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The Neuroscience of Connection: Why Association Leaders Must Lead with Feeling

By: Mary Elizabeth Murphy

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The Neuroscience of Connection: Why Association Leaders Must Lead with Feeling

In the high-stakes world of association management, we are often buried in the "what" and the "how." As executives, our days are dictated by strategic plans, legislative agendas, membership tiers, and complex educational curricula. We focus on increasing non-dues revenue, streamlining board governance, and maximizing attendance at the annual conference. As leaders and members of the **Association Executives of North Carolina (AENC)**, we are ultimately in the business of human connection. When it comes to people, there is a fundamental truth that supersedes every data point and tactical maneuver. It was best captured by the incomparable Maya Angelou:

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

For years, this quote has been viewed through the lens of poetry or "soft skills." However, modern neuroscience reveals that this isn't just a sentimental observation—it is a biological imperative. For association executives, understanding the brain's "feeling-first" architecture isn't just a leadership tip; it is the key to building an unshakeable, loyal membership community in an era of digital noise and professional isolation.

The Brain's "Highlighter": The Amygdala-Hippocampus Connection

To understand why feelings outlast facts, we have to look at the brain's filing system. Our brains are bombarded with millions of bits of information every second. To prevent burnout, the brain is ruthlessly efficient at forgetting. Most of what your members hear at a standard seminar or read in a weekly update is placed in a "temporary" folder and eventually shredded to make room for new data.

So, how does certain information make the cut for long-term storage? It comes down to a partnership between two tiny structures: the **amygdala** and the **hippocampus**.

The amygdala is the brain's emotional smoke detector and processing center. When an experience is tied to a significant emotion—whether it's the excitement of a new networking connection, the relief of finding a solution to a professional hurdle, or the warmth of being recognized by a peer—the amygdala sounds an alarm. It signals to the hippocampus (the brain's primary memory center): *"Pay attention! This matters. Save this in high definition!"*

In neuroscience, this is often called **"emotional tagging."** Without an emotional tag, a memory is just a black-and-white sketch. With it, the memory becomes a vivid, permanent recording. When we make our members feel valued, heard, or inspired, we aren't just being "nice"—we are literally hardwiring our association's value into their neural pathways.

Survival of the Felt: The Evolutionary "Why"

This biological priority exists because of evolution. Our ancestors didn't survive by remembering the exact number of berries on a bush; they survived by remembering the visceral fear they felt when they saw a predator near that bush.

In the modern professional landscape, "predators" have been replaced by social isolation, professional irrelevance, or the stress of industry shifts. When an association provides a sense of psychological safety and belonging, it triggers the release of **oxytocin**—often called the "bonding molecule."

When a member feels that they belong to an organization that truly "gets" them, their brain categorizes that association as a "safe harbor." They may forget the specific wording of your last policy update; they will never forget the sense of security and community they felt during a period of professional transition. That feeling is what drives renewal rates, not the list of member benefits on your website.

The Executive Pull Quote

"In a world of automated replies and digital fatigue, your association's greatest competitive advantage isn't your tech stack—it's the emotional resonance you leave behind in every interaction."

The "Peak-End" Rule in Association Events

Understanding the neuroscience of memory also enables us to be more strategic in planning our events. Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman's research into the **"Peak-End Rule"** suggests that people judge an experience largely based on how they felt at its *peak* (the most intense point) and at its *end*.

For an association executive, this is a game-changer. You can have a minor logistical hiccup during the morning coffee break, but if the keynote speaker delivers a "peak" emotional moment of inspiration, and if the closing reception leaves members feeling celebrated and connected, their brains will "save" the entire conference as a massive success. The emotional peaks and the final "feeling" of the event override the mundane details of the schedule.

The "Reset" Factor: Leading with Intention

As leaders, we also have to be aware of our own "buttons." In my work with S.T.A.R. Resources, I often talk about the importance of **RESET-ing**. When we are stressed, our "thinking brain" (the prefrontal cortex) goes offline, and our "emotional brain" (the limbic system) takes over. If we react to a difficult board member or a frustrated member from a place of stress, we create a negative emotional tag in *their* brain.

Leadership requires the ability to pause and choose the emotional impact we want to have. When you lead with the intent to impact how someone *feels*, you transition from being a "vendor of services" to a "partner in growth."

- **In Advocacy:** Legislators may forget your statistics; they will remember the story that made them feel the weight of your industry's challenges.
- **In Board Management:** Your board members may forget the minutes of the last meeting; they will remember if you made them feel like their time and expertise were truly respected.
- **In Member Engagement:** A new member might forget the name of the committee they joined; they will never forget the veteran member who walked across the room to make them feel welcome.

Conclusion: The Heart is the Gateway to the Head

We often try to convince our members to stay with logic. We show them ROI charts, legislative wins, and discount lists. While those have their place, neuroscience tells us that the "feeling" brain is the gatekeeper to the "thinking" brain. If we don't win the heart, we never truly access the mind.

As we continue to lead our various organizations across North Carolina, let's challenge ourselves to look beyond the "what" and the "how." Let's ask: *"How am I making my members feel today?"* Because in the end, that is the only thing they will truly remember.

About the Author

Mary Elizabeth Murphy is the CEO of **S.T.A.R. Resources** and the author of the influential book ***RESET Your Buttons and Create Relationships that Work***. A seasoned leader and keynote speaker, Mary Elizabeth focuses on the intersection of emotional intelligence, leadership, and human connection. She helps executives and organizations move beyond traditional management to create cultures of high performance and belonging. A dedicated supporter of the **Association Executives of North Carolina (AENC)**, Mary Elizabeth is passionate about helping association leaders harness the power of the "human element" to drive lasting organizational success.

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