When top executives enter therapy, they are typically looking for remediation of a problem, but almost inevitably they are also seeking ways to enhance the effectiveness of their leadership skills and the performance of their businesses. The authors’ approach, Brain Change Therapy, addresses these goals through neural and emotional state change using three modalities: deep state work with alpha/theta training, informal hypnotic conversation, and conventional therapeutic interventions. Of the three, deep state work has been found to be particularly effective in resolving trauma and releasing painful memories without intense abreaction. It involves a state of consciousness highly conducive to creative insight. This article describes an executive training program that uses all three means with particular emphasis on deep state work.

Like everyone who enters psychotherapy by choice, top executives come because “something isn’t working.” However, unlike most people, they not only want to address a dysfunctional issue but also tend to have an interest in going beyond a functional baseline toward optimal performance. A second aspect differentiating them from other clients is that not only do they bring their strengths and weaknesses into the therapeutic process but also, to a large extent, their businesses are “on the couch” right along with them. Corporate leaders intuitively know that their business success is the direct result of their own strengths and abilities, and its biggest weakness is their personal weakness. In terms of improving leadership skills, these clients are interested in working along two different vectors: (a) acquiring personal and interpersonal skills that are applicable to themselves and (b) acquiring skills to be passed on to team members.

Our therapeutic approach, called Brain Change Therapy, has direct applications for executives. A brain-based approach, Brain Change Therapy uses state change as the focus of treatment through purposeful attention, initially under the direction of the therapist, and ultimately directed by the client. There are three broad therapeutic modalities through which the clinician can assist the client in changing the brain’s neural patterning and shift attention from negative to positive states. These are brain change technologies such as alpha/theta neurofeedback training in deep states to reinforce states of calm and expand awareness (Kershaw & Wade, in press); informal hypnotic conversation addressing the preconscious mind through the use of implication, suggestion, and priming; and conscious therapeutic interventions that include various techniques for the reappraisal of situations and mindful awareness to distinguish between direct experience and constructed narrative.

As part of an initial executive evaluation, we administer several psychological tests, including the 16 Personality Factor, the Test of Variables of Attention, and a quantitative electroencephalograph (QEEG) test to ensure there are no neurophysiological issues that need to be addressed before beginning the brain/mind training program. In collaboration with us, the executive sets goals for our work together. The goals may be somewhat abstract (increased access to creativity, less sense of always being under the gun), but they are accompanied by detailed performance markers that make success clearly identifiable (three new ideas to increase product penetration in our market in the next month, no longer feeling that I must check my company email on Sunday mornings).

### Executive Training Program

The training program includes a plan for change, self-regulation training, hypnotic retrieval of resources, visual imagery for developing the “image of achievement” (Pribram, 1971), imagining the procedural sequence of an activity to generate ideas for improvement, and using strategic self-hypnosis (e.g., mental rehearsal) and ego strengthening, if appropriate. Leadership training skills are included, as well as business goal setting and future-vision training, which is a process of intuiting information about the best possible future. Many of these leadership skills are most easily acquired during alpha/theta neurofeedback training, especially when theta-dominant brain states (in the range of 4 to 7 Hz) are present. Such theta states also serve to heal underlying emotional conflicts.
Using Conversational Hypnosis to Expand the Sense of the Possible

Based on the QEEG done during the initial assessment, neurofeedback training, biofeedback, and strategic self-hypnosis can be used to reach agreed upon goals. If the EEG shows evidence of any brain trauma, we are very cautious in using alpha/theta neurofeedback training, because the amplitudes may be problematic for the affected brain areas.

All conversation is hypnotic in that it focuses attention in a narrow, directed way. Narrowed focus alters consciousness and tends to elicit certain phenomena such as time distortion (the perception that time has sped up or slowed down) and pseudo-orientation in time (such as visualizing oneself at a point in the future or past). Hypnotic conversation encourages positive state change by narrowing or broadening the focus of attention (Fehmi & Robbins, 2009; Kershaw, 1992).

We begin by teaching individuals how to change the sensations in their arms and hands just by focusing and entering a light trance. Those who are more hypnotizable can develop heaviness, lightness, numbness, or tingling in the arms and hands. The following is a sample script to elicit the trance phenomena of sensory alteration:

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Sit comfortably and focus your attention on the back of one of your hands. As you observe your hand, you may notice that your hand’s sensations change. You might be aware of a developing heaviness in your hand. You may be aware of warmth developing in your palm. You may be aware of a slight tingling in the fingers. Please keep staring at the back of your hand and tell me which sensations you notice.

After the client reports which sensations are experienced, the clinician may suggest increasing the intensity of the sensations.

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Now that you have noticed a feeling of heaviness, just allow that sensation to continue to develop. Everyone has picked up a heavy suitcase and felt its weight tugging against their arm. Notice how that warm feeling in the palm of your hand can spread. Perhaps it will move up your arm so that you now have a heavy warm feeling throughout the arm. If you like, the tingling sensation can increase, and you can begin to allow the hand to feel a little numb. Isn’t it interesting to see how you can develop these different sensations just by focusing on your hand? And there are many other abilities you have that may not be aware of yet.

This exercise is designed to suggest to the client that if attention can change and direct physical sensations, executive performance might also be enhanced with attention.

Using Alpha/Theta Neurofeedback Training for Healing and Insight

To begin deep state training, we explain that, fortunately, we have an innate healing system in the brain/body called the “theta healing system” (Green & Green, 1977; Wisneski & Anderson, 2005). To move into theta, we first guide the client to develop the comfort of alpha (8–12 Hz) to then move into the deep theta zone. The process of moving into deep theta states acts like a reset button to the brain. Depending on the client, we may also explain that when entering this deep state, the brain releases natural endocannabinoids, one of which is called anandimide, the “chemical of bliss” (Devane & Axelrod, 1994). This is the target zone for the endogenous release of any of the family of neuropeptides of relaxation (Panikashvili, Shein, et al., 2006; Panikashvili, Simeonidou, et al., 2001). The target zone is a state of theta brain resonance (4–7 Hz), and it is a state of hypnagogic reverie, the bull’s eye of the deep healing process (Wisneski & Anderson, 2005, p. 136). In this deep state, trauma can be resolved and painful memories released, often without intense abreaction. It is also the state in which creative insight, solutions, and future paths become clear.

In our work with executives and therapy clients, we have found that consciousness is restructured in this breakthrough state. When the mind enters a profound calm, anxieties about the present and future dissolve, priorities shift, and the sense of not knowing what to do dissolves. Before a client begins alpha/theta neurofeedback training, we generally do about 5 to 10 stabilization training sessions in the sensory motor rhythm (rewarding the presence of 12- to 15-Hz cortical rhythms). In alpha/theta work, we use two-channel training with active leads at Pz, O1, O2, A1, and A2. For software, we use the Cygnet™ system developed by the Othmers. All alpha/theta training is done with eyes closed using auditory rewards. Sessions are normally 30 minutes long, and we suggest the person take the mind to the edge of sleep to move into the deepest theta. This facilitates the theta crossover (where theta crosses over and predominates over every other frequency).

We do eyes-closed training to facilitate a state right above the sleep state. This deep theta state gently releases suppressed or blocked emotions that play a role in dysfunctional life patterns. When these emotions are released, the client has greater access to underlying self-compassion and positive feelings in everyday life.

This process involves an integration of deep hypnosis and alpha/theta training that we have developed over many
years of clinical work. We first talk with the client about which difficult chronic state he or she wants to shift, and then we suggest that this process can be completed in the deep theta state. We encourage the client to look for positive feelings that underlie anxiety, depression, or malaise.

After the above hypnotic induction to develop a variety of sensations, we suggest that the client close his or her eyes and begin a relaxation process that increases subjective comfort. The alpha/theta program is turned on to reinforce the cortical state we seek with the client. The client is instructed to allow thoughts to come and go and deepen the state as much as possible. At that point, we remain quiet while the person completes deep inner work.

**Using Conscious Intervention to Enhance Leadership Skills**

Neuroscientists have identified the overarching organizing principle of the brain as one of moving toward reward and away from threat (Gordon & Williams, 2008). In other words, the brain literally organizes itself on the basis of “carrots” and “sticks.” When we put it this way, executives understand it instantly. Leadership, they realize, functions at a neural level. Rewarding emotional states include happiness, curiosity, and contentment. Threatening emotional states include anxiety, discomfort, fear, and sense of loss. Environments that maximize reward (“carrots”) and minimize threat (“sticks”) have been shown to lead to increased productivity and satisfaction. The underlying reason for that is located in the limbic system.

Because of its survival value, the limbic system becomes more highly aroused when it senses danger than when it perceives reward. Positive feeling states are harder to maintain and are dislodged more easily. Unfortunately, the greater the degree of arousal, the more difficult it is to calm the system, and in an overaroused state, memory degrades, rational thinking devolves into survival thinking, performance deteriorates, and productivity falls. As we explain to executives, neither rewards nor threats have to be particularly overt to trigger significant neural responses. A reward may be as simple as a sincerely offered “thank you.” A threat may be perceived in a minor, but ambiguous, comment.

We encourage executives to pay much closer attention to the actual messages they convey to those around them. Leaders have the ability to focus their team’s attention in particular ways that influence their brain states and concomitant emotions and behaviors. In fact, we suggest that to be effective, a leader must influence those around him or her in positive ways at a neurological level. When positive states are stimulated, people have more access to internal resources and an increased desire to be part of a team. Too often, positions of leadership and power coupled with highly demanding business environments make executives all too prone to express their stress at their direct reports rather than mastering techniques of stress management and working to convey messages that will encourage staff members and, in turn, support the health of the enterprise.

In a study investigating how people order their moment-to-moment experience, researchers discovered that they switch between two types of thought processing: direct sensory experience and a personal narrative (Farb et al., 2007). The Farb et al. study found that when subjects were mindfully aware of a direct experience, such as a light breeze on the face, rather than a mental narrative, they could keep their minds calmer. This was even more evident if the mental narrative involved self-judgment, such as “my presentation isn’t polished enough.” Switching one’s attention toward a direct experience thus serves for self-calming. We suggest this practice to executives, both for themselves and as a method of stress management, which they can teach their teams.

There are several forms of reappraisal that promote optimal brain functioning. These include reframing a situation to emphasize the better of its negative aspects, normalizing a negative event so it does not become blown out of proportion, reordering or changing a hierarchy of important things, and using different perspectives to see other possibilities (Rock, 2009).

**Executive Training Case Study**

Roy, the owner of a large carpet manufacturing company, was interested in practicing deeper states of consciousness to learn to stay calm under pressure and to aid in exploring new directions for the company. He knew he needed to learn to listen and think carefully before commenting rather than impulsively delivering opinions in ways that led people to feel threatened and withdraw. He also had a compulsive tendency to count to 18 under pressure, which was interfering with his effectiveness.

After some initial sessions rewarding sensory motor rhythm, we started alpha/theta neurofeedback training with him using Pz and O1 as active lead sites. We suggested he gently allow his mind to move all the way to the edge of sleep. If images appeared, it was important to just allow them to be. We explained that they were oracles offering information we would process later.

Over 20 sessions, Roy became much less anxious. He accessed many archetypal images that spoke to him about
ways to encourage his employees and focus on their positive accomplishments. One such image was an enchanted castle with all its corridors leading to the center hall. To him, this signified that he could be more open to other people’s successes—that they all led to the center of the company—and that everyone could share in them. His most profound discovery was that he could avoid reacting to someone who was edgy with him. He began to trust the wise part of his mind to solve problems and see possibilities, and, to his surprise, he also stopped compulsively counting.

References


