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## How the Science of Neuroplasticity Can Help Your Employees Thrive



Our brains makes us jump to conclusions!

The human brain loves patterns, so we make assumptions that conform to the patterns we know. We are often wrong. This can lead to unconscious bias and judgmental behavior, causing low morale among workers who are affected.

When you make assumptions, you may experience an unconscious bias or you may project your patterns on to other people. You may also unintentionally show disregard for certain roles in the workplace, or move so quickly that you work without empathy. This can lead to misconceptions in personal and professional relationships, leaving people feeling misunderstood and isolated. The impact can be devastating on both individuals and the teams they work with, resulting in a less-than-enthusiastic work environment reduced productivity.

Scientists are devoting more time, energy, and resources to studying the human brain, and they have a solution for these common workplace challenges. Using neuroplasticity, the ability of the brain to form and reorganize synaptic connections, we can remodel behaviors and adapt to create a better workplace. This is the same premise behind dealing with people with PTSD. Smart leaders who recognize this can foster a culture where every worker feels valued and respected, helping employees thrive.

### Cognitive Training

The [science of neuroplasticity](#), refers to instances when stimuli prompt a response in the brain, allowing the nervous system to reorganize its functions, connections, and even its

structure. It can be used in the workplace to address assumptions, and develop cognitive abilities to perceive peers through a lens of greater tolerance and acceptance.

[Unconscious bias](#) is a common problem in the workplace. It impacts behaviors toward individuals of a different gender, age, race, culture, status, education, and any number of other categories. Many people may have an unconscious bias toward any kind of change in the workforce, such as having to adopt a new software system, or even getting a new phone.

When employees are exposed to diverse groups and new situations that challenge their preconceived notions, the dynamics in the workplace can change for the better. Using neuroplasticity, we can replace experiential biases (this new system is going to be a problem!) with new experiences and new relationships that improve our understanding and acceptance.

## **Remodeling Experiences in the Brain and Building Empathy**

Several [strategies](#) may help remodel behaviors and help employees thrive.

Among the strategies that are available, awareness training is designed to enlighten people to the different types of misunderstandings that occur in the workplace. We can also create structures that allow employees to share experiences and take advantage of opportunities to grow and change.

We can foster community and hold events that bring diverse employees together to share experiences. These opportunities help break down barriers and promote a culture of understanding.

This works for other kinds of changes, too. When employees learn how other organizations transitioned through a new software system, they start to see the end result as a possibility.

## **Reversing Roles for New Perspective**

To develop a more broadened culture, some companies experiment with [role reversal](#). This unique approach lets you see your workplace in a new light by temporarily performing the roles of others or using role-reversal scenarios in professional development. In the Navy we would have a day where a junior person got to fill the commanding officer's job, and the commanding officer would take their place.

The TV show, *Undercover Boss*, takes that idea to a new level by secretly immersing the most senior executives into lower level jobs, providing them with an opportunity to see how their more junior employees work. (Although I always wondered why people didn't catch on when there were TV crews following them around.)

Last week I got to have lunch with an organization's cleaning crew. One of the ladies had emigrated from Croatia, where she had been a registered nurse. She doesn't have the equivalent US medical credentials, so she is working as a janitor. Her supervisor had no idea that the woman had a college degree and extensive medical experience.

Because our brain jumps to conclusions based on the information it has, we often judge people based on the job they hold, the car they drive, the clothes they wear, or the way they speak. These experiences can open doors to better understanding. Making time for executives to see how a company functions on the factory floor builds their understanding for people in those roles. Inversely, when low-level employees are allowed to participate in the decision-making process for a company, they may feel more respected, more understood, and more valued. Exchanging roles can provide much needed appreciation for the talents and skills necessary to fulfill those jobs.

At another company, one data entry employee, Seth, was able to shadow the CEO for a day. Seth said the CEO worked far harder than he thought. "It looks so glamorous when I go by

his office,” Seth said. “Now I know better. It is hard work, filled with tedious meetings and mountains of budget paperwork. No thanks.”

These all affect how our synapses interact. We know that making assumptions can lead to poor decisions and actions, and taking action can increase appreciation for others, encourage continued learning, and open new perspectives.

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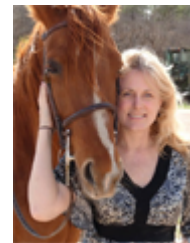
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*Mary C. Kelly*



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