

What Was I Thinking? Handling the Hijack

By Dr. Relly Nadler, CEO, True North Leadership, Inc.
www.truenorthleadership.com

We have all had the experience of doing something in the heat of the moment that we regretted later. Our reaction flew out of the gate before we could catch it. It's like our rational mind stopped and what came out not only surprised us but everyone else around. You end up saying "How could I do that, what could I have possibly been thinking?" Well in reality you weren't thinking you were overwhelmed with an emotional reaction. You were hijacked.

In the corporate world a four second outburst can tarnish a leader's career. It is what becomes chiseled in others mind about you. How does this happen and what can we do to prevent this loss of rational thought and reputation? A tool to gain more cognitive control will be presented and explained in this article.

The "amygdala hijack" is a term coined in Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence*, his first book on the subject. The amygdala is the emotional part of the brain, which regulates the fight or flight response. When threatened, it can respond irrationally. A rush of stress hormones floods the body before the prefrontal lobes (regulating executive function) can mediate this reaction.

Famous Amygdala Hijacks:

First let's look at some of the famous hijacks and the results of these. This is easier than examining our own.

1. Zidane's head butt:

In front of 28.8 million viewers in 213 countries Zinedine Zidane, a world-wide soccer role model, lost his self-control and head butted Marco Materazzi in 2006 World Cup Soccer finals. Zidane was kicked out of the game. France lost the World Cup

to Italy and Zidane's career ended in disgrace and wonderment "what was he thinking?" Again, he wasn't.

Zidane's surprising and aggressive response demonstrates the three signs of the "amygdala hijack": strong emotional reaction, sudden onset, and regret for your actions when you reflect later.

Zidane apologized to the children for his act, but remained unrepentant to Materazzi and rationalized that Materazzi's statements provoked him. Zidane's comments demonstrate the seriousness of his high profile hijack. His logic was suppressed by the powerful tunnel vision survival reaction of the amygdala. No one can *make* you do something against your better judgment, but the amygdala always can.

Zidane rationalized later that he knew there were only minutes left in his last career game and Materazzi response demanded retaliation. He was *not* thinking logically at that time and his response characterizes what we call "cognitive dissonance" in explaining his behavior. In other words, there must have been a good reason to do something so stupid in front of 28.8 million viewers.

2. Eliot Spitzer Sex scandal:

Eliot Spitzer, the governor of New York who made his name as an aggressive prosecutor of corporate fraud and organized crime had to resign in disgrace in 2008 for being personally involved in a prostitution ring. These prostitutes charged up to \$3100 an hour.

The graduate from Princeton and Harvard Law School obviously was very smart, but the pleasure and irrationality of the amygdala overtook his rational thinking of consequences and impacts on his career and family. "What was he thinking?"

Other famous hijacks

3. Bill Clinton's follies with Monica Lewinsky that got him impeached. Before Spitzer, Clinton was the poster boy for lack of impulse control. "What was he thinking?"

4. Mike Tyson biting Evander Holyfield's ear in their 1993 title boxing match. His hijack cost him \$3million and lost his boxing license.
5. Enron's executives numerous hijacks over their tenure ended with many in jail with plenty of time for better thinking.

Brain Neuroscience: How the Hijack happens

We now know there are two minds one that thinks and one that feels. The research by Joseph Le Doux reported by Goleman (1995), states "...the architecture of the brain gives the amygdala a privileged position as the emotional sentinel, able to hijack the brain."

The stimuli comes in from the eyes or ears and goes immediately to thalamus and it then goes right to amygdala before a signal reaches the neocortex. This survival mechanism lets us react to things before the rational brain has time to mull things over. The hair trigger amygdala though can be sloppy and distort things in this quick reaction.

It has been found the amygdala in animals can respond to a perception in as little as twelve thousandths of a second. So the antennae are up in the amygdala to constantly scan the environment for anything that may hurt us or things to fear.

Where did my IQ Go?

Any strong emotion, anxiety, anger, joy, or betrayal trips off the amygdala and impairs the prefrontal cortex's working memory. The power of emotions overwhelms rationality. That is why when we are emotionally upset or stressed we can't think straight.

Matthew Lieberman, a neuroscientist has found an inverse relationship between the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex, the brain's executive function where rational thought and judgment sit. When the amygdala is active with blood and oxygen, there is less activation in the prefrontal cortex. Our thinking power is disrupted and there are deficits in our problem solving, because the blood and oxygen are in the amygdala versus the prefrontal cortex. It is like losing 10 to 15 IQ points temporarily, which explains "what was I thinking?" So we are thinking but with less capacity and brain power.

In today's economy most people are walking around with more stress, apprehensiveness and fear for the future. You could say that every organization is suffering at some level from emotional hijacks and thus their organization may be operating in a dumbed down fashion.

We know emotions are contagious, so if one person is emotionally hijacked on your team or organization most likely others will catch it, like the flu. So quickly the team IQ can lose points and jeopardize executive decisions and deteriorate the teamwork and collaboration.

The leaders' ability to manage their emotions then is paramount as they are the "emotional thermostat" for their team and can influence their team's mood and productivity. The Hay Group has found that the leader has 50% to 70% influence over the climate of the team. Freedman and Everett (2008) state that 70% of the top issues in the workplace are tied to leadership. So the leader and their emotional intelligence have an enormous influence on the team.

Self- Management: How to regain your IQ points

The good news is this loss of IQ points is temporary. Self management is a leader's ability to be aware of what they are experiencing as another data set of information and be able to accept, manage and adjust to their emotions. These emotions are just as important as our thoughts, if not more, given their power to overwhelm us.

The Harvard Business Review (2003) reminds us of importance of self-awareness:

"Executives who fail to develop self-awareness risk falling into an emotionally deadening routine that threatens their true selves. Indeed a reluctance to explore your inner landscape not only weakens your own motivation but can also corrode your ability to inspire others."

For decades psychologists, counselors, priests and educators have been helping people identify or label their feelings. For example, "You must be very sad about your loss," Now we know from new research using the functional MRI that labeling these feelings helps reduce their intensity and return some of the activity back to the prefrontal

cortex and thus more cognitive control. This identification can help the individual accept and normalize what they are feeling. The feelings are cognitively reappraised or reframed and thus less aroused. This is called “affect labeling.”

Dr. Matt Lieberman and colleagues scanned the brains of 30 people - 18 women and 12 men between 18 and 36 – who were shown pictures of faces expressing strong emotions. What they found is that when people attached a word like angry to an angry-looking face, the response in the amygdala portion of the brain that handles fear, panic and other strong emotions decreased. Lieberman states, "This seems to dampen down the response in these basic emotional circuits in the brain. What lights up instead is the right ventrolateral prefrontal cortex, part of the brain that controls impulses."

So one way to gain back your lost IQ points is to label the feelings. We tell clients they need to name the feeling, normalize it and nurture a direction or action. Neuroscientist tell us the brain changes with attention and focus as these can change what parts of the brain are getting activated.

The Emotional Audit

A leadership tool that can help with both self awareness and self-management is called the “Emotional Audit.” It is designed to ask strategic questions and that can change the focus when a person is emotionally charged or about to get hijacked. When you are counting to ten to calm down ask these questions to better direct your brain’s thinking.

This audit is helpful, especially if you are feeling “triggered” by someone or something. Wait 5 seconds till you get answer to each question. To build your self-awareness and self-management, use the audit numerous times during the day. You may notice certain patterns you have to what triggers you, how you are feeling and how you get in your way.

Below are the strategic questions and hypothesized brain components that may be accessed with these questions in order. The goal is to refocus activity away from the amygdala and light up other

aspects the brain to gain more cognitive control and give you constructive options and direction. The first two questions access and label your thoughts and emotions. The third question makes conscious your intentions. The fourth question evaluates your actions in line with your intentions. Patterns of how you get in your way may emerge. The last question takes in all this new conscious data and allows you to better direct your brain and actions for the goals you want.

1. **What am I thinking?** (Basal ganglia- integrates feelings, thoughts and movements).
2. **What am I feeling?** (Basal ganglia- integrates feeling thoughts and movements) Temporal Lobes – emotional stability, name it to tame it – labeling affect.)
3. **What do I want now?** (Cerebellum – executive functions connects to Prefrontal Cortex (PFC), cognitive integration).
4. **How am I getting in my way?** Prefrontal Cortex – learning from mistakes.
5. **What do I need to do differently now?** (Prefrontal Cortex –the boss supervision of life – executive functioning planning goal setting, insight) (Anterior Cingulate Gyrus brain’s gear shifter– sees options go from idea to idea).

Anatomy of a hijack example: John was a leader who was known to have a hot temper. He was aware of it and his supervisor had it as a part of his performance review. He was at an internal national sales meeting presenting to his constituents when “he lost it” by yelling at some of his team members during the presentation to put their computers away. There was hush and awkwardness as he continued his presentation. This was very embarrassing for him and cemented his “hot head image” and limited his promotion possibilities.

What happened? John felt extreme pressure to do a good job. He prepared well and did the whole presentation himself. He did not delegate any of the preparation or delivery to his team members.

Before the presentation a few people came to him and said they were not going to make his presentation because they were going to play golf with some of the executives. This was very irritating to him. John also was trying to stay on schedule and his time got shortened so he was trying to squeeze a lot in. It was also at the end of the day where his energies and his audience were dissipating. At the beginning of his presentation some members of his team were answering emails on their computers in the back of the room. This upset him as he thought it was unprofessional of them, embarrassing as it was his team and he was resentful that he was doing everything, even though it was his decision. He saw them later in the presentation again with their computers open answering emails. The amygdala saw this as major violation and all the stress mounted to an emotional reaction. He “lost it again” was the result.

As he was getting triggered with the second email violation and felt his tension, building an emotional audit could have revealed:

What am I thinking: What are they doing, I already told them to put the computers away.

What am I feeling: I am so frustrated with them, I can’t believe this.

What do I want: I want them to put the computers away and support me here.

How am I getting in my way: I am fuming and not calming myself down. I am ready to pounce on them.

What do I need to do differently: I need to take a breath and walk over there and quietly say something to them.

We all get hijacked at times, but great leaders know themselves well, anticipate situations that may be stressful for them and take preventative measures. In the stressful moment, they know what they are feeling AND thinking. They then have multiple constructive solutions to handle the amygdala hijack and maintain their top performance.

Dr. Relly Nadler is CEO for True North Leadership, Inc. an Executive and Organizational Development firm, master certified coach and author of the Leaders' Playbook: How to Apply Emotional Intelligence-Keys to Great Leadership. For more information and FREE EI Assessments go to: www.truenorthleadership.com or Rnadler@truenorthleadership.com

Resources and References:

Freedman, J. and Everett, T., A Business Case for Emotional Intelligence, Second Edition Publication Date: October 15, 2008

Goleman, D. Emotional Intelligence: Why It can Matter More Than IQ. New York: Bantam Books, 1995.

Goleman, D. Working with Emotional Intelligence. New York: Bantam Books, 1998.

Harvard Business Review, "Breakthrough Ideas for Tomorrow's Business Agenda," April 2003

Lieberman, M.D., "Social Cognitive Neuroscience: A Review of Core Processes." The Annual Review of Psychology, 2007. 58:259–89

Lieberman, M.D., Eisenberger, N.I. Crockett, M.J., Tom, S.M., Pfeifer, J.H. and Way, B.M. "Putting Feelings Into Words: Affect Labeling Disrupts Amygdala Activity in Response to Affective Stimuli." Psychological Science, Volume 18, No 5, 2007

Nadler, R.S. Leaders' Playbook: How to Apply Emotional Intelligence-Keys to Great Leadership, Santa Barbara: Psyccess Press, 2007

Nadler, R.S. Leadership Keys Field Guide: Emotional Intelligence Tools for Great Leadership, Santa Barbara: Psyccess Press, 2007

Scientific American: CORRECTED: Name that feeling: You'll feel Better. June, 2007