

TotalPicture Radio Transcript
David Rock Interview Podcast
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[Rethinking Leadership: The 2010 NeuroLeadership Summit](#)

Welcome to a special [Leadership Channel](#) podcast on TotalPicture Radio. This is Peter Clayton, reporting from New York City.

I'm here with David Rock, the founder and CEO of [Results Coaching Systems](#). David works with Fortune 500 clients, specializing in embedding internal coaching capacity, within organizations to develop leaders, retain talent, improve performance and change culture. David is one of the thought leaders in the global coaching profession. The integrated coaching system he developed in mid-90's has been taught to over 10,000 professionals in more than 15 countries.

In 2006, David founded the [NeuroLeadership Institute and Summit](#), a global initiative bringing neuroscientists and leadership experts together to build a new science of leadership development. The institute is now a worldwide network of researchers and practitioners building a new body of knowledge.

I've had the privilege of attending a past NeuroLeadership Summit. This year their Summit will be held October 26-28th in Boston and you can find many links to information about this summit, including TotalPicture Radio interviews on David's feature page in the leadership channel on TotalPicture Radio, that's totalpicture.com.

David, thank you so much for taking time to speak with us today. I know you have a plane to catch, back to Australia this afternoon. Tell me a little bit about the objectives in the conference this year. It's called, Rethinking Leadership. What do you mean by Rethinking Leadership and what are some of the objectives of the conference?

David: It's our biggest conference as you notice. It's interesting because last year we planned a 2-day conference, but we put on like a sort of private small event on the morning of the first day. About 80% of the conference participants all turned up for that, wanting three days and we thought wow, there is obviously a real hunger for spending more time. So it's definitely our biggest yet and I think our most important.

The topics have just emerged naturally. The previous topics have been making new connections and kind of building the foundations of a new field. This year, we think we've got the foundations theoretically of a field. We know what the neuroleadership field is made of. We've got the pedagogy worked out and now we really want to move forward a bit and say what do leaders really do, how do they do it and more importantly, how do we improve the quality of leadership?

A few months ago, I was at the Harvard Business School for an event that they had been doing every year that's kind of a little similar theme but more business school academics. It's called the Future of Leadership colloquium and it was a couple of days with the world's top business school academics and business school deans, and all this kind of thinking about where it's going. I stood up and said something kind of controversial which I feel very strongly about, which is that while we have leadership assessments to sort of compare leaders to each other, we really have no way of knowing who is a good leader or why. We don't have a theory of what makes someone an effective leader because we don't know what leaders actually do. We can't tell if a leadership development program is effective or not because we don't really know what it does. We can't compare leadership development programs or initiatives. I mean it's really the dark ages when it comes to improving the quality of leadership. It's really complete guesswork in most situations. And I don't think that's very good for anyone. You think of some of the challenges we've had as a society in the last few years and clearly a lot of that is a lack of leadership.

There is a wonderful quote in the *New York Times* – I don't remember the exact words – but it was something like... this was about the BP oil rig... it was something as the disaster got closer, groups of people argued more. As the disaster got more and more imminent, basically the tensions went up and people collaborated even less. What was missing there was a strong leader who could coordinate that and have such a catastrophe. That's an example of what an absence of leadership can do.

I think it's really about what the leaders do, why do they do it, how do we measure leaders now and how do we improve the quality of leaders. There's a thing I wrote recently for [Huffington Post](#), which is pilots and doctors tested for competence but not leaders – why is that? Pilots and doctors. Well pilots and doctors are tested for competence because firstly, there's an agreed body of knowledge of what they do. And secondly, because people think there's real lives at stake. There is real lives at stake with leaders as well, political leaders, business leaders, community leaders. But we don't

test them at all because we don't really have any kind of theory base to understand what they really do. We hardly have a definition of leadership that's even vaguely agreed.

So that's really what the conference is about is what do leaders really do, how do we measure them better, how do we develop them, how do we know we're developing them, and it's really kind of rethinking that whole idea.

Peter: Who attends these conferences, David?

David: It's a fascinating group of people. The speakers are pretty extraordinary. Probably the majority of speakers you'd want to sit down and talk to for days, they're just such interesting people who are not just academics, they're really easy to understand. But the participants in many ways are the real feature, because there are a lot of people who never go to conferences normally. This is kind of their big intellectual input for the year. A lot of them write books, a lot of them either run leadership development or change or OD where they can affirm themselves, or they work inside a large organization, or they're creating leadership development programs. Some of them are from the governments, people from the Army and NASA, and people like that. Some of them from big business as well. And probably the really interesting part is they're from many countries. They're from 20-30 different countries. Some really, really passionate people.

There is one thread through all of them, and the thread is they're all change agents. They're all people who are trying to create and are creating positive change, and they really are up to things. They're up to big things, the participants who come along.

You can grab any six people and say what are you working on at this event and will want to talk to all of them for hours because they're such interesting projects and interesting things that they're up to. I think it's a really unusual community of people who don't go to a lot of conferences but really appreciate the fresh insights and the really intellectual rigor that comes out of it.

Peter: Well given the fact that there are so many interesting people who attend these events, do you allow time for them to actually communicate with one another and network?

David: That's one of my real bug-bears is that you go to a conference and you expect to talk to people like you expect to... there are 200 people you want to talk to and you talk to 6. And it drives you crazy because,

expectation of a reward is very rewarding but an unmet expectation is even worse.

So there's actually 4 sessions a day, and there's about something like 4 hours a day of structured interaction time with other people, that's structured/unstructured time. Literally breakfast, lunch and dinner plus two one hour blocks, plus 30-50% of each of the actual 4 sessions a day is designed specifically for discussion. It's probably the most interactive that you'll see and we collected data on this on our first summit. The very first one we worked out that every person spoke to 30% of the rest of the group which is kind of unheard of in a conference and that's a good conversation with 30% of the community. So that's the kind of level of interaction that I think people really enjoy and appreciate that you don't get in a lot of events.

Peter: David, I know one of the things that you've attempted to achieve every year with these conferences is make improvements in the delivery in how you go about making these presentations. What are some of the things you're doing different this year from in previous years?

David: That's a good question. I definitely really love to improve these things, there's always more you can do. One of the things that happened at UCLA event last year was Warren Bennis came along, and he was a participant, and he gave a great talk, but he was a huge contribution every time he would grab the microphone and start questioning the neuroscientists in the other sessions. A number of times he just asked such wonderful questions in the Q&A sessions, that we ended up sort of giving him the mic quite a lot of a time because there were such great questions. We realized that it would be great to get some deep thinkers from the business world and have them debrief the neuroscientists and make the links, so rather than just having the neuroscientists present. And so that's what we're doing this year; we're integrating neuroscience and leadership research and actually getting a team of people who would pre-work a bit as well and kind of plan a session. Pretty much all of the sessions are based on a topic where a neuroscientist comes in but a leadership person then kind of translates it, makes it accessible, asks the tough questions, as well as the audience having a chance to talk amongst themselves and interact.

It's kind of much better integration. We will also cut down the number of sessions, it's four themes a day. So there is really only four sessions a day which you are going to.

Another thing this year we have really big names, Ivy league universities involved. We have professors from Columbia, professors from MIT, from

Harvard, from NYU. It's really quite another level in terms of the participation of the big universities. There's a lot more practitioner focus. There are sessions specifically devoted to practitioners sharing with each other and learning from each other which we think is important. There's a meet the scientist session everyday. So at lunchtime you can choose the scientist that you want to go and chat with and there is a meet the scientist lunch that you could connect with.

There is also just more sort of brain recharge times. So everyday there'll be a kind of a hot room and a cold room, in a sense, to either connect with lots of people and be so social and hear loud music or to have quiet time, depending on what you need – kind of an opportunity to recharge in whatever way works for you.

There is lots of things that we improved. I think overall, the biggest change people will probably notice will be the greater practitioner focus and the sessions being just that much more rich in terms of how the dialogue actually emerges.

Peter: I think that's great because I think there is a real need to tie all of this neuroscience that is based on science back to leadership and how does this really translate and how can people use this in a practical way.

David: Yeah absolutely. And it's tricky because it's a conference, it's not designed to be practical by nature but there are tremendous practical implications from the science. It's a conference to look at what are we learning from the science that we can then apply, and so you've got to have the science being practical.

Peter: What are a couple of the real top takeaways that you see from this event this year?

David: There are some really exciting topics. We have Sandy Pentland coming, and he's the first person that can actually really say I can predict how effective and successful a leader will be. And the interesting thing is he can do that without knowing the actual words they say; he can do it based on biological data, and he can predict leadership effectiveness. Now that goes against everything we know in leadership. So it tells you that leadership maybe something more than just the words people use. That's a big idea.

We have Josh Greene who is the head of the Moral Cognition Lab at Harvard University talking about the neuroscience of ethics, the neuroscience of moral behavior, which is a big idea.

Kevin Ochsner, the head of the Columbia Social Cognitive Lab is talking about how do habits actually form, with another guy, Phil Dixon, there looking at why giving feedback doesn't actually work for creating habits and how that feedback systems we have are basically terrible for the way the brain works and how we would do it differently.

You've got Jason Mitchell who is the head of the Social Cognitive Lab at Harvard, talking about how do we actually know other people and how do we understand ourselves and understand other people.

Lisa Feldman-Barrett opening the conference, she's one of the most important and interesting researchers today in emotions. She's going to start off her session with emotional intelligence is wrong, [inaudible 12:30] is the great writer but the fundamental idea is actually incorrect, it's not how emotions work. Pretty controversial and pretty important.

Jonathan Schooler doing a session on mind wondering and how we can significantly increase the number of insights that we have as leaders. Jessica Payne, the neuroscience of sleep and how critical that is and how all that works.

So that's kind of about half the really big ideas that are happening. There are a lot of important sessions.

One of my favorite things about this event is that a lot of the names no one has heard of and they are extraordinary thinkers, studying really important things and great speakers, and these are people that no one has heard of before. Most of the people I knew didn't know Matt Lieberman or Kevin Ochsner or Lila Divachi or others, and they are some of the most interesting and important researchers around, up and coming. A lot of these people, they run labs, they run the lab at Harvard Business School, they run the social cognitive lab there, they run the memory lab at the NYU, they run all sorts of interesting labs but you might not have heard of them. So they're people that are doing important work, rather than just having big names.

I hate going to conferences and you see this big list of people you've always wanted to meet because they are famous and you get there and then you're really disappointed by the quality of presentation because it's the same shtick they've obviously done for 20 years or much longer. You won't see

that here; you'll see people presenting new ideas in a really fresh way in an engaging way and things that are very cutting edge.

Peter: How do you go about selecting the people that are speaking at this event and how do they complement each other, and what is the ultimate goal you're expecting after three days of this conference?

David: It's a really complex process. It's like saying how do you create a painting, how do you create a piece of art? I have a vision of sort of what I want the theme to be about. It's very hard to put in words. I usually don't have a title yet. I think about the sort of big names, or interesting names that we can get, because it's hard to get really good people. We think about what's important, what are people focused on, and then we try to identify topics that should be discussed, what do we think are important topics that haven't been researched, that haven't been talked about that we want to know about, what do I want to know about that that I'm not seeing anywhere. Believe me, there is a lot of those topics.

This year it's like what are the neural challenges of the senior leader; why are senior leaders so kind of out of touch, overwhelmed, what's going on with senior leaders. We've got a session where people research that. I create collaborations where I put a neuroscientist together with a business researcher and I get them to actually work on a topic. For example, we have one this year on what's the most efficient way of designing learning in terms of the follow up, how much follow up, how often? People are working on that.

And so we think about what are topics that are important, what's topical at the time, who are the people that we can get, and then we weave it together. It's the more complicated and kind of complex thing that I do every year but it's one of my personal projects I work on is kind of casting this and creating this and dreaming it up.

In summary it's kind of what's really important. To me, what's really important is to improve the quality of leadership. We're really bad at it. I'll probably make some enemies saying that. If the internet was as functional as leadership development is one in a hundred emails would get through. And we really need to improve the science of understanding leaders and developing leaders. This by no means is a silver bullet but it's helping with a part of the process and it's really helping us understand some important pieces of what is it to be an effective leader today.

Peter: Well obviously when you talk to most major corporations today, one of their number one objectives are developing the next generation of leaders and how do you go about doing that, right?

David: Absolutely. Improving the quality of leadership development was the second most urgent issue in a big Boston consultant group study recently; the second most important issue improving the quality of leadership and development. It's clearly an issue and we think that the science has a long way to go.

Peter: David, thank you so much for taking time to speak with us again here on TotalPicture Radio.

David: Thanks so much, Peter.

We've been speaking in with David Rock, author of *Personal Best Quiet Leadership* and *Your Brain at Work*. He is the CEO of Results Coaching Systems and founder of the Neural Leadership Institute and Summit. Learn more and voice your opinion of this podcast on the leadership channel of TotalPicture Radio. And remember, you can subscribe to our podcasts on iTunes, Zune, Odeo and many podcast aggregation sites.

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