

ICF Paris International Café Coach

Tips and Hints for Coaches from Neuroscience



Taking a good look inside the brain with Dr Patricia Riddell (shown left).

What's going on in our client's head when he or she's grappling with change? And what's going on in our heads, when we're trying to understand life from their point of view?

These are just a couple of the questions that Dr Patricia Riddell was able to answer for us at the latest International Café Coach.

People have wondered for centuries what goes on inside our heads, but as far as science goes, the field of neuroscience is relatively new.

Empathy

The first thing that Patricia shared with us is about empathy and the three different kinds of empathy that exist in the human brain :

Affective Arousal – the type of empathy that we see in babies, who start to cry when another baby cries

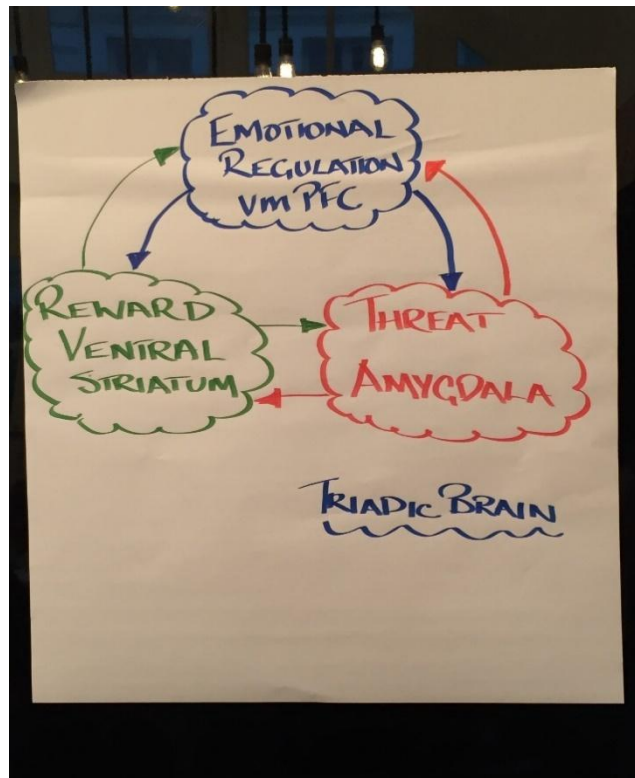
Empathic Concern – the empathy illustrated by parenting when we actually feel the same thing as our children

Empathic Understanding – the empathy we use as helping professionals, when we can understand how another person feels without actually feeling the same thing.

This last kind of empathy is only possible due to the development of our medial prefrontal cortex and the right temporoparietal junction (areas of the brain which are found just above the eyes and over the right ear if you're wondering!). These parts of the brain allow us to differentiate between self and other, and allow us to reflect on how we feel and how we would feel if we were in the other person's situation.

Although it's interesting to know what part of the brain is actually firing at any given moment, what is fascinating to discover is that our brain works as a network. It's never only one piece alone that is responsible for a decision or for behaviour, but several parts working together – as shown in the diagram below of the Triadic Brain (a very simplified model of one network in the brain).

Information is constantly moving back and forth, from the Amygdala telling us what we want to avoid and the Ventral Striatum telling us what we want to move towards and the ventromedial prefrontal cortex regulating our different emotions and helping us make decisions. It's the prefrontal cortex that helps us understand the context of what's happening in front of us or to put it another way, why a lion in a cage doesn't provoke the same response as a lion walking into our kitchen.



Self-Empathy

After having set the scene, Patricia got us to move on to some experiments. As coaches we're used to using empathy when working with clients, so how come it's so difficult to be empathic with ourselves? The reason is that the brain isn't actually wired for this. It may not be very helpful to beat yourself up, but it's usually what we do when we feel we've done something wrong. Patricia got us to experiment with some alternatives when remembering an incident where we had been critical with ourselves:

1. Using distancing to remove ourselves from the level of the detail that the brain is referring to.
2. Avoiding unconscious responding by taking time to analyse and name the emotions present.
3. Thinking of what we would say to a friend in the same circumstances or of what a friend would say to us.

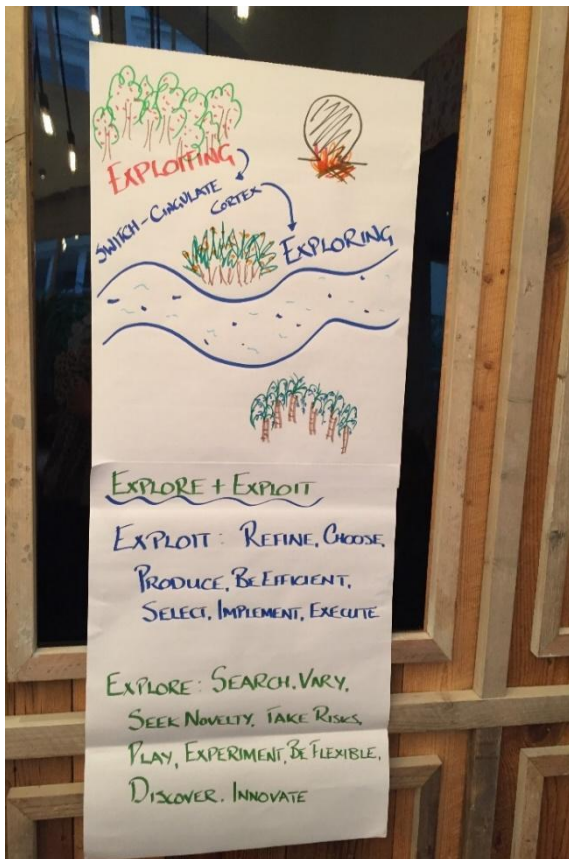
We found by experimenting with these ideas that, while they helped each of us to be less critical of ourselves, there wasn't one favourite strategy - different people found different strategies more effective for them.

Exploit and Explore

Another part of the brain which is particularly relevant in coaching is the Cingulate Cortex. Patricia told us that, within this area of the brain, there is a switch moving between the two modes of Exploit and Explore. We all exhibit both of these behaviours, but we each have a preference for one or the other. Using just one of them can lead to depletion or boredom if we over-exploit and a lack of production or completion if we over-explore. The words shown in the picture below illustrate the full extent of each behaviour and are familiar to anybody working in business today.

Patricia shared that when we make decisions, it is as if we are using a decision-making battery – helping us to decide between what we know we should do and what we want to do. Always choosing what we want to do allows us to keep our battery topped up, but if we have to choose what we *need* to do, then we can start to run our battery down.

So how do we know if our clients prefer to Explore or to Exploit? And how do we help them to move towards Exploring if it's necessary but uncomfortable?



By using the Exploring/Exploiting map shown left!

As a cave man or woman, what do I need to help me to cross the river and explore? What will help me to feel safe? Who do I need to take with me?

For me, what emerged was that although I love to explore, I need to know that my tribe is still behind me. Turning round every so often to make sure that the path behind me isn't overgrown with vegetation.

These kinds of questions help us, and our clients, to recognise where we're comfortable, or not, and to start building strategies to move forward.

As Patricia pointed out, balancing the need for reward (for the ventral striatum) and avoiding threats (for the amygdala) as we go on our journey is vital.

A big thank you to Dr Patricia Riddell from all at ICF Paris International for helping us to take a closer look at the workings of our own brains and for helping us to see new ways of helping our clients move forward with empathy (and self-empathy!).

Learn more about Dr Patricia Riddell and Neurosciences from reading her book : "The

Neuroscience of Leadership Coaching ; Why the Tools and Techniques of Leadership Coaching Work" by Patricia Bossons, Patricia Riddell and Denis Sartain or by visiting her website: www.patriciariddell.com.

We look forward to inviting Dr Patricia Riddell to return in 2018 for a one day workshop on this stimulating subject.

Article written by Jo Leymarie, 17th of October 2017

Participants at this event are entitled to 1 CCEU unit for Core Competencies and 1 CCEU for Resource Development.

ICF Paris International. is an English-language initiative by ICF Chapter Paris Ile de France. The quarterly English-language breakfast meetings aim at creating an opportunity for the international coaching community to get together in Paris. Internationally renowned and diverse guest speakers are invited to share about trends, best practices, methodologies, tools with the coaching community in France. The events are open to all nationalities, to both ICF members and non-members.

We welcome your contributions to make our events successful.

Please contact one of our ICF Paris International team members within our chapter to share your suggestions, contacts and proposals:

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