



# Rewiring the organisation

Neuroplasticity, Narratives and Networks

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## Rewiring the Organisation: Neuroplasticity, Narratives and Networks

Sparknow directors Fiona Hiscocks and Victoria Ward on the story of Sparknow, our latest thinking and how we're continuing to rewire the organisation for the better.

Sparknow is at a turning point. Since the mid-90s we've worked at the forward edge of thinking and practice in knowledge management and narrative. In diverse organisational settings we have used our grounding in these fields to help businesses transition through sticky moments, refine their knowledge structures and sharpen their insight. Our clients come to us wanting to become more innovative, productive and high-performing. We help them make that happen. *From leaders to frontliners and everyone in between, we strive to deliver changes that make a substantial and lasting difference* – whether that be a new futures model, a new code of conduct to reflect new norms or the transformation of a dysfunctional team to a high performing one.

In Sparknow, we call this “rewiring the organisation”. It's about connections, networks and channelling energy for maximum power.

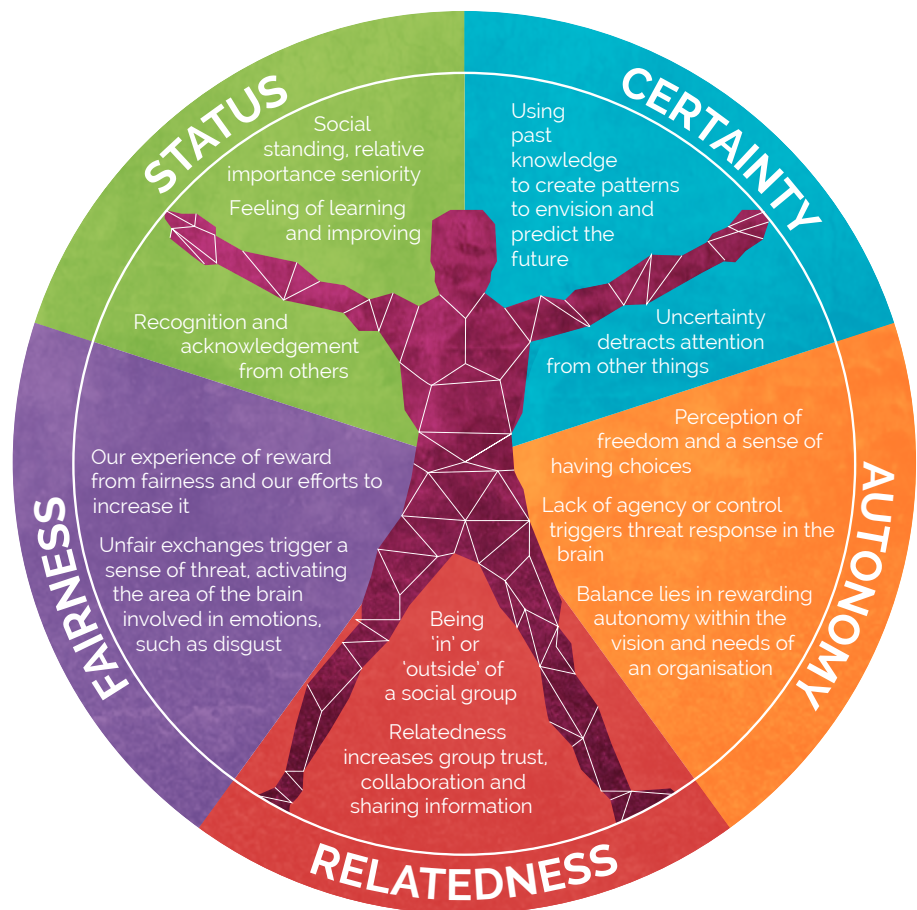
Over the twenty years we've been doing this, we've also seen brain science move more and more into the mainstream of thinking and practice in organisations. Areas we know well, such as leadership, talent development, organisational development programmes, high performing teams, ethics and values at work have all benefited from a more advanced understanding of how the brain grasps and retains knowledge.

So while we've been inhabiting a similar territory, following the blueprint set by our first knowledge management method in 1996/1997, we're now raising our heads to take proper stock of some of the new movements around us – brain science as well as other developments in organisational thinking. Looking again at the way we do our work to unpick the principles on which they function.

*We continue to chase that forward edge, bringing back the most highly evolved thinking to our clients so that they're equipped to tackle ever more complex technologies and challenges.*

To this end, our core team has been working over the past few months to hang together our work, its history, direction, and the evolving contexts we're seeing our clients in. And we've chosen the triad of neuroplasticity, networks and narrative as an organising device. *Rewiring the Organisation* lays out the top slice of that work in a way that sets up a year-long enquiry. We're starting by exploring the most current thinking in these areas through the lens of our rich portfolio of work.

Neuroplasticity first. There is so much fertile ground to explore here, from “attention density” to the neurological power of insight. But for now *Rewiring* looks at the SCARF<sup>1</sup> model, which explores human neurological responses to being threatened or rewarded across five key needs – status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness. Depending on whether these SCARF needs are rewarded or threatened, we have an approach or avoid response triggered by the part of the brain that deals with emotions, fear, motivation and – most importantly for businesses – behaviours.



We've read that, "if out of synch, these five needs have been shown in many neuroscience studies to activate the same threat circuitry activated by physical threats, like pain."<sup>2</sup> So social interactions, like a great training session or a fractious meeting with your board of directors, can trigger the same response as ancient, survival-based experiences, like finding a freshwater stream or running from a sabre-toothed tiger. Even in a society where our survival needs are likely taken care of, changes like the slightest adjustment to our work life can trigger the strongest of neurological responses (Imagine for a moment the outrage felt by people at one organisation when the email circulated announcing a mandated move from real to instant coffee.)

**"For a change to stick, organisations must go about change with people – not do it to them."**

Around a decade ago we worked with a national logistics organisation seeking to reinvent engagement at the frontline, and we devised a process called Walking In Their Shoes (WITS). Fusing knowledge management, narrative and theatre techniques, WITS was designed to give technical managers space to explore and play out the complex feelings of their stakeholders in response to messages of change. How might they feel about this new world? Why might they be resistant to this change? Would everyone respond in the same way?

This dramatic technique viscerally enables and equips these technical people to shift their engagement strategies accordingly. WITS has become a highly adaptive tool that we've applied in all kinds of settings as part of change programmes. Now we have the chance to look at how to adapt WITS with the SCARF model in mind, equipping managers with the knowledge and emotionally intelligent insight required to drive authentic, sustained change within the organisation.

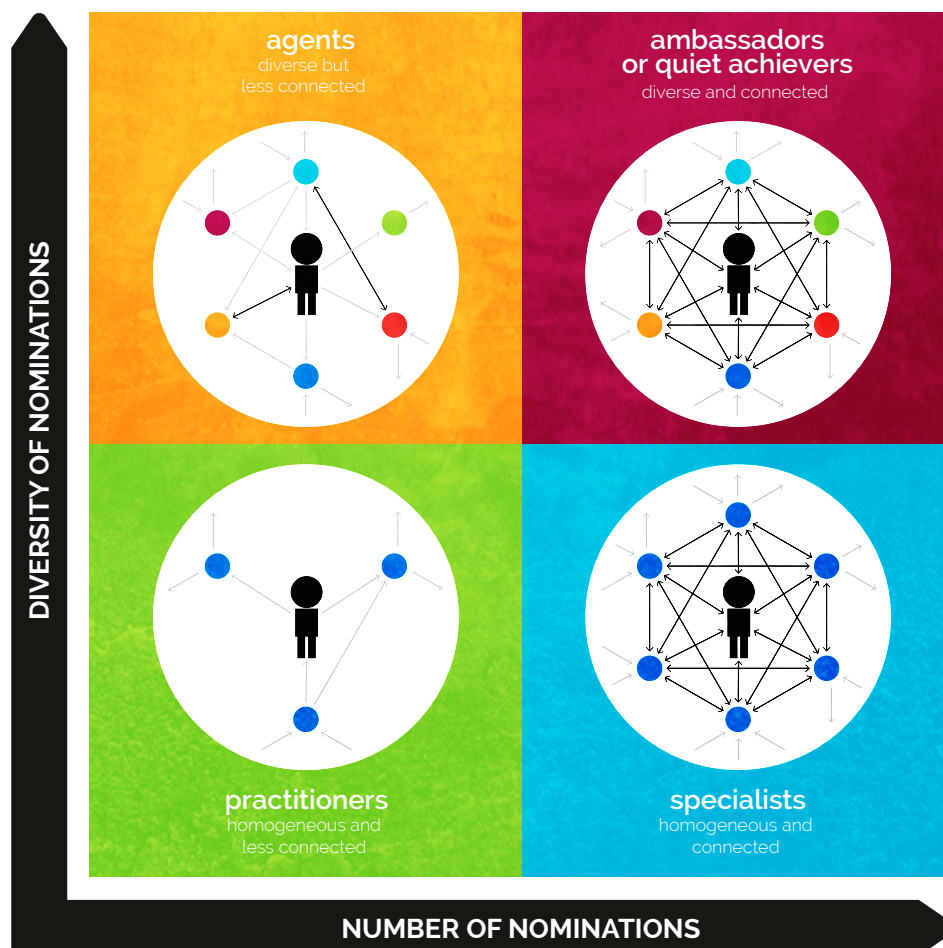
"The SCARF model shows how fragile our sense of wellbeing can be."<sup>3</sup> So conditions of trust are vital to avoid us shutting down when these five needs are – inevitably, humanly – threatened by change. For a change to stick, organisations must go about change with people – not do it to them.

Our brain's plasticity gives it an extraordinary ability to continuously achieve new innovations. And in order to leverage this complex brilliance of the mind, it's crucial that our brains are not constantly in a threatened, shut-down mode. This phrase really struck a chord with our experience of helping businesses in transition: "In the fear-free organisation leaders understand that scared people spend a lot more time plotting their survival than working productively. In the fear-free organisation people work on inspiration."<sup>4</sup> Neuro theory like the SCARF model, combined with tools like WITS, give change leaders the opportunity to foresee emotional resistances to change, and to tune their strategies accordingly so that people join them in the change, rather than running from it.

**"Our brain's plasticity gives it an extraordinary ability to continuously achieve new innovations... humans are relational creatures, and ... our brains see the organisation primarily from a social perspective."**

On to networks. The original knowledge management programme in an investment bank that provided the founding DNA for Sparknow had, at its heart, the idea that peer-to-peer networks are the central system through which change can happen (not dissimilar to the way in which our brains are wired and rewired by our network of neural pathways). Sparknow owes much of what we know about social networks to working with Laurence Lock Lee, and about knowledge networks to Katrina Pugh, and we gratefully acknowledge their influence here. It's worth adding that not only do we take pride in our interdisciplinary and collaborative approach; our experience has shown that it brings great value to our clients as well.

Us humans are relational creatures, and whether you like it or not our brains see the organisation primarily from a social perspective: "One of the most basic and vital jobs the brain does is to capture, encode and store the simple and complex details of every single experience we have ... and it happens within the context of relationships."<sup>5</sup> Take a look below at some of the ways different people operate within their social network.



" Change is constructed socially, in that it has to come through relationships... We've seen time and again that truly embedded change won't happen without leveraging the power of the network..."

The networking archetypes<sup>6</sup> above help us visualise how **networks cut through organisational boundaries and operate outside of official hierarchy**. Consider, for example, how a leader falling under the "practitioner" archetype might struggle to influence employees across the organisation – or how quietly influential a shop-floor manager may be if they fulfil the "ambassador" archetype. These considerations are vital when thinking about the design of any change vision.

**Change is constructed socially, in that it has to come through relationships**. When presented with a message of change that will likely impact your job in some way (even if only slightly), and that will be difficult to handle as you adjust to the transition, who will you respond to better? A faceless voice of command, from someone who doesn't seem to appreciate the real effect the change will have on you? Or the person you've shared a desk with for five years, who offers an example of how enacted change looks in the day-to-day, and who is open to frank, sometimes challenging, discussion?

**We've seen time and again that truly embedded change won't happen without leveraging the power of the network** (which is, of course, a web of relationships). Sparknow seeks to identify, equip and work with those people we know to be nodes, connectors, agents and ambassadors in networks so they're empowered to drive change forward.

We've seen this power in action with information managers in a government department who needed to take their business units through a new set of electronic documents and records management disciplines, in the face of considerable resistance. We've seen it with frontline managers in a national logistics agency who had to fetch and carry uncomfortable truths between the centre and the frontline of action. We saw it with the 'storianteers' (self labelled in a delightful accident of mishearing) who worked in partnership with us to understand the resistances to, and energies for, change in the merger of two large government departments.

We see it in our work in talent and leadership programmes to help leaders understand themselves as orchestrators of networks. Right now, for example, we're working with World Health Organisation colleagues who are facilitating the founding of the Rapid Response Team (RRT) Global Network – a knowledge network whose purpose is to convert the emergency response to Ebola into a resilient and ready network of response to outbreaks.

Our continuing research shows us that **understanding the power of the network on the "macro-level" goes hand in glove with comprehending the "micro-level" of neuroplasticity in an organisational setting**, and that the combination of the two can be leveraged to great effect within organisational culture. *Rewiring* is our way of probing deeper. How can neuroscience help us understand how to structure the roles, relationships, rituals and activities of a network like the RRT Global Network? And how can we then help organisations better harness their networks to enhance their performance and effectiveness?

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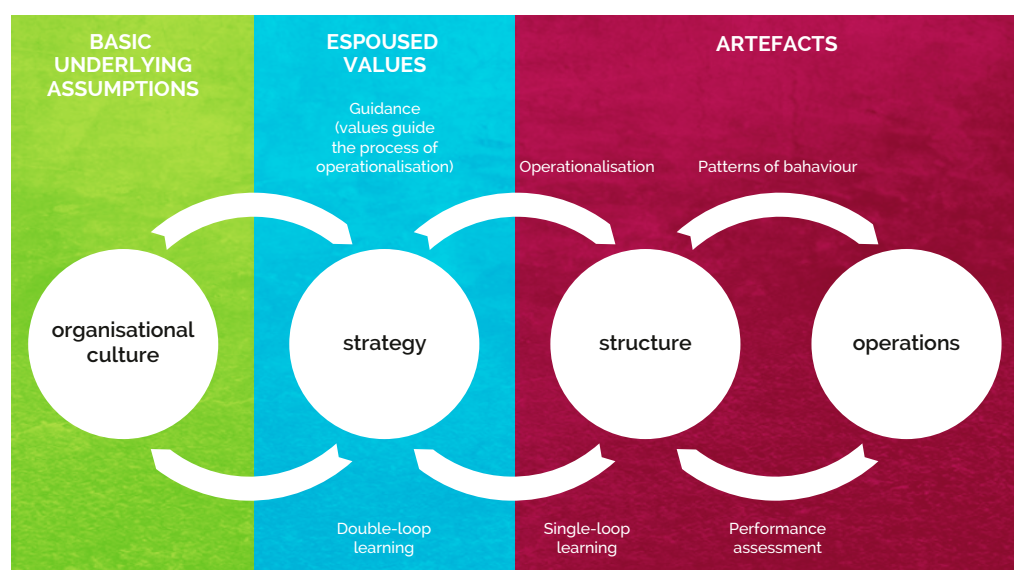
Finally narratives. Our early work on narrative was influenced by two ideas. The first is that an effective, compelling, strategic narrative doesn't live "out there" somewhere, detached from the day-to-day, but "in here", so that for employees it's "our story that we are shaping together", not "their story that they are doing to us". The second is that **the singular narrative is dangerous – it blinds us to the glorious multiplicity of experience and perspective, numbs us to clues of what's coming next and stops us getting ahead of the competition**, plodding through the same old story. In an organisational setting this means giving room to many voices and day-to-day experiences to create a narrative that lives and breathes, which feels co-created and for which everyone takes shared ownership and collective responsibility.

"Humans are hardwired for story... How can the organisation ensure that the collective story is the touchstone and guiding force for members of staff?"

Stories are how humans make sense of facts, experience, data and behaviours – they help guide us and they make work meaningful. It seems that "100,000 years of story dominance in how humans interact, communicate, archive and recall essential information has evolutionarily rewired human brains."<sup>7</sup> Humans are hardwired for story.

Since the financial crash, and in parallel increases in complexity and regulatory intensity in other sectors, we've been working more and more in the area of ethics, values, codes of conduct, behaviours and beliefs. Organisations are facing increasingly complex problems which have many hands involved. And those involved are coming up against tricky dilemmas in which "the right thing to do" is unclear. How can organisations equip their people with an internal compass that guides their actions along with a clear identity which connects to the story that leaders are telling? How can the organisation ensure that the collective story is the touchstone and guiding force for members of staff?

Take a look at the model below:



Dauber Model of Organisational Culture

Espoused values<sup>8</sup> is a term that has evolved from Edgar Schein's work on organisational culture.<sup>9</sup> You can see from the model above how different levels of organisational culture create feedback loops with each other.

"We all make sense of values through stories... aligned values stories allow employees to deal with difficult dilemmas very differently, and to feel more confident taking personal risks to do the right thing for the organisation."

If espoused values are communicated through the official story that an organisation tells about itself, consider how this could be powerfully reinforced (or disrupted) by the underlying story that employees actually use to live out their work behaviours. We all make sense of values through stories. We also very quickly spot gaps between words and actions. If what we experience is at odds with what we're told we will start to shape our own narratives, which may well be misaligned with those of the organisation. But when put to good use and gathered collectively from a range of sources across the company (not just cascaded from the top down), stories give people an opportunity to make shared meaning emerge from abstract values. This aligned values story then allows employees to deal with difficult dilemmas very differently, and to feel more confident taking personal risks to do the right thing for the organisation.

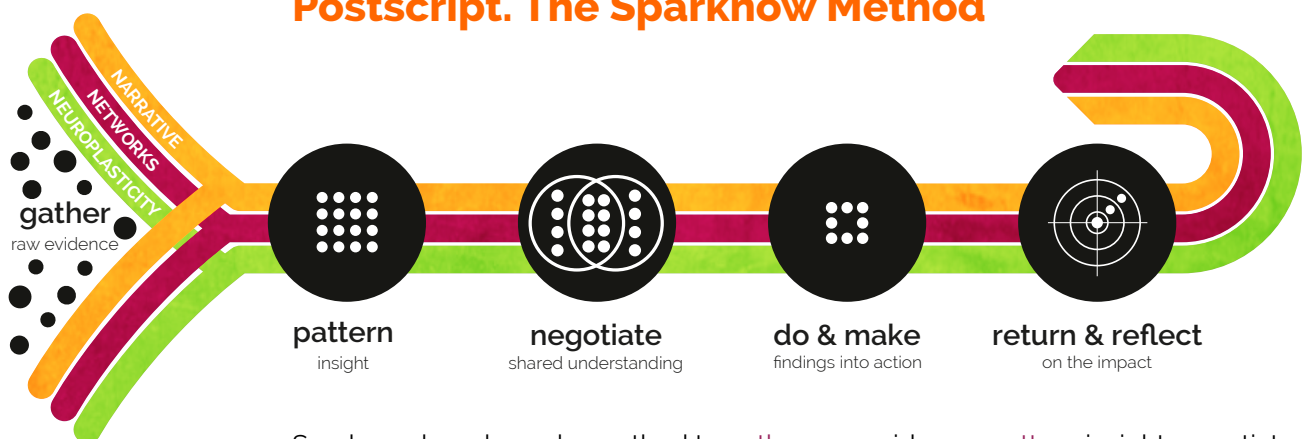
Two of our live projects illustrate these themes. The first is a facilitation process and set of storyboards designed to trigger conversations around quality in manufacturing – whether it's on the factory floor or a compliance officer being a trusted advisor to managers in the manufacturer. The second is with a government agency with whom we're exploring the gap between word and deed, helping

them to see that stories of "red tape" or poor meeting etiquette do not live "out there" somewhere, and are in fact "our" not "their" stories that need resolutions. In this and other cases we've taken the evidence from day-to-day experience and used it to negotiate some kind of charter, or code of conduct, where the topline principles or values are demonstrably linked back to the evidence in the stories we've gathered.

We're excited to share this starting point of our enquiry *Rewiring the Organisation*, and invite you to follow over the coming months as we begin to unpack our triad of neuroplasticity, networks and narrative, dipping into some of the theories reflected in our practice. We'll be publishing case studies, engaging in robust conversations with experts from many different fields and asking ourselves and others questions about how we can continue to pioneer organisational change. One last thing. We were drawn to the term "rewiring" partly because it winks at some of the common analogies and metaphors that brain science, networks and narratives share. But also because it captures what we do best: creating unimpeded pathways so that the powerful energies of those working within the organisation can drive action, change, movement and new directions, and take businesses to the next level.

**Victoria Ward & Fiona Hiscocks**

## Postscript. The Sparknow Method



Sparknow has shaped a method to **gather** raw evidence; **pattern** insight; negotiate shared understanding and commitment; **do & make** relevant artefacts and experiences that translate findings into action; and **return & reflect** on the impact of the work. More and more we are tightening the connections between this method and current research into the brain, neuroscience and cognitive functions, networks and narratives.

## Endnotes

- 1 Rock, David, "SCARF: a brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others", *NeuroLeadership Journal*. Issue 1, 2008. Retrieved 15 December 2015. [http://www.your-brain-at-work.com/files/NLJ\\_SCARFUS.pdf](http://www.your-brain-at-work.com/files/NLJ_SCARFUS.pdf)
- 2 McFarland, Walter, "This is your brain on organizational change", *Harvard Business Review*, October 2012. Retrieved 15 December 2015. <https://hbr.org/2012/10/this-is-your-brain-on-organizational-change>
- 3 Rogers, Jenny, *Coaching Skills: A Handbook*, New York: Open University Press, 2012.
- 4 Brown, Paul, Joan Kingsley and Sue Paterson, *The Fear-Free Organization: Vital Insights from Neuroscience to Transform Your Business Culture*, London: Kogan Page, 2015.
- 5 Ibid
- 6 Thank you to Laurence Lock Lee for providing the original of this image.
- 7 Haven, Kendall, *Story Smart: Using the Science of Story to Persuade, Influence, Inspire and Teach*. Libraries Unlimited, 2014.
- 8 Dauber, Daniel, Gerhard Fink and Maurice Yolles, 'A Configuration Model of Organisational Culture', *SAGE Open*. 2012. Retrieved 10 November 2015. <http://sgo.sagepub.com/content/2/1/2158244012441482.full.pdf>
- 9 "Three Levels of Culture – Schein", *Value Based Management*. Retrieved 15 December 2015. [http://www.valuebasedmanagement.net/methods\\_schein\\_three\\_levels\\_culture.html](http://www.valuebasedmanagement.net/methods_schein_three_levels_culture.html)