



# The Politics of Hope Newsletter

*“Helping Ordinary Citizens Become  
Extraordinary Public Leaders”*



## The Six-Second Secret to Leadership

By Donna Zajonc

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Remember when you were young and had a playground argument? Invariably the teacher said, “Johnny, Susie, count to ten before you respond.” It turns out that advice is more than friendly guidance. It only takes a few seconds to learn one of the great secrets to successful leadership. Here is how it works.

When we react with an impulsive judgment or outburst, our emotional reaction is controlled by a small but very influential center at the base of our brains called the amygdalae. It is an almond-shaped group of neurons which store memories associated with emotional events from our past.

The flight, flight or freeze mechanism is controlled in part by the amygdalae which protects us from what we have judged as fearful or threatening situations based upon previous experiences. The amygdalae directs our stress hormones to flow, raises our heartbeat, tightens our muscles and stimulates our facial muscles, which causes a frown or look of disgust before we even realize what is happening. No wonder our co-workers read our body language and know our response before we open our mouths!

**Here’s the Six-Second Secret to Leadership: It only takes six seconds to reset the electrical impulses away from the amygdalae to the pre-frontal cortex of the brain that controls our ability to make rational choices.** When the pre-frontal cortex is directing our thoughts, we now have a greater ability to differentiate between conflicting thoughts or ideas, evaluate complex cognitive beliefs, listen to others and moderate our social behaviors.

The pre-frontal cortex can orchestrate our thoughts and actions based upon our current internal desires (rather than previous emotional experiences). This part of our brain helps us be the leader we choose to be rather than make reactive judgments based on past experiences that are still lodged in the memory bank of the amygdalae.

*“A positive thinker doesn't refuse to recognize the negative: he refuses to dwell on it. Positive thinking is a form of thought which habitually looks for the best results from the worst conditions.”*

~Norman Vincent Peale



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Brain research studies in 2004 and 2006 showed that people shown images of frightened faces increased the activity of the amygdalae. This means that a frightened look on your face can increase the control the amygdalae has over other people in the room. **As a boss, if you react with judgment, fear or disgust, you will most likely increase the emotional reactions of others.**

The pre-frontal cortex is considered the “new brain” while the amygdalae is the “older brain” (also known as the reptilian brain) buried deep into the gray matter at the base of the skull. The reason human beings are still on this earth is because the older brain managed to keep us safe from wild animals and other dangers that lurked around the corner.

Today’s leaders must have a different set of skills far beyond just the survivor skills of our ancestors. **This means we must develop a calm and open demeanor, willing and able to listen to the ideas of others, empower our team to excel, and create a vision from the whole of the group rather than just our individual perspective.**

The Six-Second Secret to Leadership is learning to catch ourselves and reset our brain. In my life, it is fairly easy for me to be a rational leader who chooses to listen to others if I have not been triggered by an emotional event that puts me into a defensive frenzy. The trick is learning to catch and correct.

Forming any new habit takes practice, practice, practice. Here are a few tips on how to recognize when the amygdalae has control and learn to shift to your pre-frontal cortex:

1. Take one deep breath before you are ready to speak. Make sure it is a deep breath and lasts at least six seconds. Notice the difference that just one deep breath can give.
2. I have a client who wears a rubber band on his wrist as a reminder. Develop your own playful habit that works for you.
3. Listen. There’s no more powerful way to connect with others at work or at home. Listening engages the pre-frontal cortex of your brain.
4. Be willing to try. Just noticing and paying attention to your habit of reacting and being willing to try new strategies will give you a boost of confidence and desire to keep learning.

If we can become mindful of the situation, in just six seconds our neurons will reduce firing in the amygdalae and increase their activity in the pre-frontal cortex. The old-saying of “count to ten” was for good reason. Those few seconds allow the brain to reset so we can choose our reaction to a situation rather than react without thinking---and that skill is the basic secret to successful leading in today’s complex world!



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### Comments?

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### Executive Coaching for Government Leaders

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***"Excellent presentation! The seminar was useful to our executive staff and many individuals mentioned how much they enjoyed it and they are not normally complementary of having to attend training sessions. I believe it will have a positive outcome. Thanks for everything!"***

**~ Mac Craig - City Manager  
Largo, Florida**

***"My gratitude list for 2008 has Donna Zajonc at the top. As my coach, she was instrumental in my business success which tripled revenue since its inception. Her positive encouragement and concrete ideas moved me forward to great success. She pushes me to excel where I am strong and helps me avoid pitfalls that have plagued me in the past. I highly recommend her assistance.***

**~Pamela S. Erickson, Owner  
Public Action Management**