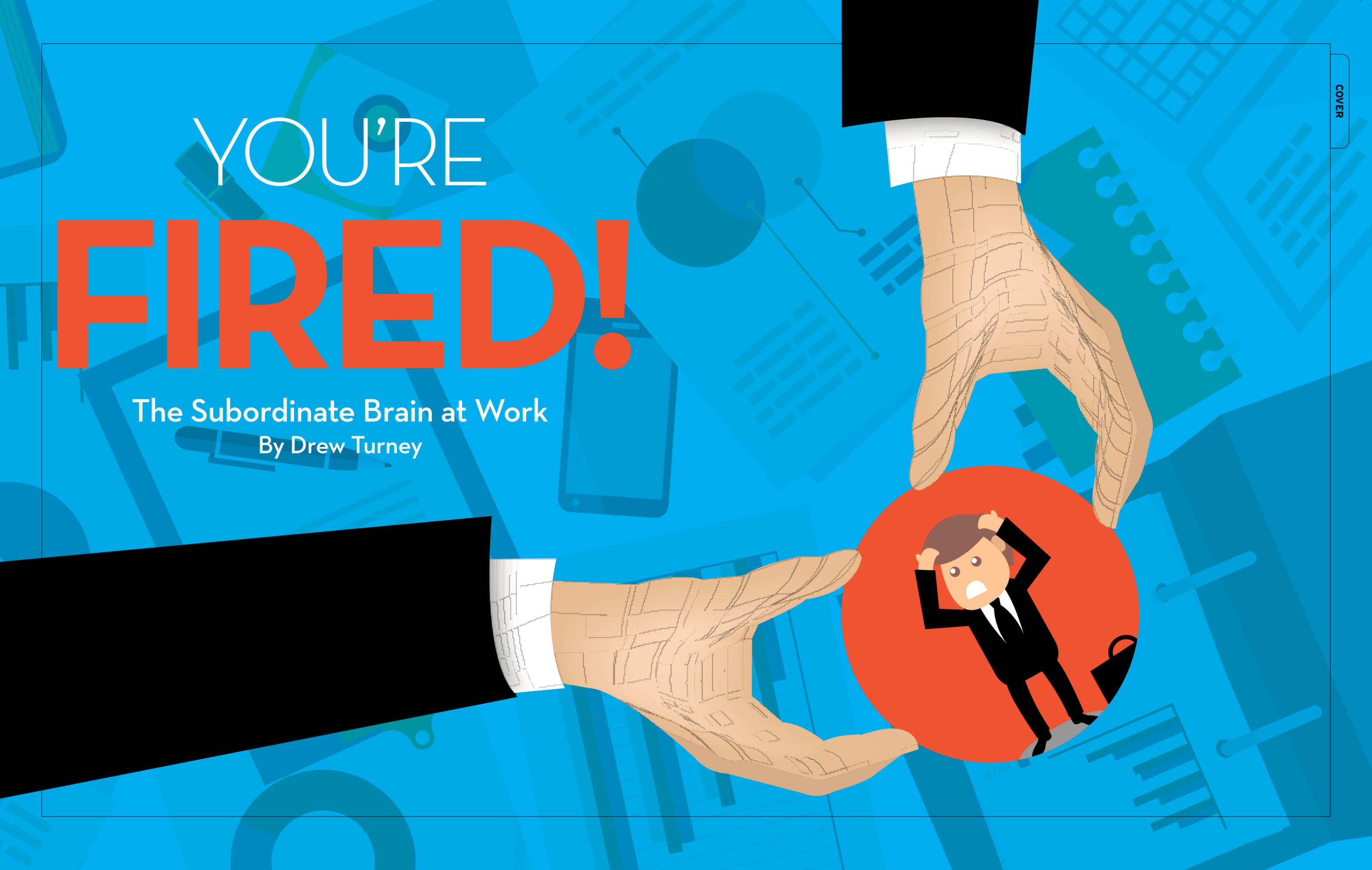


YOU'RE FIRED!

The Subordinate Brain at Work
By Drew Turney



“A leader can’t do the work. All they can do is inspire others.”

Your boss can fire you but you can’t fire them. What does that do to our brain chemistry and (therefore) performance? Drew Turney untangles the uneasy cognitive relationship around whoever’s in charge.

● In our market-based economy, everyone has a boss. Most of us answer to a manager or supervisor, but even the CEO answers to shareholders. So the pressures of being judged for your work hardly vanish the further up the ladder you climb. And if you asked them, many business leaders would probably tell you they miss the responsibility-free days of being file clerks.

That said, one of the benefits of being the “boss” is the right to plan, execute, and supervise a vision for the way things are done. You’re free from the stresses of having to answer to multiple levels of leadership above you, being judged for minutiae, or even fearing the loss of your job on a day-to-day basis.

Elizabeth Amini is an adjunct professor at USC Marshall School of Business, CEO and co-founder of Anti-Aging Games, and the president and co-founder of the Trojan CEO Network, and believes the control that comes with being the boss helps manage the stresses affecting us in the workplace more effectively. “High levels of stress without control can actually shrink the brain adversely, affecting memory, decision-making, and emotional regulation even further,” she says.



Lynette Louise agrees. An international mental health and parenting expert (specializing in autism), the author and broadcaster is working on her Ph.D. in psychology at Saybrook University. “Part of their attention is on the boss and part is on the job,” she says. “Since the brain only attends to one thing at a time this results in quick shifting from solving the problem to impressing the boss.”

A worker staying on task has dual interests at heart that affect brain chemistry and performance. Louise thinks when a subordinate is solving a problem with the boss present, the development of the brain’s logical processing and reward-center responses are affected. According to her, it causes a kind of “cycling addiction,” reinforcing the need for approval.

“The boss can just focus on the problem,” Louise says. “Their left frontal lobe is more singular in its focus and fires in a less-diffused manner. The nucleus accumbens sends pleasure signals when the challenge is being worked on. Since brains love these pleasure signals, it becomes very clear about what to focus on and where to put the energy.”

The result is that the subordinate brain tends to be more rewarded by approval and therefore stops accessing its own creativity as efficiently because the focus is split, confusing frontal lobe signals and impairing creativity, or blocking it altogether.

Scientific knowledge about brain stressors seems to agree to

some extent — persistently high levels of stress hormones like cortisol can actually reduce the volume of brain tissue.

But there’s a competing chemical process as well. The effects of cortisol can be counterbalanced by testosterone and estrogen, so while being in charge can cause initial changes that obstruct brain function, the long-term effects of stress associated with being on top can reduce or even reverse them.

According to another research claim, the “big picture” thinking that bosses must engage in develops the frontal lobes and enhances connections to the limbic system, creating quicker communication between these two regions and allowing them to work in concert rather than in opposition.

Of course — like mostly everything in brain science — attributing behaviors to certain processes or regions is very inexact based on our current knowledge. One neuroscientist contacted for this story found the above action “a bit too generalized.”

AS INDIVIDUAL AS YOU ARE

All of the above depends on the brain and its owner. We’re not all leadership material, after all, and even if we were, many skills associated with leadership are learned rather than born. Our brains adapt to (and are shaped by) events and interactions in our social environment.

“Being in command shapes and reinforces [traits some people already possess] further, and for others, adaptability and quickness to learn can afford them an edge in on-the-job leadership,” says neuroethicist Dr. James Giordano, professor of neurology at Georgetown University Medical Center. “But for some, no matter what position they may be in, they just don’t have the neuro-cognitive

capabilities to assume or engage leadership.” According to Giordano, you either use what you’ve got to rise to command (or learn to lead once you get there) or remain subordinate — often with a desire to do so.

Of course, there’s a whole different class of stressors to being a boss (some would say there are a lot more of them). Even though executives or managers might not have direct bosses looking over their shoulders and the associated daily threat of losing one’s job, it can be lonely at the top with no confidantes you can let your guard down in front of. All too often, bosses suffer the experience of simply being resented or disliked.

Suzanne Bates, CEO of Bates Communications, is a global expert on executive presence and leadership whose firm helps senior executives communicate with their audiences. She believes the stress affecting the boss’s brain is even worse than yours.

Bates studied the methods that make a boss effective over time, and being aware of both the task at hand and the social environment of encouraging your people to give it their best, it is quite the mental workload.

“Qualities such as authenticity, humility, resonance, concern, interactivity, and inclusiveness play a major role in whether a person in a position of authority is effective as a leader,” Bates says. “A leader can’t do the work. All they can do is inspire others. It isn’t enough to overcome resistance, influence others’ decisions, inspire commitment, and get people to go above and

beyond. In the short run, ‘Do it because I’m the boss’ can work, but it creates disengagement — people will do little or nothing, and even undermine decisions.”

Or it may be that executive brains have different stresses because they just have too much to do — cognitively speaking. A common complaint among workers is that the boss might have good technical skills for the goals of the organization but lacks the social skills needed to inspire.

Research presented at a 2011 summit about neuroscience and leadership outlined how hard it is to imagine or predict the emotional states of other people. When we experience even a mild cognitive load, our ability to appreciate what others are thinking or needing is seriously impaired.

Also consider that when you think analytically about a problem, you are in fact “switching off” the circuitry that deals with empathy or imagining the emotional states of others. With so many details of projects and the needs and moods of the people working on them going around in their heads, it’s no wonder our bosses sometimes seem distracted or uncaring.

If your day is consumed with merely doing your job properly so you don’t get fired, that may be a luxury compared to what your boss is going through. ☑

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