

# VantagePoint

Providing Perspective for Association Professionals in Wisconsin

**NeuroLeadership:  
Train Your Brain for Better Decisions  
and Improved Mind Span**

..... page 1

**President's Message**

..... page 2

**Executive Director's Message**

..... page 5

**2010 Program Calendar**

..... page 7

**What I Learned at ASAE:  
Prepare for the Revolution**

..... page 15

**Remembering Names**

..... page 11

**Worksource Wisconsin: Resource by  
Employers for Employers**

..... page 12

**Ice Cream 2.0: A Case Study  
in Social Media for Meetings**

..... page 14

**On-Demand Solutions: Up-to-Date Tools  
for Association Management Software**

..... page 10

**Ten Strategies for Getting There  
and Staying There**

..... page 21

**Association News**

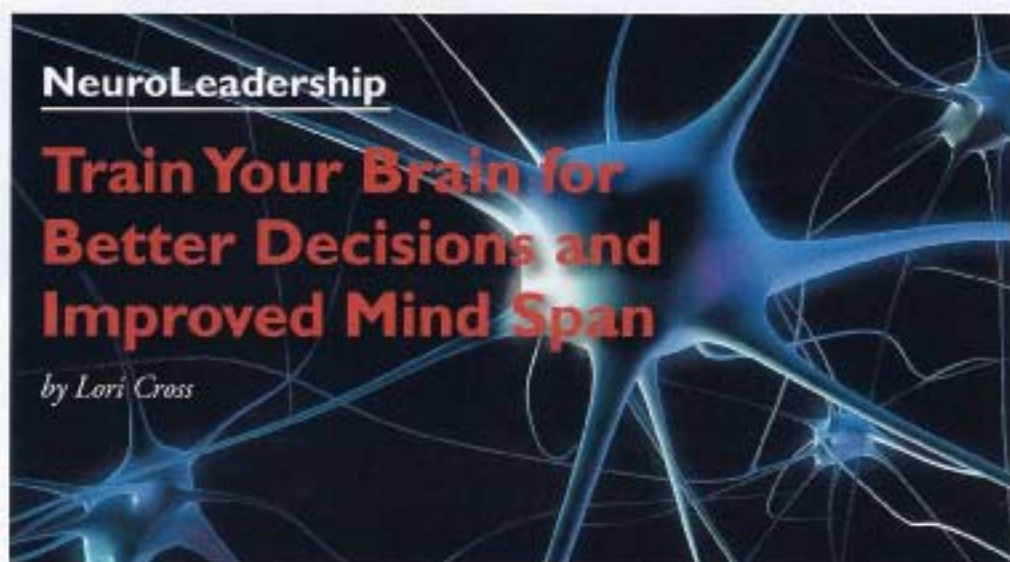
..... page 23

**New Member Profiles**

..... page 25

**Welcome the Newest Members**

..... page 26



After years of being told to always keep an open mind, I learned a very disheartening fact in one of my first college courses. My neuro-anatomy professor flatly informed us that brain cells were unique because they could not regenerate in adulthood. In fact, we learned that a child is born with many more neurons than they will ever need which are slowly pruned away until adulthood. The implication was that if you ever destroyed an adult brain cell, it could never be replaced. You would have to compete in this world with whatever mental capacity remained.

While I'm certain this revelation curtailed weekend binges for some of my fellow students, this grim limitation haunted me as I began to design biomedical devices for stroke and paraplegic patients. Were we attempting the impossible? Later, when faced with developing leaders, the question arose again - how much could any adult truly change behavior and learn new ways of working given the assumption of a static brain? My search for deeper understanding led me to explore the connections between two emerging bodies of knowledge - neuroscience and leadership development. New medical technology has recently been developed that allows researchers to gain remarkable insights into how our mind performs, learns and adapts as we tackle both routine and complex leadership tasks. Much like the telescope and microscope transformed our view of the physical world; these technologies are fueling studies that provide remarkable new views of our internal mental world. The findings provide promising opportunities for application in real-world business situations and the development of more responsive leadership.





*Lori Cross will be the featured speaker on Dec. 4, 2009 at the Osthoff Resort in Elkhart Lake.*

Continued on page 17


## NeuroLeadership *continued from page 1*

One of the first discoveries in neuroscience shattered the long-held belief of my well-intentioned college professor. The brain does generate new cells and make novel connections throughout adulthood, although in slightly different ways. Even more surprising, we learned that adults can purposefully change the anatomical and neurochemical structure of our brains via a three-step process of awareness, insight and focused attention. Our minds can actually redesign our nervous system to form alternative ways to think, perceive and react to the world using these three mindful steps. Neuroplasticity call this capability self-directed plasticity. Plasticity has been used to treat patients suffering from neurological diseases such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, dyslexia and autism. Parallel techniques are now emerging to apply these methods to leadership practices. Practical examples include making better decisions, creating stronger followership and responding in more thoughtful, responsive ways to leadership challenges. To illustrate the process, let's start with one of the most powerful areas of application – developing more effective problem-solving and decision-making skills.

 **Step 1 is Awareness.** When you think about the leaders who consistently make great decisions and solve really difficult problems, they seem to have a knack for creative reframing questions, resulting in fresh perspectives and innovative solutions. What's their secret? Well, neuroscience is now exposing the details regarding brain function during moments of insight as compared with periods of detailed analytical processing. Of course, both methods are excellent ways of solving tough problems. For many business challenges, however, the complexity and ambiguity of the situation can be so great that the analytical demands of the problem may outrun our cognitive abilities, thereby reducing our effectiveness. You can literally think too much and overanalyze a situation. The art of gaining insight for complex problems includes the ability to engage the entire subconscious brain, including the emotional, interpretive and long-term memory centers. In order to activate these subconscious areas of the midbrain, we need to literally turn up the volume of their signals while turning down the hard-working analytical center. Equipped with this new awareness of what evokes a better problem-solving mindset, how do you intentionally engage all the necessary centers whenever needed? Let's turn to some other clinical studies to provide us with a fresh perspective.

 **Step 2 is Insight.** One of the most powerful factors for preparing the brain to solve complex problems and make difficult decisions is your overall mood. To boost the performance of our subconscious areas, it is very beneficial to create a relatively positive mood for ourselves and others. In studies conducted in several neuroscience centers, including Northwestern University and Drexel University, it has been shown that participants solved more insight problems, more rapidly, after watching comedy films that increased their positive mood. Several other evidence-based techniques have also shown positive results for enhancing insight. The common theme is the creation of a more mindful environment to allow these quieter, subconscious brain areas to become more dominant. Our brains must then integrate the various perspectives with analytical techniques that capture, refine and select the most appropriate decisions or solutions.

Although we are now aware of and have some new insights regarding better mindsets for decision-making, how does one go about changing our decision-making practices, especially in a dynamic, high-stress team setting?

 **Step 3 is Focused Attention.** The third step is perhaps the most difficult because it requires one to pay close, focused attention in multiple examples over a period of time. It requires immediate use of the techniques when the next difficult problem or decision comes to your attention. Repeating the new behaviors at every subsequent opportunity until the new ways of working become routine takes true discipline. To shorten the gap between knowing and doing, one must plan immediate and repeated action. Taking others through a similar three-step process can help to catalyze permanent changes in your brain as well as in their neural network. Using triggers to remember the techniques and when to apply them is also an excellent means of building your focused attention discipline.

Paying close attention and repeating the behaviors with mindful awareness until all team members become masters of these novel decision-making skills will actually rewire neural circuitry. You will soon find that your leadership team is making better decisions, with less time and more creativity than ever before. Team commitment and positive conflict management are also enhanced when one takes the time to engage the entire brain and keep it focused on new ways of thinking.

This same process of awareness, insight and focused attention can be used in several areas of leadership. Applications for team-building, building trust, managing conflict have all benefited from this approach. In the end, authentic leadership requires one of the highest levels of cognitive and emotional intelligence of all human endeavors. As we mature and gain experience, our leadership techniques can continuously improve if we choose to gain awareness, develop insights and pay attention. What has been well-understood about adult learning is that learning quality is directly proportional to attention span. It is now clear that a superior means of sustaining attention is achieved with this three-step process. When combined with some of the most compelling neuroscience discoveries of our time, significant leadership capability, or mind span, becomes possible. Today's innovative leaders are already focusing their attention on developing superior mind span, in order to enrich their companies, motivate their employees and enhance their performance, both personally and professionally. Good to know that it all begins with an open mind.

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