



The Neuroscience of Success in Medical Affairs

In most cases, professionals across all industries aren't much concerned with the definition of success. And the same is true for Medical Affairs — people are far more focused on achieving success than understanding it. However, anyone seeking to tap into their full potential must give the broader concept of success more than a passing thought.

This is not an easy task, as success is an esoteric concept — it evades easy definition and is widely susceptible to subjectivity. Ask any number of people what success is, and you're likely to get just as many different answers.

To a certain degree, this is only natural — a baseball player will have a different view on success than a medical liaison and other metrics by which they measure it. In this article, however, we won't concern ourselves with individual, goal-based approaches to success.

Instead, we will look at the neuroscience behind the notion of success in general — and how a different, more thought-out approach to our behavior in the workplace can lead to higher chances of career success in the long run.



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Success: The Ultimate Iceberg

Before delving into the neuroscientific research of success, it's important to ask another, more general question: how does success manifest itself in practice? How do we perceive it in others, and how do we recognize it in ourselves?

There are many possible answers to this, but one is particularly visually enticing: the iceberg concept. An oft-repeated visualization of success is a polar iceberg — with a tiny part protruding from the water and a vast mountainous mass beneath the surface, invisible to the casual observer.

And that's just what it appears like to outside spectators. When we notice a strikingly successful person, they often appear to be geniuses or people with some sort of inherent advantage that the rest of us lack.

As anyone who has achieved any manner of success could tell you, the truth is very different — and that's as true for Medical Affairs as it is for stand-up comedy, police work, or politics. Succeeding in any kind of field takes massive effort that most people don't end up noticing; the far more significant but below-the-surface part of the iceberg.

That iceberg is comprised out of a variety of positive traits and good behaviors — all of which are not easy to come by. Success requires calculated risks, an immense focus, proper goal orientation, persistence, imperviousness to failure, frequent sacrifice, and above all else: hard work.

And as many of us can attest to, even this formula does not bring 100% of success — plenty of people who did their best to become leaders in their fields were hindered by circumstances beyond their control. Still, it's crucial not to be discouraged in the hardest times either — if you get up and keep trying even when everything doesn't pan out perfectly, eventual success is almost inevitable.

One of the main reasons coaching has proven effective repeatedly is that it provides professionals with a much-needed structure to build positive habits and behaviors. But the question is — what kind of behavior is this? And what affects how we behave in the first place?

Behavior and Success

If you want to succeed and assume a leadership role in Medical Affairs, you need to become the master of your behavior on a daily basis — something a surprisingly large number of people never manage to do.

Returning to the iceberg metaphor, it's easy to conclude that the top of the iceberg — the visible results by which we measure success — is built on top of what's below. And the less visible part is the collection of all our behaviors on the road to success.

Among these, it's essential to differentiate between two types of behaviors:

- Intrinsic behavior — our “behavior of the self,” self-focused, and self-rewarding behaviors
- Extrinsic behavior — our behavior towards others

If you want to become a successful leader in Medical Affairs, you will need to master both sides of the coin — extrinsic behavior directly correlates to effective leadership, while intrinsic behaviors impact our leadership qualities indirectly and affect our productivity.

Coaching can help you understand your specific workplace behaviors better and start noticing cause-effect patterns that lead to success and failure. However, understanding is not enough — success requires more than passive observation.

Truly successful professionals extract the correct conclusions from the correlations between brain function, emotional states, behavior, and success. Ultimately, this means mastering yourself in a way that guarantees hitting all the right notes in your professional life.

Brain Function and Success

After concluding that success depends on our behaviors, it's only logical to ask — what exactly drives how we behave and how we approach workplace interactions? All of our behaviors are based on layers of opinions, biases, convictions, and beliefs.

However, all of these can change or exhibit themselves differently based on our neural activity. Or, in simpler terms, it all depends on the brain functions we spend the most time processing at work. Depending on the “driving brains” where we predominantly reside in the workplace, we'll have different behaviors and effects on others in a leadership capacity.

We can differentiate between three primary parts of our brain that affect our behavior:

- Amygdala
- Basal ganglia
- Prefrontal cortex

Amygdala

The amygdala represents a collection of cells found in the base of our brain. The amygdala is crucial for processing immediate, strong emotions — such as fear. This part of the brain is where we give meaning to our emotions, remember them, and begin associating them with responses — so-called “emotional memories.”

From the dawn of humanity, the amygdala was the key element that triggered our quick, automatic, reactionary responses to our surroundings. For example, the fight-or-flight reflex that was designed to help save our ancestors from injury by competing tribes or wild animals is dictated by the amygdala.

And that immediate response is still triggered when we're afraid or threatened. By its definition, this is a restrictive state — negative, unpleasant, and avoiding.

Basal Ganglia

Secondly, there are the basal ganglia. While their fundamental function is related to movement and motor skills, the basal ganglia are also crucial for processing reward and other cognitive information. This part of our brain activates when we receive instant gratification and short-term success in certain tasks.

While it triggers significant dopamine releases, “spending time” in the activated basal ganglia often means losing sight of the bigger picture.

Prefrontal Cortex

And finally, there’s the prefrontal cortex — the brain region where successful leaders should strive to spend most of their time.

The prefrontal cortex is there to assist people in setting and reaching their goals. It gathers inputs from different parts of the brain, processes all of the information, and adapts accordingly. As a result, mastering your prefrontal cortex means mastering your executive functions, like:

- Coordinating complex, multi-step behaviors
- Planning long-term
- Managing impulse control
- Anticipating the consequences of our actions
- Focusing our attention

After reviewing the behaviors we’ve outlined as crucial for success in the beginning, it’s quite apparent that most of them depend on activating our prefrontal cortex as much as possible.

Leadership and Cognitive States

Naturally, professionals will spend some time in each of these parts of our brain throughout their workday and their lives in general. However, with the right coaching, you can learn to steer your cognitive functions towards your prefrontal cortex — and become more successful as a result.

Conversely, people who spend their workdays with a predominantly active amygdala will create toxic stress for themselves and their surroundings. And predominantly active basal ganglia will result in tunnel vision and short-sightedness — leading to yourself and your team spending most of your time on the proverbial hamster wheel instead of making progress.

On the other hand, a dominant prefrontal cortex allows you to master your own behaviors and emotions and perform more methodical and planned decision-making. And when it comes to extrinsic behaviors, spending time in your prefrontal cortex means creating a work environment that’s productive, creative, psychologically safe for others around you.

This is important to note, as leaders influence the behaviors of other team members with their own cognitive functions. Thus, steering your brain activation also means steering the behaviors of others — brain states are as “contagious” as that initial yawn that starts spreading around a room.

Amygdala-controlled leaders create extremely top-down teams — there are little to no dissenting voices or room for innovation. In the context of medical affairs, this means falling behind industry standards and failing to communicate the right messages to internal and external stakeholders and KOLs.

Leaders controlled by their basal ganglia tend to create teams by recruiting the smartest, most capable, and influential professionals. They can usually come up with a *force majeure* presentation while recruiting and make a powerful case for why their organization is a game-changer.

However, their teams ultimately lag behind on innovation because they can’t break out of set biases, narratives, and harmful patterns — with an overt insistence on hierarchy. The best-case scenario here is mindless compliance with the MA team’s supportive role in the organization. Prefrontal cortex leaders represent the best of all worlds — they are capable of finding passionate and knowledgeable professionals, but they also create an atmosphere where everyone is eager and free to contribute to the vision, purpose, and mission of the organization. They don’t suffer from limiting patterns or established narratives, and these leaders can make the most of all the skill sets and perspectives of various team members. And their methodical and emphatic approach to leadership allows them to exceed expectations and come up with innovative and custom-tailored results for both internal and external stakeholders.

Deliberately engaging the prefrontal cortex results in emotionally intelligent behavior. Leaders who can simultaneously be self-aware, self-managed, and perceptive of others will be authentic and reasonable, constantly providing a positive influence to their team.

As Dr. Daniel Siegel, MD, says: “where attention goes, neural firing flows, and neural connection grows. Thus, cognitive mastery of ourselves is the ultimate trick to success. With the right coach, Medical Affairs professionals can learn how to navigate their cognitive processes and purposefully engage their prefrontal cortex. Over time, this leads to growth in both professional and personal lives.

More specifically, professional coaching for MA professionals can result in:

- Increased team satisfaction and a consequent increase in productivity
- Increased employee engagement
- Increased cross-functional collaboration
- Increased chances of getting the drug to market sooner
- Increased uptake of key MA projects for data utilization in pharma product positioning
- Reduced employee turnover