

Interview #10: Paul Zak. Creator of the Love+ rule, Ofactor.com & researcher on oxytocin, the molecule which could alter humanity for the better.

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1. How do you see yourself at 65 or when retiring and by which deed or accomplishments or by which words would you like to be remembered?

This is a profound question! I do my best to live by a simple rule: for every interaction I have, I try to increase the amount of love in the world. I call this rule Love+. I would like to think that there would be many people, most of whom probably do not even know my name, that have had a positive experience when interacting with me and hopefully that has made them happier. The research I have done on oxytocin shows that after a positive experience with someone, for the next 30 minutes people are calmer, happier, and treat others better. My Love+ rule seeks to create a virtuous cycle in which love spreads around the world as people interact with each other.

2. “People will work their butts off for something they really care about for people that they trust.” What is the meaning of this affirmation? What is then the real motivator which spurs people to work hard? An item they really care about? Or people that they trust? In other words, is it that people first place their trust in another person and then choose an item they really care about, and this will be the key which will entice them to work prodigiously? If so, then the importance of leaders, as people which can be trusted, becomes of vital importance in society. Would you say that in North America, a great number of leaders seem to belong to the business world? Is business and success in the business realm the sure ticket in turning this person in a leader?

My neuroeconomics research, both in the laboratory and in field studies at various organizations, shows that people will give discretionary effort to projects when they are with a group of trusted colleagues, or they understand that the

project provides social value to the world, or both. So, trust and purpose are key ingredients for high-performing teams and organizations. I have started a company, Ofactor.com, to help organizations measure and manage their cultures for high trust and to clarify their social purpose. It is exciting for me to have a positive effect on employees' lives and to help improve organizational performance.

3. What have you found so far, related to the brain basis for human flourishing?

The consensus finding from research over the last decade is that flourishing increases when people have high-quality relationships and when they find purpose in their lives. Purpose for most people involves service to others. So, flourishing depends on connecting to, and helping, other people. The neurochemical oxytocin is an important signaling molecule that helps us form and maintain attachments to others, and it motivates us to help others. My lab has produced evidence that those who produce more oxytocin are more satisfied in their lives because they have better relationships. What is really important about this is that the brain circuit that processes oxytocin is "trainable", that is, when one connects to others more often, it gets easier to do so because the brain is trained to make more oxytocin. This means that a fulfilling life, or a more fulfilling life, is attainable by everyone with a functioning oxytocin brain circuit--which is nearly all healthy people. Readers can do this themselves by making a point of engaging more with others--talking in elevators, or engaging in small talk in stores, or by putting in more effort to socialize with friends and family. Build the habit of connecting and you'll be happier.

4. What are the attributes of a culture of purpose? Is purpose an item often missing in Western cultures, more so than in Eastern cultures? Have you met a few individuals who seemed to act out and embody purpose, well beyond the average individuals?

One of my favorite management thinkers is W. Edwards Deming. Deming said that at the core purpose of every organization is serving others. This is the only reason why people pay for an organization's products, because it improves their lives. My research shows that companies in which colleagues know their core purpose, and live their purpose day in and day out, are more productive and profitable. A good example is LinkedIn. Their purpose is "To empower their members to be more productive and successful". At a recent visit to LinkedIn, every group of colleagues I met repeated their purpose statement to me when I first arrived at their department. Their purpose is alive because it is used in make decisions at the company. That is, for any decision they make, they ask, "Does this empower our members to be more productive and successful". Purpose statements, if they are to be used, must be succinct and other-focused. When organizations have a Purpose, they become causes, not just places for transactions.

5. How much are we who we are because of biological reasons or factors? And how much are we who we choose to be, consciously or subconsciously or unconsciously (regardless of our biological make-up)? Or would you say that we are the representation of the constant interaction between all the different aspect of our self and person and that this is ever changing and evolving?

All behaviors ultimately come from brain activity. Brain activity depends on one's genes, one's life experiences, one's current physiologic state, and one's external surroundings. The brain is very flexible and adaptive, but not perfectly suited to result in people choosing the best behaviors in the modern world. The brain also sets up default pathways for behavior that result in habits. Habitual behavior saves brain energy and therefore can be hard to change. As a result, people are "weird" in that for the same situation, people often behave quite differently. This is to be expected because in experiments, we see a wide variety of brain activity when people face the same situation. This means that we should not expect ourselves or others to be consistent in our choices; there is no "normal" just variation around an average. An implication I draw from this is that we need to be tolerant and compassionate toward others because there is often no "right" way of doing things. There may be better ways and worse ways, but these may be highly dependent on the set of factors that affect brain activity in different people. So, embrace human weirdness!

6. Of all the activities you have, which can be described by various positions, such as professor, etc., which activity is for you fundamental and defines you as a person, more than all other ones?

Easy, being a father to my two amazing and beautiful daughters.

7. What does 'Ofactor' stand for? The factor 'O' as in...? Can you explain?

The "O" is a little mystery for people to solve. If readers think about what I am well-known for discovering I think they should be able to figure it out.

8. "Zestxlabs" is a research firm that specializes in the application of neuroscience to marketing and consumer behavior." Could this firm be employed by a government in order to polish its image and increase its soft power or appeal? What are the differences between using marketing in order to affect the behavior of people (based on the discoveries of neuroscience) and public opinion manipulation?

Great question! Our 10 years of research in this area lets us to help organizations create more immersive messages and experiences. Messages that have a narrative arc and have conflict and real emotion tend to be highly immersive and will often motivate action after a message. Experiences that are multisensory and evoke emotional responses are those that are highly valued. Consumers want these kinds of experiences and businesses want to provide them to consumers. The technology we have developed allows organizations to quantify immersion in messages or experiences and thereby improve how much people enjoy them and remember them. This helps companies create loyal customers. Governments and politicians generally think less about creating great experiences for citizens (though maybe they should!) than about staying in power. I do not think we can help them do these things very well. I think what is really interesting about our technology is that it reveals peoples' unconscious and emotional responses to things--responses that we are not generally aware of. This knowledge can help people understand what they really like and in this way improve their lives by helping them find out what they like to do. For example, my lab was recently part of a TV show in Japan that examined the growing number of divorces initiated by middle-aged women. We had couples wear our sensors and then gave them activities to do that increased their immersion in, and attachment to, each other. We showed couples how their attachment to each other increased when they did these things and how they could repair and improve their relationships. There is something powerful about seeing one's own data, and data from one's spouse's brain, that helps us understand ourselves.

9. If you were to speak to a classroom of kids, aged 13 to 15, and you had to sum up your life experience and research, into a 5-minute presentation, in order to provide advice and counsel, as best you could, what would your talk or presentation be about?

I would discuss love. Our brains are built to love others and we need love ourselves. When we embrace this truth our our brains, I think we can become more accepting and compassionate. And, as I said above, human brains are quite variable in their responses. I think teenagers in particular should understand that there is no normal and embrace their individuality and that of those around them.

10. If you could relocate to anywhere in the world, or take an extensive trip, where would you go and why?

I would love to do an around the world trip taking, perhaps, a year, to go to unusual places. There are so many unique places and peoples that I would like to explore--southern Spain, Malta, Casablanca Morocco, Tangiers, Bagdad, Bora Bora, Tibet, Antarctica. It would be a dream trip to just keep moving.

11. If you were asked to put together a team of 20 people for a mission to Mars, from all around the world, belonging to any field or profession, etc. how would you do the selection process, in light of your research and findings related to neuroscience and other disciplines?

I think the key would be diversity at every level: men and women, thinkers and makers, young and old. Research shows that diverse teams are the best at innovating and facing challenges. Plus, diversity just makes life more interesting!

Answers provided by Paul Zak.

No changes or omissions were made to the answers.

Questions by F. Normandeau