



## Agitate and contribute state

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Our brain is highly socially sensitive and hard wired to detect threat. This kept us alive in the Stone Age Era. Recent research (Newman, 2022) shows that in the first few seconds we judge someone by their trustworthiness, warmth and competence. We ask ourselves nonconsciously, Do I trust them? Am I safe? (TRUSTWORTHINESS); Do I feel a warm connection of acceptance? Are they from my tribe? (WARMTH); Are they competent? Are they rational and open to learning? (COMPETENCE). During a personal interaction, if these needs are not satisfied then a leader might easily trigger us into **agitate state** as our brain goes into defensive and protective mode. Influential inspirational leaders prime conversational chemistry to trigger others into **contribute state** where people feel inspired and willing to engage.

The avoidance - approach concept is not new. Early psychologists developed the idea of avoid and approach response and later neuroscientists and applied social neuroscience research added to this theory. The following table shows the evolution of the theory and illustrates that a different chemical mix, brain areas and physiological condition are associated with each state.

Avoidance response	Approach response
Threat mode (Gordon, 2000) Stress state (Gordon, 2020) (Neuroscientist and MD)	Reward mode (Gordon, 2000) Relaxed state (Gordon, 2020) (Neuroscientist and MD)
Prevention cues (Friedman & Foster, 2001) (Psychologists)	Promotion cues (Friedman & Foster, 2001) (Psychologists)
Thinking narrows (Frederickson, 2011) (Horwitch & Chipple-Callahan, 2016)	More innovate (Frederickson, 2011; Jung-Beeman et al., 2008)
Move away (Lieberman, 2007) (Psychologist)	Move towards (Lieberman, 2007) (Psychologist)
Defensive or frustrated (Rock, 2008) (Coined the term neuroleadership)	Inspired and engaged (Rock, 2008) (Coined the term neuroleadership)
Stressed, flustered and high alert	Calm, comfortable and focused
Release of cortisol, adrenaline (brain chemistry)	Release of oxytocin, dopamine, serotonin & noradrenalin (brain chemistry)
Emotions inhibit synaptic growth (Hansen, 2014) (Psychologist)	Emotions build neural architecture (Hansen, 2014) (Psychologist)
Reflexive brain state (Arsten, 2015)	Reflective brain state (Arsten, 2015)
High stress response, flight or fight	Low stress response, rest and digest
Survival emotions of fear, anger, disgust, distrust, shame and sadness (Swart et al., 2015; former psychiatrist, neuroscientist, Wang, 2019) Aversive feelings (Kandel, 2012)	Attachment emotions of trust and joy, inspiration, hope, gratefulness and curiosity. (Swart et al., 2015; former psychiatrist neuroscientist, Wang, 2019) Appetitive feelings (Kandel, 2012)

Heart rate increases, blood pressure rises, inflammation, muscles tight, sweating, fast breaths, gut inactive, pupils dilate (Gordon, 2022, psychiatrist, neuroscientist)	Pupils constrict, flexible, slow breaths, gut active, muscles relaxed, feeling of satisfaction (Gordon, 2022, psychiatrist, neuroscientist)
Limbic response inhibits executive brain (Willis, 2016, Neurologist, MD & teacher)	Prefrontal Cortex active and accessible. More open to logic and critical thinking (Willis, 2016, Neurologist, MD & teacher)
11 brain regions deactivated including: Posterior cingulate cortex (social network) Left inferior frontal gyrus (mirror system) 6 regions activated including: Bilateral anterior cingulate cortex (narrowing attention) Left posterior cingulate cortex (less compassions) Posterior inferior frontal gyrus (negative emotions) (Boyatzis, 2011)	14 regions activated including: Anterior cingulate cortex (attention) Right inferior frontal gyrus (social network) Right inferior parietal lobe (mirror system) Right putamen and bilateral insula (Relationships approach) (Boyatzis, 2011)
Activates the sympathetic nervous system (Sapolsky, 2004)	Activates the parasympathetic nervous system (Sapolsky, 2004)
Inhibition system (Cuddy 2022) Scarcity, defensive, rigidity, threat, inaction	Approach system (Cuddy 2022) Abundance, secure, cognitively, opportunities, action
Agitate state (Newman, 2022)	Contribute state (Newman, 2022)

## Implications

1. We judge people in the first few seconds by their trustworthiness, warmth and competence.
2. This nonconscious assessment reveals emotion, under a second that will trigger an agitate or contribute state.
3. An individual in agitate state is more likely to be closed to learning and resistant to engagement and change; an individual in contribute state is more likely to be open to learning and more willing to cooperate and perform at their best.
4. Thus, the way we feel about someone will determine our willingness to engage and perform at our best.
5. The collective feelings will drive behaviours that create a culture that will either speed up or slow down the change we want to achieve.
6. A leader can prime conversational chemistry and create settings to maximise contribute states to establish high performing learning cultures and teams.

## Strategies that build contribute state for high performance

There are many practical tools and strategies leaders and schools can use to establish cultures that support high performance learning cultures. Neuroscience has shed light on why some leadership behaviours are more effective than others. Contact Dr. Judi Newman at the Academy of Organisational Neuroscience Australia to find out more. Her work can boost your team's leadership performance and give your work an edge.

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