

Management by Gaming: Stimulate Happy Brain Chemicals

by Loretta Breuning, PhD

People are highly motivated to do things that stimulate the happy brain chemicals. Dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin and endorphin are stimulated by behaviors relevant to survival. However, the brain defines survival in surprising ways, so organizations struggle to tap into nature's reward system. Management by Gaming is a powerful way to do that. It aligns organizational needs with individual needs so that each team member can feel good when taking steps that enhance organizational outcomes.

The brain chemicals that make us feel good are inherited from earlier mammals. These neurochemical impulses are hard to explain in words because they are controlled by brain structures that evolved long before the verbal human cortex. Animal research makes it easy to understand what stimulates dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin and endorphin in the state of nature, and transfer that knowledge to the workplace.

Dopamine

A lion's brain releases dopamine when it sees prey. Evidence that a reward is at hand triggers a good feeling. However, a lion

would not survive if it ran after every gazelle it saw. The lion's brain is designed to analyze the prospects before investing effort. When a hungry lion sees a gazelle is within its reach, its dopamine surges. That releases the energy needed for a successful hunt.

Our brains release dopamine when we see evidence that a need is about to be met. Dopamine tells your body to release the reserve tank of energy, and it feels good. We are designed to save our dopamine for good opportunities to meet needs instead of wasting it on fruitless endeavors. When your belly is full, your mammal brain focuses on social and future needs. The large human cortex can embrace complex goals because it is attached to a mammal brain that releases dopamine with each step toward the goal.

Our steps toward goals are fraught with uncertainty. We do not enjoy dopamine unless we see clear evidence that our steps are indeed leading to a reward. Management by Gaming generates the clear signals we need to keep dopamine flowing as we step toward complex goals.

Managers can easily adjust these signals to maintain alignment between individual efforts and organizational goals. Gamified management tools continually stimulate the good feeling that our investment of energy will be rewarded.

Oxytocin

A gazelle's brain releases oxytocin when it stays with its herd. Safety in numbers feels good, but it comes at a high price. A herd animal competes for small patches of grass instead of exploring lush new resources. The brain built by natural selection rewards you with the good feeling of oxytocin when you sustain social bonds. As you move away from social support, oxytocin falls and you feel like a gazelle exposed to a lion. It is not easy being a mammal. We constantly look for ways to stimulate one good feeling without losing another.

Management by Gaming can sustain the good feeling of social trust while greener pastures are explored. It does this by illuminating individual contributions to team goals, and team contributions to an individual's goals. This corresponds to the two ways of stimulating oxytocin: giving trust and receiving trust. Dysfunctional trust bonds easily develop in organizations. Management by Gaming can prevent this with scorecards organized around teams. Then, individuals can easily see how they benefit from team efforts.

Serotonin

A monkey's brain releases serotonin when it takes the dominant position. Social

dominance promotes a monkey's genes in the long run, and natural selection built a brain that rewards it with a good feeling in the short run. Of course, dominance seeking is not always the path to survival. The monkey brain constantly analyzes available data and decides when to go for it and when to withdraw. Serotonin is not aggression but a nice, calm sense that you have what you need.

Organizations continually grapple with the mammalian urge for social dominance. Management by Gaming expands opportunities to stimulate serotonin in healthy ways. Basic scorecards show each individual how to gain a social advantage through efforts that meet organizational needs. Badges can be created to offer as many opportunities for distinction as individuals choose to pursue. Every team member can find multiple avenues to social importance without resorting to dysfunctional behaviors.

Endorphin

A zebra's brain releases endorphin when a lion's huge canines pierce its neck. We rarely think of endorphin this way, but physical injury is in fact endorphin's trigger. The release of "nature's morphine" creates a euphoria that masks pain, which helps an injured zebra escape. However, endorphin wears off in a few minutes, because pain is the valuable signal that an injury needs protection. We are not designed to run on endorphin all the time, but to avoid pain as much as possible. However, endorphin feels so good that individuals are motivated

to repeat behaviors that stimulated it before.

Fortunately, exercise stimulates it, and so does laughing and crying. Healthy ways of stimulating endorphin take time.

Management by Gaming helps individuals take time out for exercise, laughing and even grieving when needed, by clearly representing progress toward goals. By building a strong sense of progress, it supports good intentions for work-life balance.

Cortisol

Bad feelings are caused by a brain chemical called cortisol. When an animal is hungry or injured, a surge of cortisol gets its attention. This motivates the animal to do what it takes to make the bad feeling stop, and to avoid anything associated with it in the future.

Cortisol causes stress in humans because our big brains are so good at associating things. We can construct threats in our brains instead of just focusing on the threats reaching our senses. This has helped us take action to prevent pain, but as soon as we solve a problem, our brains leap to the next potential problem. Cortisol is a huge source of bad feeling in the workplace. Management by Gaming is a great way to reduce cortisol. We are less inclined to anticipate threats when we have good information.

Disappointment is a threat from the mammal brain's perspective. When a hungry lion fails to catch a gazelle, it is still

hungry. When you fail to achieve an expected goal, your big brain releases cortisol even if your belly is full. We are always generating expectations so we are constantly challenged to manage our cortisol. Management by Gaming allows for a continual adjustment of expectations, which reduces uncertainty and reduces cortisol. Gamified tools focus attention on the good feeling of meeting goals instead of the bad feeling of avoiding a threat.

Short-Term Rewards versus Long-Term Rewards

In the modern world, we seek distant rewards with long sequences of steps that have uncertain outcomes. However, each of these steps are motivated by immediate brain chemicals as triggered by new information. Management by Gaming can shape this information in ways that complement our natural reward system. The brain is always scanning for information relevant to rewards and threats. Organizations that meet these information needs in new ways will flourish because they align short-term neurochemical rewards with long-term organizational rewards. In a world bombarded by information, this information-management strategy will bring a growing advantage to an organization.

The human brain will always be interested in short-term rewards. We can understand and manage this impulse instead of expecting to transcend it. The brain structures that manage our neurochemicals are inherited from earlier mammals.

Instead of thinking of the limbic brain as a weakness that must be resisted, we can enjoy living at a time when it is better understood.

Decisions versus Impulses: Neural Pathways to Better Outcomes

Our brain evolved to sift and sort information rather than wasting attention on everything in sight. It sifts information using neural pathways built from experience. Old pathways are not always the best guide to new objectives, but we often rely on them because they are so efficient. New pathways are inefficient until we build them with repetition and pave them with happy chemicals. Management by Gaming supports the building of new neural pathways so individuals can focus on the information most relevant to organizational outcomes. These new neural pathways are the infrastructure of new habits and expectations.

A virtuous circle results, as better information leads to better steps, better outcomes and better expectations. A flow of good feelings fuels positive steps and more positive expectations. Management by Gaming is powerful because it works with our brain's natural operating system. It is likely to play an important role in the practice of management in the future.