

Neuroscience of Community with David Rock (Transcript)

Work Better Podcast Season 1: Episode 2

“Feeling part of a community tells us we’re going to be okay if things go wrong.”

David Rock, CEO NeuroLeadership Institute

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Work Better Podcast

Chris Congdon: Welcome to Work Better, a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. The rules of work are being rewritten and we’re all trying to figure it out. We invite leading thinkers – like today’s guest David Rock, CEO and co-founder of the NeuroLeadership Institute – to share ideas and insights that can help us make sense of what’s happening and navigate the massive change we’re going through.

David coined the term “neuroleadership” nearly 25 years ago. And he’s spent a lot of time studying *Your Brain at Work* – which is also the name of one of four books he’s written. The NeuroLeadership Institute brings neuroscientists and leadership experts together using a science based approach to advise organizations on how to build new leadership skills and capabilities. We’re going to talk about return to office, quiet quitting and what leaders need to learn as companies adopt hybrid work. And at the end of the conversation – stick around – because my friend, and colleague, sociologist Dr. Tracy Brower – will join me to talk about the insights David shared and connect it back to ways to make work better.

CC: Welcome David, thank you for joining us today.

David Rock: Thanks, Very much. It’s great to be here.

CC: You know I'm I'm excited to talk to you because there's so much about work that is changing right now between hybrid work strategies - so we have more work happening away from the office. It feels like the employer employee contract is shifting. People want something fundamentally different in their relationship with work. And we've been exploring a lot about how the workplace could begin to feel more like a neighborhood like these great places where people feel a sense of community and so I wanted to ask you about the neuroscience of community like how does a feeling of community affect the brain?

DR: Yeah, it's a great question. So you know the brain is built to keep us alive and the way that it does that is - the brain's organized where if there's something that's dangerous for you, you get an alert response in the form of like. Ah, you know, pay attention, pay attention. Pain is a kind of alert response. It's like something's not wrong, pay attention. But also you get this reward response of like oh there's something good over there. And the brain will tell you about potential rewards by kind of orienting your attention right?

So if you're walking in the woods and you hear a scary noise. Um, that could be a you know a snake. For example, you'll immediately turn around and you know your heart rate will go up really quickly. But if you see it, it looks like a really pretty sight. You won't turn as quickly. But you'll orient your attention towards something that could be rewarding. So the brain's constantly tracking these what we call threats and rewards all the time and there's a network for primary threats and primary rewards which is basically the pain and pleasure network.

But there's a whole bunch of experiences in life that have kind of piggybacked on the pain and pleasure network and one of those is basically a feeling of being connected safely with other people and the hypothesis is that we evolved in times of small groups where you know your survival was dependent on being a trusted member of that fairly small group. Might be 5, 10, 20 people something like that and you know when you felt safely ensconced in that group, you felt safe. You would know you would live. Well, if you were cast out of that group, it was dangerous.

You probably wouldn't survive on your own and so what's happened is we've evolved this brain that innately feels positive or reward responses when we're connected with others and actually feels like we are in danger when we're not connected with others.

A researcher who passed away a couple of years ago John Cacioppo from Chicago, amazing researcher and he showed how loneliness is actually the brain's response to dangerously low resources in the same way as hunger is a pain response to dangerously low resources and if you think that not having enough people around you is not dangerous, you haven't been through really challenging times like in a real crisis. You really need people around you in so many ways. So that's basically what's happening.

So a community feels good as long as you have what we call shared goals with people you've got trying to do similar things. Then it's innately rewarding to be around a community. It feels good and it's innately threatening now. Of course people have different levels of this though.

Some people will say, well hang on, I'm an introvert.

You know I really don't like a lot of people but there are certain people that an introvert will feel safe with and if they don't have those people around them as much as normal, they'll still feel that pain response. They just made that maybe 1 or 2 people a week or a month for other people. It's a lot more folks but whatever your level is. We feel innately intrinsically rewarded when we feel part of a community because it tells us we're going to be okay if things go wrong.

CC: Yeah, you know there's research out there lately. That's been talking about the value of having friendships at work and that number of friendships at work seems to be going down like people are feeling. Maybe they're not having that same type of relationship that they had in the past. What do you think is going on there?

DR: Yeah I saw that just this week actually, some more writing coming out about this. The work friendship is diminishing partly because we're not spending time together going for lunch together. You know we're more at home partly. It's the contacts between the company and the individuals being strained.

I don't know that it's a healthy thing I think people got a lot of their social needs from the workplace I think people stayed in companies because they had a lot of of colleagues that they felt needed them and the vice versa and so I think it provided a kind of bond. Now you know you don't have to run back into the office to create that bond. That bond can be created still working virtually but just you just have to be a little more intentional about it. But I do think it's not a positive thing that there are fewer friendships at work both from the employer's side. But also from the employee's side. You've got fewer social resources in an emergency.

CC: There's also this phenomenon that I think leaders are starting to recognize like they may not have had a term for it. But maybe they had kind of a leadership spidey sense that something was going on and it's this term that came up on Tik Tok not too long ago about this idea of quiet quitting which feels like it could be a little bit about setting boundaries but maybe also about engagement levels starting to drop off. What do you think about that and how might a community or a sense of community at work help with that?

DR: Yeah, so we did a lot of research on engagement over the years. We published a paper on it a long time ago now in 2009 but essentially engagement is the net state of that person as it relates to threat and reward. So someone who if you imagine threat and reward as a kind of horizontal arrow and put reward on the right, threat on the left. You know someone who's engaged is on the right of the middle, right? Someone who's slightly engaged, someone who's very engaged. You know, really passionate. They're experiencing strong rewards. They're leaning in. They have this resilience that comes from kind of having such a positive optimistic state that you know bad things just kind of wash off them right? So strong engagement is on the right, you know slightly engaged or sort of close to the middle. You know you've got people who are slightly disengaged and then you've got a term that's out there. We didn't invent it, which is, active disengagement and that's someone who's really checked out. Maybe they're even saying bad things about the company. Maybe they're influencing other people and I don't know that quiet quitting is quite that far. It's somewhere between sort of disengaged and actively disengaged. And it's essentially the person who has really checked out Now. It might be that they are just experiencing such cognitive burnout from having to process so much and their brains just kind of can't do it any longer. They, you know, physically kind of checked out and they're not getting enough rebound time. They're not getting enough rest time to maintain the level so that it could be that they feel that the company doesn't care about them. The manager doesn't care about them and they're just you know more psychologically. Emotionally you know, checked out.

It could be driven by a few factors but you definitely see the phrase burnout showing up as one of the biggest factors for employees and interestingly when I asked ah hundreds of senior leaders and and talent executives in the last year you know the biggest skill gap for managers that comes up over and over. It's a huge outlier is empathy/ There's a real gap in managers and leaders at all levels being able to show real empathy for people and I think that's part of the solution is people are going to have to be much better at showing care and caring and actively doing something to help people because folks have been in the biggest crisis of their lives. In many situations, I think that's part of the psychological kind of checking out that's happening. But for some people it could be cognitive. They're just doing so much for you know, five days a week 12 hours a day their brain just isn't getting the rest it needs to rebound.

CC: David you were talking a minute ago about bringing people back into the office which for some organizations has all gone very smoothly, but for other organizations they're getting pushed back. It's a little bit of a struggle. And you know when I was reading about your SCARF model I was kind of intrigued by that and wondering if some of the things in that model could pertain to why organizations are maybe struggling to get their people to want to come back into the office even some of the time. Can you talk about that a little bit?

DR: Yeah, yeah, absolutely so SCARF stands for status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness and these 5 things are the drivers of strong threats or strong rewards. So if you've got that horizontal line of threat on the left, reward on the right, SCARF is like under that and each one of these can be either a negative or positive now generally the negatives are stronger. So if you imagine that line as a seesaw you know if you attack someone's status by saying hey that was a dumb thing you just said at a meeting, you can't balance that out by saying oh by the way but you're dressed well today. The negative is generally much more impactful than the positive and that's true for all threats and rewards in the brain. Generally we pay more attention to that.

You know that snake we see makes us jump. That pretty sight we see doesn't make us jump. But anyway so SCARF describes the 5 things creating these really strong threats and rewards and in particular the A is a really important one to understand in this environment.

So autonomy is a feeling of control and what generally happens when the world becomes uncertain in any context. Our reflex action is to try to increase our sense of autonomy. Our sense of control. We lean in and we try to control things and you know over this pandemic, our sense of certainty massively plummeted.

We also dropped our sense of relatedness. We were around fewer people. We really struggled with relatedness and we also felt really out of control. We didn't know what to do or what was going on but there was this weird silver lining in being allowed to work from home. Gave us this unexpected control over all sorts of things. We'd forgotten they were important and they weren't just like when you work which is a big thing to control now or where you work which is a nice thing to control. They also were how much sleep, how much you could see your kids and when you could see your kids. And you know being able to fit in an exercise routine and being able to control your social life even your diet because you're in 1 place all the time, you're much more in control of your diet so you know diet, exercise, social life, family life and sleep. I mean that's a pretty big set of things you'd have in control over. And so you know we kind of gave people unexpected control over this stuff and unexpected rewards are really strong. So unexpected control over all this is really rewarding but unfortunately unexpected threats or having this control taken away from us is even more threatening than the other is rewarding.

So what's happening is people are feeling like they're losing control over things that really really matter to them and that's a problem and when you realize that for a lot of people. This is family life, health, diet, exercise, sleep as well as work. You go? Oh okay, no wonder they're reacting and a lot of people obviously voting with their feet or they're, you know, checking out now with this situation.

What you want to do is, if you're creating a threat, you want to balance it out with multiple rewards. So if you are going to do something with autonomy, if you are going to kind of take away control. You're going to have to do it in a way that puts some rewards on the other side whether that's maybe to certainty or relatedness which is shared goals or fairness. Show you're doing it really fairly. Um. But ultimately you're probably going to want to soften that blow as much as you possibly can by giving people more control than they expected over elements of the process. So maybe if you are required to come back in, maybe you can be flexible on the time or instead of saying we want you in three days a week. Maybe you're willing to say we want you in twelve days a month and you can work out at a team level how you do that or maybe you can say we want you in for the last week of the month everyone so we can all be together but you can decide how many days a week. Work out what you can be flexible on because the more things like that you can do the better off everyone will feel.

CC: Yeah, those are really helpful strategies to think about. I want to go back to something you said earlier about leadership and skills because I agree with you that I think empathy is a skill that we all need to develop and I imagine there are a lot of skills that when you look at how much has changed about the way we are working, again, whether it's how we're working or what we're expecting from one another in that contract. What are some of those skills that you'd say leaders need now, maybe more than they've ever needed before and particularly in this kind of hybrid work experiment?

DR: Yeah, we've been thinking about that a lot so in my day job heading up the NeuroLeadership Institute. You know we're in the business of building habits at scale across large organizations like 5,000,000 people last year built new habits. So in any domain we always think about what are the critical habits people need and in this time there are a few that managers really have to anchor on. 1 of them. You know we call it solve for autonomy and manage for fairness. So one of these things is as much as you can like, work out how you can give people autonomy in this time and at the same time really make sure it's fair between people and teams and all this stuff and I think that keeps people more motivated and more engaged. Offset some of the challenges.

Whatever you're doing with your organizational plans with letting people be at home or at the office, you want to do that in any of those situations. Another one. That's really important is you're going to be really careful of shifting to that surveillance mindset that we've seen happen a lot. You know if you're not going to see everyone every day be careful of the feelings that managers will have about wanting to feel more in control and so if you don't see even some of your employees some days, you might be like - hey send me a report at the end of every day for everything you did and that attacks people's sense of autonomy and status and fairness - like hey I'm kicking out of the park. Why do you want this? So be careful. What happens if you don't see people? It can affect you as the manager, it can affect your feelings control and certainty and even status so you might have a slight threat in these 3 but the employee will have an even stronger threat to their sense of status and certainty and autonomy and fairness and relatedness like all 5 will be a negative if you start having this kind of surveillance mindset or some have started to literally track keystrokes and see when people are offline. There's a surprising number of companies that have been doing that in the pandemic. So it's really shifting from a surveillance mindset to an outcomes mindset and we think that's a really really important frame for any kind of hybrid work strategy you're really anchoring on outcomes and not on monitoring and tracking anywhere near as much and of course there are people that will rot the system as there are when people are in the office. So that's another set of habits and then there's also just how to work with people virtually.

CC: So let's talk about those situations where we are together. If we are in physical places with one another like do you have a sense of what might be the optimal environment? And maybe it's not purely physical. Maybe it's a combination of physical and virtual. But what is this optimal environment if we want to maximize people's sense of community and belonging?

DR: Yeah, it's a complex question because on the 1 hand you know we come into the office because we want to see each other and collaborate and all this, on the other hand you know the open office has some mixed research and essentially it's driven the growth of you know, big headphones. Actually research on this shows that when you go open plan people actually interact less because they're all headphones all the time trying to focus and you just can't get around that so it's not as simple as like oh let's all just go open I think it comes back to autonomy. You want to give people choices. Do you want to work in a cafe style environment around people and some background music? No one is talking too loudly on the phone. Do you want to work in a totally quiet environment where you can focus and there's sort of like a library environment. Um, do you want to work in a cubicle where you can make calls and be there or do you want to switch it up? Ideally, think of a few different environments like a cafe environment, a library environment and the private environment and have enough space for people to mix it up and then there's the you know then there's the team working together space where folks can collaborate and there's lots of whiteboard space. So I think it's about giving people some options. I mean what we know about environments is the higher the roof the space, the clearer people can think. You know, we have to see the horizon to makes us more creative.

CC: Is that a neuroscience thing David?

DR: Yeah. Having a higher roof, a kind of more open space helps you kind of think bigger thoughts, feel less anxious, more positive and optimistic, more creative. So I mean it's a subtle effect but it has an effect. Um, so you know ideally we want a few choices of environments. And not be so direct and tell people you have to work this way that's going to be the ideal.

CC: Yeah, well I think that's fascinating and I agree with you that having a lot more diverse kinds of spaces not only gives you more autonomy but actually feels more inclusive. You know, like people have choices to make based on what they need, and how they like to work so it can support all kinds of different people right.

DR: Absolutely you think of even the lunch space where you have big long tables so people can kind of hang out with peers and if they're sitting at a big table, it can be called a communal table. This is a sign that you'd be happy to chat with people and people can just hang out and then you could have like you know private booths which are more for private conversations or being on your own and kind of these subtle signals give people an opportunity to choose you know how they want to be and generally there's an inclination if we're in the office that we want to connect with other people but there are also plenty people who get there and just need to focus. So we want to be able to account for both.

CC: Yeah, well this has been a really fascinating conversation. David, I really appreciate your thoughts about neuroscience and the brain and how we connect with each other and I just want to thank you for joining us today. I really appreciate you being here with us.

DR: Thanks for the opportunity, I love the work you guys do. We've been thinking a lot over the years about designing environments. We've helped some organizations conceptualize environments and you know the big variable is kind of autonomy and give people options and recognizing that some people really do need to focus and there's no substitute for a really quiet environment sometimes and so you know making the workplaces better for humans is something we're excited about as well.

CC: Well thank you. We are very excited about making the workplace better for humans. So again. Thanks so much for joining us today. David.

DR: Thanks so much. It's been a pleasure.

CC: Joining me now is Dr. Tracy Brower. She's is vice president of workplace insights at Steelcase. And, she's also the author of *The Secrets to Happiness at Work*. Tracy's also a contributor to *Forbes* and *Fast Company*. We've done a lot of thinking together over the years. So, I'm excited to talk about this with you.

Tracy Brower: Thanks for having me here.

CC: One of the things I found really interesting that David talked about was how we evolved in groups. And if you're in the group, you are safe, and if you're out of the group, you're potentially in danger. I thought it was a compelling point that he connected that to loneliness. You've thought a lot about loneliness and connected that to the workplace. Can you just talk about that a little bit?

TB: His points were so interesting there about loneliness, the need for belonging and connection. I feel like work and the workplace end up having an expanded role for us to come together. In a lot of ways, we don't see as much of each other anymore. I order a box from Target instead of talking to someone at the checkout or my coffee on an app. I'm not having as many of those day-to-day moments. So, we connect with each other at work and we come together at work. The workplace can send us such cues about how we come together. Maybe there's a comfy place for us to grab a minute together, and that invites us to spend time. Maybe we don't have a dedicated workspace anymore, but we have a dedicated neighborhood. So we know where to find our people and we can find the people we work with most easily, and we can chat with them about task and relationship stuff. We can catch up and talk about the project we're working on together. I feel like the workplace is that place where we can connect and it can really make it easy to do that.

CC: It's interesting. Working at home, I felt like I was getting a lot done. But I didn't really think about this feeling of loneliness until I got back in the office and started seeing people that I didn't have a scheduled interaction with that I could run into – literally – in the cafe and being able to have a conversation about – I mean I wouldn't have scheduled a meeting to talk about what yoga classes are around town. It was really great to have that kind of interaction. And I think that space gave me that cue, that you're talking about, that it was okay to have those casual conversations.

TB: Exactly. There's really great research about those casual interactions and how those are actually really correlated with happiness. We don't have to have really deep meaningful conversations to feel happiness. Those bump-into conversations can do that. And I think when those are threaded through your day – like I can grab coffee between meetings and I run into someone – or my neighborhood has enclaves around it and I can flow between the meeting with colleagues and the video conference I need to duck into by myself. I think that flow and convenience really help the workplace to be a place where we can make those connections and be in community with one another.

CC: I also found David's insights about quiet quitting really interesting as well. It's a big topic. He likened it to engagement, which we've done a lot of work on as well. I'm curious because he talked about some of what he thought might be behind some of that is leadership skills and empathy. And I know you've done a lot of work and writing on empathy and our need to show empathy at work. What did you think about that?

TB: I thought that was so interesting as well. He talked about new leadership skills and empathy and how leaders are going through their own stuff as well in terms of reward and threat. I always say leaders have so much emotional labor they have to do. Maybe more so now than ever before. There's so much pressure on leaders in so many ways. And one thing leaders can do is create the conditions for empathy. Sometimes things get in their way to do that effectively.

Leaders may think 'I don't have time for this.' I need to add this to my plate. Expressing empathy, asking questions, attending, listening, tuning into what you see in employees can be part of your day-to-day work, what you do every day. I think one of the challenges, and he talked about this, is that when you're a leader, you need to lead virtually. Sometimes you don't see people all the time. And maybe empathy is easier when you're in person, because in person you get so many more non verbal cues than you can see on the screen. Sure, hybrid work is here to stay, and we need to get good at it on the screen. But when we're in person, we can really understand what people are going through, maybe to a greater degree.

CC: It feels more natural to talk about somebody's life or what happened on their weekend when you're together. It feels like when you pop-on the screen for that virtual meeting, it's down to business, got to get going. We don't always take time for those kinds of interactions that are really important. I've noticed that and feel like I've had to work at it a lot.

So, we have these new habits we need to work on as leaders. And when David talked about hybrid work, and how people are responding to it, we need to give people a sense of autonomy and a sense of fairness. And, I know that can be difficult to do. You've worked with a lot of clients trying to figure out their hybrid work strategies, so what do you think about that?

TB: Yes, we have so many customer questions on this topic because by definition different people are working in different ways, so that creates a sense of potential perception of less fairness. So when we see customers who are doing it really well, we're seeing them be really clear with their principles that will guide the options people will get about when and where and how they will work, and the level of control they will have over that. And they are really transparent about that and why certain roles or jobs get to work differently. And the other thing we're seeing is that customers having more success with it are focused on the content of the work to guide some of those decisions. More than pay level or hierarchy. How the work gets done, the content and nature of the work may drive the choices or some of the choices they are able to give people. I think that's some of what we're seeing that can start to provide balance. We know control and autonomy are so important. We want to give people more choices about where and when they work. And the workplace can be a place where we can give people more of those choices and they can feel more tangible.

CC: This concept we've been working on now for a while to design a workplace to be more like a community and a neighborhood. When you talk about those kinds of cues that people need to have different behavior, that feels like one strategy that organizations can use to give people that sense of autonomy that David was talking about because they would have more choices. But it also feels like an opportunity for fairness because if we all have that opportunity to choose where we work based on what we need, that feels like a more fair work environment than we've had in the past.

TB: Yes. And I love the point you made with David about inclusivity. We all have differences in the way we work and how we prefer to work – so having the variety, and settings in the workplace and also having a culture that gives us permission to use them. Like it’s okay if I go into an enclave to take a call, no one is going to frown their brow or raise their eyebrows if I do that. Or it’s okay that I go to do my heads down work in a workcafe, so I’m able to be alone, together. I get that sense of connection David’s talking about, and I made a choice. I’m controlling my day. I have some autonomy about going there for my work without sitting at my workstation all the time.

CC: That’s an important new skill for some of us to be able to get comfortable with people using a diverse set of spaces to get their work done. It’s no longer that someone has to be at their desk to be perceived as getting their work done. The culture says that they have the option to move and be where they need to be.

TB: I think that movement, if it helps us to be more effective, we get that sense of esteem for work. Work has a really important role to play in our lives for individuals as well. It’s where we express our talents, and where we contribute to our community. It’s the workplace and it’s the work and how we feel connected to other people and feel that sense of esteem.

CC: It’s where we feel those bonds with each other and that we need each other.

TB: It’s the reward, response.

CC: Exactly. Exactly. Thanks Tracy, I really appreciate you spending some time with us talking about the conversation with David.

TB: Thank you.

CC: Thank you for being here with us for our first episode of Work Better. If you enjoyed this conversation – subscribe to this podcast on your favorite podcast platform and visit us at steelcase.com/ subscribe to sign up for weekly updates on workplace research, insights and design ideas delivered to your inbox.

Join us next week for my conversation with Annie Murphy Paul author *The Extended Mind*. She talks about the power of thinking outside the brain and fills us in on the science behind “Groupiness”. We hope you join us.

Thanks again for being here – and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better. Work Better podcast is produced by Rebecca Charbauski. Creative art direction by Erin Ellison and Emily Cowdrey. Editing and sound mixing by SoundPost Studios. Technical support by Mark Caswell and Jose Jimenez (he-men-es). Digital publishing by Areli Arellano (are-ee-ahno) and Jordan Marks.

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