way the brain operates causes this system to frequently be “offline”, sitting in neutral and reserved for special circumstances or situations. Instead, another part of the cortical structure we refer to as the neocortex, directs most of our behavior. The neocortex is responsible for the majority of the thinking system, including lower order thinking skills and memory systems. Operating from this part of the brain leads to autopilot behaviors such as completing work tasks in a routine manner and avoiding challenges that require the more effortful creative thinking skills of the pre-frontal cortex. This autopilot behavior results from the automatic thinking that happens without much effort or awareness. This is the system most people operate from throughout most of their working day, going from routine task to routine task without ever pausing to really “think.” Its value is that it conserves energy and creates efficiency in completion of those routine tasks. A well-designed leadership purpose supports this process by helping a leader to keep thoughts and beliefs positive, maintaining the pre-frontal cortex in a state ready for action when needed, and capitalizing on the use of the neocortex’s capabilities to maintain efficiency when appropriate.

Great leaders know when and how to leverage this autopilot system to maximize efficiency, and when to abandon it for greater leadership effectiveness by engaging the pre-frontal cortex.

- **The limbic structure = emotional system**

This structure, which is actually comprised of several smaller interconnected structures, sits deep inside our brain and is largely responsible for the generation of emotions that arise

from our thoughts and beliefs. Some of the emotions that are generated feel good (joy/excitement/love/happiness) and some are uncomfortable (anger/fear/sadness/anxiety/frustration). Both types of emotions drive behavior, but not necessarily in the direction needed to be most effective as a leader. Great leaders have learned how to manage and channel this system in themselves. A well-designed leadership purpose is the starting point to creating the right sequence of beliefs that activates the pre-frontal cortex which then prompts the limbic system to generate the right emotions, at the right time, and in the right intensity. This is the interaction of the hardware and software at its best. In a sense, the leadership purpose serves as an efficient operating template for leadership beliefs that generate the emotions that drive the most effective leadership behaviors, especially in times of stress. It helps leaders respond rather than react.

- **The reticular activating structure = attentional system**

The third and final part of the brain relevant to our discussion is a collection of brain structures connected together by neural pathways, and it lies even deeper within our brain than the limbic system. It’s frequently referred to as the reticular activating system, and is responsible for directing our attention to things in the environment that are important to us. Think about this system as alerting us to potential threats as well as potential opportunities. If a threat is detected, this system activates our limbic system to create uncomfortable emotions (anger/fear) that generate a fight or flight response. This is frequently referred to as a “limbic system hijack” since it overrides our cortical thinking system, narrows our attention to focus on the danger at hand, and puts us into defensive actions driven by those uncomfortable emotions. These reactions are rarely helpful to leadership effectiveness.

By leading from your leadership purpose verses an emotional reaction, you are much more likely to get positive results.

### An outdated system

An important point to make here is that the threats which activate this system in today’s work world are much different than those of our ancestors. For us, it’s generally not the fear generated by a threat from a dangerous predator, but rather the fear generated by threats of being rejected by important people in our career (like our boss) or of not being successful on a particular project, task, or assignment. The threats are different, but the impact on our brain and mind, and thus our behavior, is the same. What was once a very appropriate response to a threat (fight it or run from it) is no longer very adaptive in the work world in which today’s leaders operate. Great leaders know how to manage and channel this response. Again, a well-designed leadership purpose can play an important role by serving as the “interrupt software” for limiting or even preventing the inappropriate reactions that can be triggered by the reticular activating system.

## An upside

The reticular activating system also has an upside. If an opportunity is detected, this system again activates our limbic system, but this time to create more desirable emotions (excitement/joy) that generate an approach response. We refer to this as a “limbic system boost” since it creates emotions more likely to drive behaviors that are constructive and build leadership effectiveness. These positive emotions serve to broaden our attentional awareness in order to see additional opportunities we would otherwise have missed. This generates behaviors that help us seek out and build cognitive and social resources that can contribute to our future efforts and ultimate success. A well-designed leadership purpose helps keep the reticular activating system operating to our advantage rather than our disadvantage.

## Imbalance between the upside and the downside

One of the things we know about this system, and the brain in general, is that it has evolved to be more attentive to threats in our world as opposed to opportunities. This makes sense from an evolutionary perspective. In the world our ancestors occupied it was much more important to avoid the threats than identify the opportunities. If we miss the danger of a rival lurking in the bushes with a big stick, we die. If we miss the carrot growing in those bushes, no problem, there are other carrots to be found. It's been suggested that we have five times more neuro-machinery dedicated to finding threats in the world than finding opportunities. Because of the way our brains evolved (our hardware) it is even more imperative that we be very intentional in our efforts to create strategies (our software) to detect opportunities that can facilitate effective leadership. A well designed leadership purpose is one of several such strategies that we teach to accomplish this objective.

## The neurochemistry behind leadership purpose

No article about the neuropsychology of a leadership purpose would be complete without mention of some of the neurochemistry involved. Our brain is an electrochemical organ, meaning it communicates via a host of neurochemical reactions between its billions of neurons making up the brain structures we have discussed. Those neurochemicals can be released by our thoughts and beliefs, initiating a process of emotional sensations that can drive positive leadership behavior. Three of the most important neurochemicals implicated in a leadership purpose are:

- **Dopamine** – helps create sensations of excitement and insight needed to solve difficult problems.
- **Serotonin** – helps create sensations of relief and accomplishment when important tasks are completed and can be crossed off the “to do” list.
- **Oxytocin** – Helps create sensations of trust and relationship bonding necessary to be most effective in getting things done through people.

## Conclusion

If you had any skepticism about the value of a well-designed leadership purpose before reading this article, hopefully you are now reconsidering that position. If you had already recognized the value, you now have a better understanding of how a leadership purpose impacts your neuropsychology in a way that helps you be a more effective leader and achieve optimal results.

### References/recommended reading

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## Truist Leadership Institute

During the past half-century, Truist Leadership Institute, and its predecessor firm Farr Associates, have developed and refined approaches to business leadership through collaborative work with clients throughout the United States. The Truist Leadership Institute provides organizations with a leadership development partner who helps create dynamic and effective leaders, increase employee retention and improve the bottom line.