

treat 'em mean, keep 'em keen

Where did you meet your partner? I met mine in Miami, on a training course. In those days, training courses were all about the bar bill and the spa.

I can't quite remember what we were taught exactly, but I came away thinking my new employer was fabulous. Were they just the good old days? In the downturn, this habit came back into vogue. Treat the talent to a week of 5* living, call it a leadership course and they won't walk away when the market picks up. Nowadays, the word 'Leadership' seems to be used largely as a magic word to turn a dull training event into something sexy, a bit like adding 'Strategic' to the job

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title of one of your tricky dead-wooders. Well, bad news folks. The warm bath approach to executive development just doesn't work, except perhaps as a very expensive retention device.

For a while now I have been using 'critical incident' learning for leaders at Ashridge Business School. Our simulation uses research on what leaders really need to be good at to give leaders-in-waiting 'muscle memory' for their future roles. A bit like lining them all up and injecting them with 20:20 foresight, so they don't have to sit around waiting for 'leadership experience' to happen to them. And when neurobiology got trendy, I immediately leapt on the bandwagon, and wired up a load of leaders to heart-monitors to find out what was happening to them during the simulation. Don't worry, I had professional help, from Professor Tricia Riddell of Reading University, and a host of Ashridge colleagues. What we found was that there was a direct correlation between increased heart-rate and increased learning. That's right – the people who got a bit stressed out by the whole thing were the most likely to be learning their socks off. Goodbye happy



sheets,
hello crosspatch
executives wanting to
know what on earth is going on.

So, here is a snippet of theory for you: they reckon that when we are in 'fight or flight' mode, we make a call about whether or not we are resourced to cope. If we are, we stay physically and cognitively optimised to prevail against the threat. If we aren't, we start prioritising the functions necessary to exit stage left. But 'resourced to cope' is not a scientific measure, it's a feeling, an instantaneous decision we make, which is why you get crazy stories about grannies lifting cars off toddlers when they shouldn't have been able to. And the good news is that this feeling is very easy to manipulate. We just have to spot where you don't feel

resourced, and take you through a process that makes you feel better, like practising difficult conversations until you're not scared of them anymore.



Eve was a keynote speaker at CRF's leadership roundtable. Read the meeting notes at crforum.co.uk.

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Because of how memory works, it so happens that this kind of learning is quicker than traditional learning, and has a longer shelf-life. But the very cool thing about learning under pressure is that it helps you to identify your 'stretch zone' thresholds. Figuring out where your 'fight' mode is matters, because it's where you'll be at your cognitive best. Like the top performers in sport and the arts, you need to be able to step into this space when it really counts. It's not healthy to stay there for long, but it's where your brain is at its keenest.

And now we know that if you can spot where you're under-resourced, you can extend this high-performing space, by deliberately resourcing yourself to cope.

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