

MAKING YOUR BRAIN WORK FOR YOU

IN THE WORKPLACE

BY GRETA A. DAVIS



People like to think that professionalism is a matter of learned behavior, characteristics, or skill. But interpersonal neurobiology, also known as IPNB, suggests that our behavior at work is also shaped by the state of our nervous system. Daniel Siegel, a well-known psychiatrist, describes the brain as a social organ that develops and functions in relationship. When we feel safe and respected, the mind integrates; thinking is flexible, creative, and empathic. When we sense threat, even subtle threat such as a sharp email or public criticism, the nervous system shifts into protection. Productivity problems that appear “personal” can also be understood as biological.

Emotional intelligence isn’t simply being nice; it’s the capacity to notice internal states and choose how to act with others. Siegel calls this “mindsight” — the ability to observe our own mind rather than be driven by it. Neuroscience shows that putting feelings into words calms the limbic system (i.e., emotional processing center) in the brain, a process summarized as “name it to tame it” by Siegel. An employee who can think, “I’m embarrassed and defensive right now” has already regained more choice than one who only *feels* irritation or anger.






Empathy also has a neurological basis. According to IPNB research, human brains are wired for connectivity; we pick up one another’s tone, posture, and intention through what are known as mirror systems. This means that emotional intelligence is contagious. A regulated manager helps regulate a team; an anxious leader spreads anxiety without saying a word.

The polyvagal theory of psychologist Stephen Porges, which you can learn more about online, helps explain why this kind of regulation can matter as much as motivation and can also influence job performance. The nervous system continually scans for cues of safety or danger, which is referred to as “neuroception.” When it detects safety, the “social engagement system” is activated; the voice softens, facial muscles relax, and collaboration feels natural. Under perceived threat, the body prepares for fight or flight, which is experienced as increased heart rate, a narrowing of attention, reductionistic thinking, and defensiveness. It would seem that no amount of corporate policy, persuasion, or even incentives can override these biological realities.

Practical regulation is therefore a core professional skill in the workplace. Small actions like slowing the exhale, standing up, looking out a window, or taking three mindful breaths send signals of safety to the body. Poor sleep, caffeine, and meeting overload all shrink our optimal functioning where we manage stress effectively.

Here are some things you can do to navigate such stresses and avoid problematic reactions in your

workplace, such as saying or writing something you’ll regret:

-  **PAUSE.** Step away from the screen. Sometimes, even pausing for a minute helps. Movement tells the nervous system the perceived emergency is passing.
-  **REGULATE.** Lengthen the exhale, feel your feet, or drink water. Sensory grounding brings the rational brain back online.
-  **REAPPRAISE.** Ask yourself, *What else might be true? What outcome do I want?*
-  **RESPOND.** Draft the message without sending, read it aloud, and wait 10 minutes before finalizing.
-  **REPAIR.** If words have already escaped in a hasty email, all is not lost. The repair can be powerful. A brief follow-up such as, *“I spoke too quickly earlier. I care about this project and about working well with you. Can we reset?”* reactivates social engagement far more effectively than silence or avoidance.

CULTURE AS COLLECTIVE NERVOUS SYSTEMS

Organizations often invest in strategy while neglecting biology. Meetings that begin with two minutes of settling, leaders who model humility, and norms that allow short pauses before decisions all expand collective regulation.

When workplaces treat emotional regulation as a shared skill rather than a private weakness, people can bring their full intelligence to the job – and fewer emails need to be unsent.



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