



*When in  
doubt be  
Relational*

## *THE SCIENCE OF THE RELATIONAL BRAIN*

By Kerry-Lyn Stanton-Downes

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In the first article in this series, I talked about the mental health crisis and its cost to business – but the fact is we’re not even seeing the real extent of it yet. A recent Deloitte survey reveals that millennials and Gen Z rank mental health as their single top priority, and – disturbingly – 50% of those surveyed reported constant high levels of stress and anxiety, with only a third feeling able to share mental health concerns with their employers.

These new priorities, and the dismayingly low levels of confidence that employers will take them seriously, are ignored at our peril: we cannot, for a moment, forget this is the workforce of the future.

In fact, the demands of that workforce can serve us, by showing the way towards a new relational paradigm in which relationships and human thriving are key values.

I said it in my previous article, and I’ll say it again here: this does not mean sacrificing business effectiveness, innovation, growth, or profit – what we can call ‘economic wealth’. Instead, it’s about maximising those things by maximising our and our teams’ ‘relational wealth’ developed through the creation of relational safety leading to trust, resilience, agility, effectiveness and reliability.

## ***“Talented individuals are great assets, but more important is how they relate to one another”*** *Arent Greve, economist*

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With that in mind, let's turn to a host of other statistics illustrating the problem in ways that emphasise the potential upside for business. A study by economist Arent Greve on the relative importance of human versus social capital (broadly, the experience, education, and intelligence of individuals in isolation weighed up against the relationships they form in organisations) attributes most productivity benefits to the latter: talented individuals are great assets, the study suggests, but more important is how they relate to one another. Organisational psychologist Adam Grant, meanwhile, has demonstrated that employees who actively demonstrate care for one another are also more engaged and committed in their shared endeavours in the workplace. Healthy, happy groups are more effective than dysfunctional ones, no matter how brilliant the individuals on the latter might be.

***“How can you ensure you're one of these successful businesses? By understanding the brain is fundamentally a relational organ.”***

The inescapable reality is millennials have already effected a transformation in workplace priorities, and Gen Z will push that revolution further. The process will take investment, careful thought, and real commitment, but successful 21st-century businesses will be ones that recognise the new reality and evolve accordingly – not only because of their response to that reality itself, but because they will have tackled deep relational flaws of which they were not even aware.

How can you ensure you're one of these successful businesses? By understanding the brain is fundamentally a relational organ, and through a focus on relationships transforming the relational environment of your organisation into one where individuals, teams and business can thrive.

### ***Leadership overwhelm***

'I have to admit we feel an element of overwhelm with mental health issues these days,' a CEO recently confided in me. 'I know it's true for leaders in other organisations too. Problems that didn't seem to exist before are everywhere now, and we don't always feel like we're equipped to understand them – let alone solve them. Where are they coming from? Can they all possibly be real?'

I'll tell you what I told her. Sure, some of the complaints and demands can feel like a step too far. But you also have to understand that younger people are living in a very different world to the one experienced by older generations. One where the hyperconnectivity, digital social media, virtual working and a vastly diminished sense of community have led to a dramatic outbreak of what I call 'relational poverty'. Not only that -it's also the case that this is only a dramatic new moment in a longstanding relational crisis. That's the reason we need to treat the mental health crisis not simply as a problem but as an epochal, era-defining opportunity for our society and our businesses.

To better understand this, we need to ask the question: 'why are healthy relational spaces so important, and why is relational poverty so crippling?' Well let's begin with the brain.

## *“we have a basic need for emotional connection and safety that is baked into us at a biological level”*

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### *The brain is a relational organ*

The human brain is hardwired with the belief that if we don't belong – if we do not feel secure and valued within our communities – our very lives are in peril.

Clearly, the reality behind this belief no longer obtains in the way that it did in prehistory, when to be excluded from the group would nearly certainly result in immediate danger and death. Yet for all its adaptability the brain evolved many of its most basic structures to respond to that reality, so the need to belong or risk death remains the fundamental imperative that motivates many of our behaviours. It is the most dramatic reality behind the brain's relational nature.

### *“Individuals can only thrive and be fully productive in a healthy relational space”*

To realise this is to see two things. First, the mental health crisis afflicting millennials and Gen Z is not fundamentally a question of younger generations' new sense of entitlement, but instead a result of relational poverty that attacks the sense of belonging and security that is one of the brain's most basic goals and needs.

Second, and as a result: treating the symptoms of individuals is necessary but insufficient. What is truly needed is a new relational paradigm that will approach the health of the brain with the understanding that it is fundamentally relational, and that as a result individuals can only thrive and be fully productive in a healthy relational space.

### *The science*

Twentieth-century psychology and recent advances in neuroscience have allowed us to understand the workings of our brains and minds in unprecedented depth and detail. This isn't the place for an in-depth exploration, but certain insights and developments are essential to understanding our current relational crisis.

Attachment theory, which began to develop in the mid-twentieth century, has been crucial to revealing humanity's fundamentally relational nature.

Where prior to this it was generally assumed that infants and children form attachments as a learned behaviour, and usually as a result of being provided with sustenance, attachment theory established that in fact human beings are born with an innate urge to form bonds, and we do so not simply with sources of nourishment but rather on what we can call an emotional basis: that's to say, we have a basic need for emotional connection and safety that is baked into us at a biological level.

## *“Where we appear on the mental health spectrum is dictated by how we relate to those around us and how they relate to us”*

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Partly stemming from this fact is another: that we are co-regulating beings. This means that viewing human beings in isolation is always going to yield an at best partial and at worst totally wrong understanding of us and our needs. Instead, we need to grasp that to a very significant degree we live in – and are shaped by – the relational spaces generated when our nervous systems come into contact with those of other people. The consequence? Where we appear on what Corey L. M. Keyes calls the mental health spectrum – between languishing and flourishing – is not dictated by our brains and minds in isolation, but instead by how we relate to those around us, and how they relate to us.

### *“Psychology and neuroscience clearly demonstrate we are built to generate, navigate, and thrive in healthy relational spaces”*

Though a young science that’s still the subject of lively debate, Polyvagal theory can help us understand the process of co-regulation at a neurobiological level, illustrating vividly just how connected the psychological is to the physiological. Specifically, the theory focuses on the vagus, a cranial nerve that plays a central role in the way the nervous system shapes every aspect of how we experience our lives.

As the ‘poly’ in the name suggests, Polyvagal theory posits a vagus more complex than previously understood, one with a branch (the ventral vagal system) exclusively devoted to social engagement and connection-making. By implication, it gives a picture of the brain with the capacity to form connections – and the need to – built into its very physical structures.

The point: psychology and neuroscience clearly demonstrate we are built to generate, navigate, and thrive in healthy relational spaces. We are creatures whose ability to co-regulate is in-built but also develops through on-going experiences of co-regulation and allows us to create a shared sense of safety through belonging. But by implication they also tell us the opposite is true: if our relational spaces are dysfunctional, we will be as well. And seriously so.

### *How this applies to your organisation*

If the brain, nervous system, and body as a whole have evolved to be relational – that is, to need connection and security and to co-regulate – then it is clear our businesses and organisations need to provide the relational values, principles, practices and processes by which connection and psychological safety can be fostered.

***“The brain, nervous system, and body have evolved to be relational, so organisations need to provide the relational values, principles, practices and processes for psychological safety can be fostered.”***

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These principles, practices and processes should promote curious reflection over dogmatic and opinionated reactivity; respectful candour over blaming and shaming; a culture of service in pursuit of a shared goal over one of self-interest; conscious presence over ambivalence and distraction; a mindset of possibility and abundance over right-vs-wrong thinking; constructive vulnerability over defensive and guarded behaviour.

***“There is a requirement for challenges to be negotiated. If we apply the thinking laid out above we can ensure we meet those challenges while maintaining relational health crucial for long term prosperity. ”***

Any of these negative alternatives will prompt fear, stress, panic and anxiety at the deep psychological and neurobiological levels we have been discussing, accompanied by very real physical symptoms – increased heart rate, accelerated breathing, physical pain, an inability to think clearly, tunnel vision, impaired hearing – and other fight-or-flight responses.

The results? Unhappy individuals and teams, high staff turnover, low efficiency – and business failure.

We all know that in any business or organisation there is a requirement for challenges to be negotiated, and potentially difficult things communicated. But, if we can apply the thinking laid out above, where individuals receive cues that foster a sense of connection and security, we can ensure we meet those challenges while also maintaining relational health crucial for long-term prosperity!

I invite you to join me next week for the third article in this series, where I will begin to talk about how relational wealth and economic wealth, far from being in conflict, in fact when properly balanced, will deliver improved mental health, organisational harmony and efficiency, and ultimately maximised productivity and profit.

E: [kerry-lyn@capacityatwork.com](mailto:kerry-lyn@capacityatwork.com)

W: [capacityatwork.com](http://capacityatwork.com)

Li: [linkedin.com/in/kerry-lyn-stanton-downes/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/kerry-lyn-stanton-downes/)