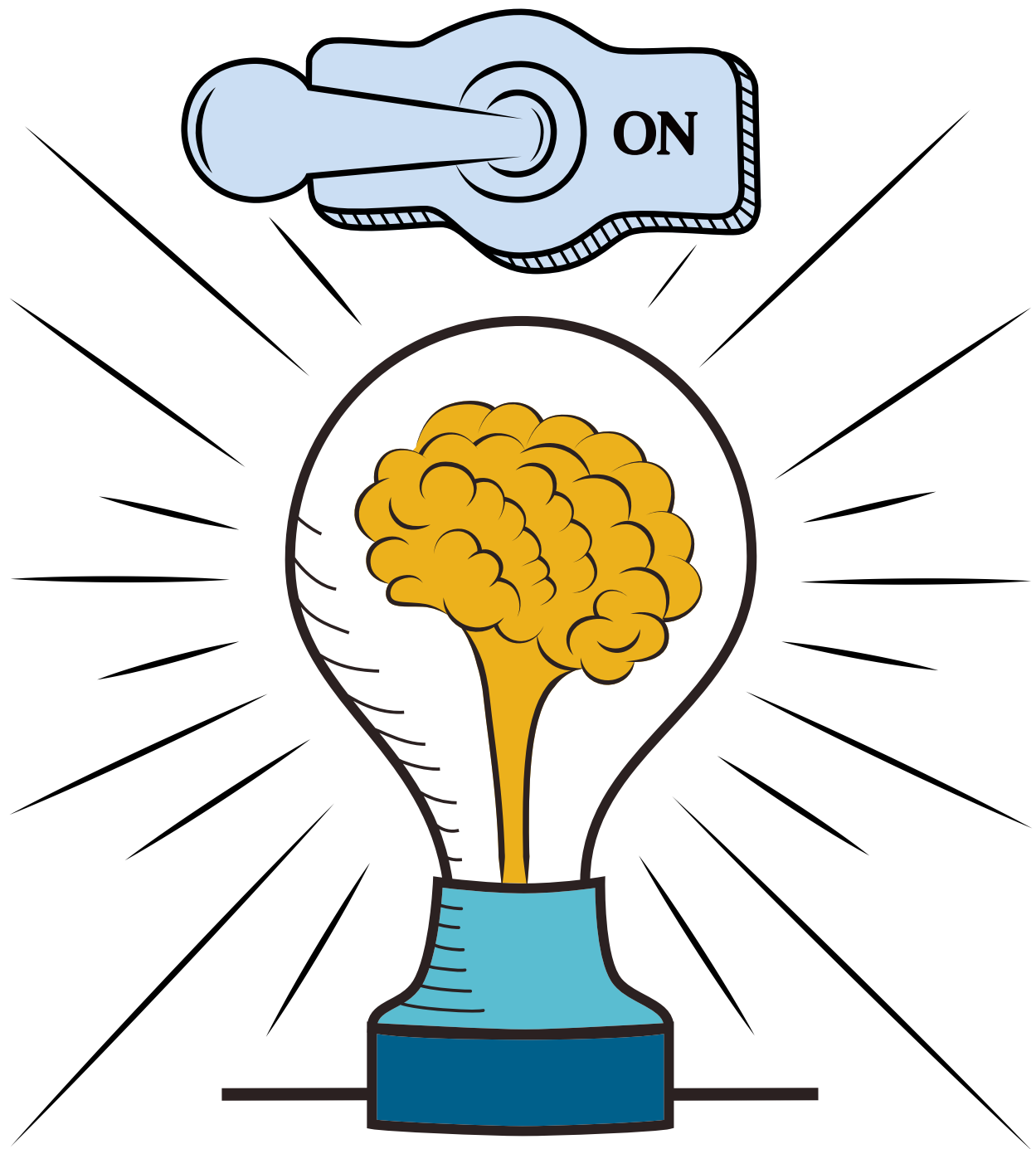# Flip the Switches in the Brain:
5 Ways to Motivate Your Team, Staff, or Client

By Shelley Row, P.E., PTOE

T he transportation consulting firm suffered from mismanagement. The new manager, Joan, walked into a declining client base, a mass exodus of staff, demoralized remaining staff, and a lack of organizational vision for her unit.

You may not face challenges of this magnitude, but you are likely to have a team or person who could use inspiration or a client who needs to feel the love. You have more control than you may think once you know how to skillfully engage the brain.

Think of it like this—the brain has two electrical circuits—one activates feelings of reward and the other activates feelings of threat. Whether it is with staff, teams, or clients, the reward circuit is the more reliable, long-term motivator of behavior. Unfortunately, the threat circuitry (via the amygdala) is more easily activated. With the slightest provocation, that circuit is quickly set into motion. This is the way we're built and why we've survived for so long.

The good news is that you can, with practice, consciously activate the reward circuit (via the ventral striatum). Here are five switches —the five Cs —that you can flip to activate the brain's reward or threat circuitry.
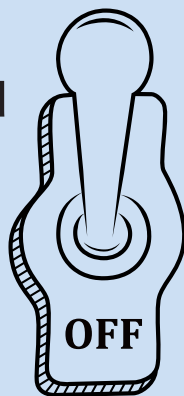
Brain Switches that Activate Reward and Threat Responses

Reward	Threat
Certainty	Uncertainty
Control	Lost control
Connection	Disconnected
Clout	Lost clout
Consistency	Inconsistency

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Certainty and uncertainty. There's a reason that you experience resistance to change. The brain wants its world to be as expected based on its history. The brain constantly scans its environment for anything expected. If the brain is certain of the present and future, it feels comfortable. But with uncertainty, alarms go off.

Situations that create a sense of uncertainty happen frequently, such as lack of transparency, no information shared from management, no performance feedback, leadership instability, and ad hoc policies and procedures. How can you as a manager create more certainty during uncertain conditions?

Let's look at Joan's situation. Previous management lacked clear direction, many staff are now gone, and those who are left worry about the future. They need certainty at a time when she too is uncertain. However, there is more certainty than may be obvious. Joan knows how to grow the business. She knows how to nurture client relationships and how to recruit top talent. She can provide a sense of certainty by clearly and confidently validating staff concerns (validation takes the sting out of emotion) and sharing her plan. She might say, "I know you are concerned about the future of our organization. Admittedly, we are not as well positioned as we could be. Here are three things we will be doing to move forward. We will schedule regular visits to each client; we will pool our connections to find and recruit new talent; and we will retool our project management process to ensure on-time, high-quality work. This will reposition us as a respected consultant in our industry."

For government employees, administration change creates uncertainty. Will the new leadership be easy or tough to work with? Will they be supportive of key projects? As the manager, you don't know the answers. But you activate certainty when you say, "We don't know much about the in-coming administration. But here's what we *do* know. We do good work; we have a solid staff; and we will prepare information to clearly and concisely explain our work." (Note: The clear action step activates both certainty and control.)

Here are a few ideas to enhance feelings of certainty: Establish a clear timeline for a new project; provide frequent feedback to staff; be transparent about what you know or don't know; articulate a clear vision for the office; or implement repeatable processes.

Control and lost control. The brain likes to feel in control so take advantage of it. Give others a sense of control to active reward circuitry. You don't even have to give away *full* control. You might release control of the process but retain control over the final product. For example, a friend's son takes growth hormone shots six days a week. He has no control over that; however, his mom let him pick the one day of the week without a shot. Now he has a level of control over his situation. How can you apply that principle?

Back in Joan's office, having provided certainty on next steps, she would be wise to give staff control over how to implement them. She might specify monthly client visits while staff control the agenda and schedule for the meetings. As she considers revamping the project management process, her staff are resistant. (Resistance is normal. The brain is designed to do what it's always done because

it's easier, faster, and takes less brain energy. Feelings of reward help overcome resistance.) What can Joan relinquish control over? Perhaps she asks staff to create metrics for an updated project management process, research software packages, and bring recommendations to the group.

Take a few minutes to come up with creative ways to give over real, partial, or perceived control to activate a reward response. For a client or citizen who is unconvinced of the merits of a project, you could ask them to set a trial period, to define the parameters for moving forward, or define when to pull the plug. It puts them in control of some parts of the work.

Connection and disconnection. As technical professionals, we favor logic; however, we are biologically social creatures. The brain craves connection to others. In fact, research shows that we demonstrate more empathy, trust, and cooperation with those whom we feel connected. According to a *Simply Psychology* article, research by Solomon Asch in 1951 illustrated the strong desire to fit in under pressure. Asch showed groups of people a line of defined length and asked them to select the line of the same length from a series of three. All except one in the group were told to select the wrong answer. The test was to see whether the one person felt pressure to change their answer and conform with the group. Of twelve trials, 75 percent changed their answer to conform at least once even though it was clearly the wrong answer.[1] Your staff and teams feel the same pressure to fit in and be part of a perceived "in-group." You naturally want to connect with those like you. It makes the brain feel good.
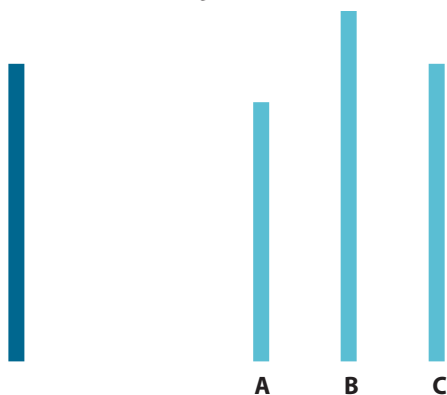
If everyone around you said line B was the same length as the far left sample line, would you agree with them? Solomon Asch's line test shows people agreed with an incorrect answer to fit in with those around them.[2]

But, the office is filled with in-groups and out-groups. Much is written about in/out groups based on gender and race, but it goes beyond that. Do you have multiple offices? Has your company merged? If so, you may notice reluctant collaboration or trust across locations or companies. The brain doesn't feel connected to the people in another state and flips the threat circuit.

Thankfully, the brain readily accepts new connections. For Joan, she needs to increase the connections between the remaining staff so that they feel like a team and not the ones left behind. Teams create a sense of connection by setting common goals, naming themselves as a team, establishing their performance norms (this also activates control), and conducting team activities (field trips, happy hours, lunches). She can also create individual connections by seeking out commonalities. The gruffest colleague may soften when connecting about kids, sports, or a shared hobby. Connection fosters greater trust and collaboration.

Clout and lost clout. The brain *really* likes feeling important, but it's not about giving out raises or promotions (although that's okay, too). Feelings of reward from clout are activated in simple ways.

Think about circumstances that make you feel a wee-bit important: the *really-big* boss calls you by name; your input is specifically requested; a colleague demonstrates respect for your idea; you are invited to lunch with the inner-circle; your project team receives an award; the client tells your boss about the good work you do. With each example, your brain does a happy dance.

How can you create that same brain-based happy dance for your staff, team, or client? For top performers, send a hand-written thank you note, go for coffee together, give a shout-out in an important meeting, or offer them a career-development conversation. The gift of your attention feels like clout. Joan can easily use any of these with her team. She should also be attentive to ways her staff could lose clout: their ideas are ignored; they are excluded from discussions on *their* project; or they are subjected to public criticism.

For clients or citizens, you might: call the client for their input on a key decision; tell the citizen that you appreciate their dedication to the project; send a thank you note at the end of the job noting a positive influence the client or citizen had; or praise the active citizen in a public meeting. The key to applying this brain switch is sincerity.

Consistency and inconsistency. This is about fairness. Whether with staff or clients, we are sensitive to being treated fairly and consistently. Inconsistent treatment lights up the threat circuitry immediately. You don't want one client saying to another, "They didn't do *that* for me!" Morale is damaged when staff mutter in the halls, "He's playing favorites again. John gets to do anything *he* wants!" The threat circuit is on fire and productivity plummets. In Joan's case, she should be particularly mindful that existing staff do not perceive preferential treatment of new staff.

For this reason, policies and procedures are important to ensure fair treatment. Unintended bias easily creeps in (see Connection above) to personnel decisions. To the out-group, it looks like inconsistency. One caveat, however, is that you need room for interpretation. A clear, replicable rationale for the application of

guidelines is key. If you deviate from the stated policy, share your thought process so others understand you were *appropriately* fair. Take a hard look to ensure you are being fair and consistent.

Lastly, be aware that you don't need all five Cs to be effective. You may use Control and Certainty to manage the new project, or Connection and Consistency for personnel situations. Keep the 5 Cs in view to remind you to activate the brain's reward circuit. In time, you will realize higher productivity and collaboration, and that's enough to get motivated about. **itej**

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