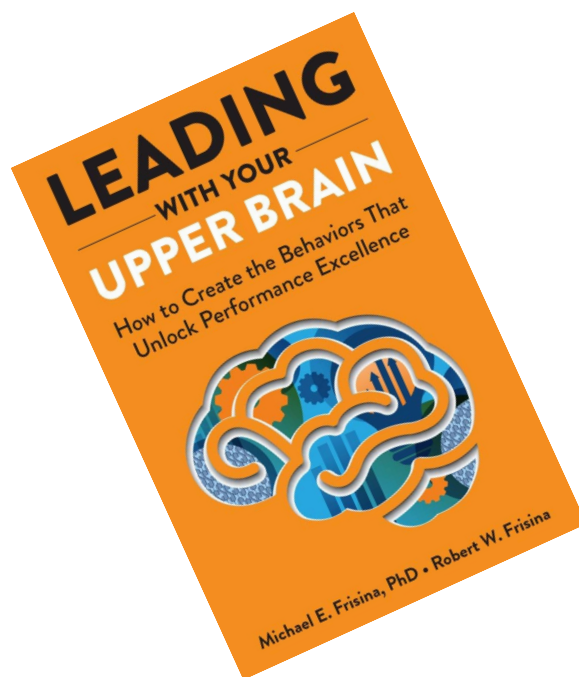


Book Review:

Reviewed by Alisha Christiansen and Ron Bonnstetter



***Leading With Your Upper Brain: How to Create the Behaviors
That Unlock Performance Excellence***

Dr. Michael & Robert Frisina's book, *_Leading With Your Upper Brain_*, offers a compelling blend of neuroscience, behavioral psychology, and leadership development. Drawing from decades of leadership science and brain-based research, Frisina makes a bold claim: **the most effective leaders succeed not because of superior technical knowledge, but because of their ability to regulate behavior, manage relationships, and develop self-awareness.** With this thesis, the book reorients leadership training away from “what” we do and toward the “how” and “why” of our behavior.

At the heart of Frisina's argument is the idea that leadership performance is the product of both technical and behavioral capacity: ****Performance = f(x) (technical capacity) × (behavior capacity).** Too often, organizations fixate on technical skills, overlooking the interpersonal and emotional factors that drive engagement and productivity. Yet, as Frisina emphasizes, most people are hired for technical expertise but fired for behavioral issues (p.4). Effective leadership, then, hinges on cultivating the behaviors that foster trust, safety, and collaboration.

Michael and Robert anchor their ideas in the brain's architecture—what they call “leading with your upper brain.” The prefrontal cortex, our upper brain, governs executive functions such as planning, emotional regulation, and moral reasoning. In contrast, the limbic system, or “lower brain,” is reactive, impulsive, and fear-driven. Great leaders are those who consistently activate the upper brain, especially in moments of stress. As they put it, **“the human brain can perform both functions extremely well—just not at the same time”** (p.31).

This neuroscience framework becomes the foundation for a behavioral model of leadership that prizes self-awareness, emotional regulation, and adaptability. The book offers multiple quotes that capture this ethos, such as: **“Your behavior is never confidential, is never a secret, and never lies about what you really believe or who you really are”** (p.40). **Behavior is observable, measurable, and—most importantly—changeable.** Thus, leadership is not a static trait but a dynamic, trainable set of practices.

The book draws attention to the **“knowing-doing gap”**—the space between intellectual understanding and actual behavior. **“Fear,” Frisina argues, “is always a key contributor to the knowing and doing gap”** (p.51). Leaders often know what they should do but fail to act because fear hijacks their brain, triggering a lower-brain survival response. To close this gap, Frisina emphasizes the role of mindfulness, cognitive reappraisal, and intentional practice in cultivating upper brain performance.

Mindfulness emerges as a cornerstone of the book's practical advice. Defined as **“thinking about your thinking,”** mindfulness helps leaders recognize and regulate the thoughts that drive

behavior (p.72). Practicing 5–15 minutes of mindfulness daily, Frisina notes, boosts resilience, attention, and collaboration—three skills essential for 21st-century leadership (p.74). With neuroscience backing, they argue that **mindful leaders can physically rewire their brains, enhancing both performance and well-being.**

Self-awareness receives special attention throughout the book. The authors frame it as the starting point of effective leadership: **“To lead others effectively, we must first lead ourselves effectively”** (p.62). Using insights from neuroscience, he shows how leaders who manage their thoughts and emotions are better equipped to engage teams, inspire trust, and adapt to complexity. He urges readers to seek feedback courageously and embrace lifelong learning—not just as a slogan, but as a behavioral discipline rooted in humility.

The book also addresses organizational culture, arguing that engagement is shaped more by leadership behavior than any other variable. They cite Gallup research showing that **“70 percent of a team’s engagement is influenced by their manager”** (p.5). **High-performing leaders display seven behavioral skills: building relationships, developing people, driving change, inspiring others, thinking critically, communicating clearly, and creating accountability** (p.5–6). These are not innate traits but behaviors that can be learned and practiced.

What sets this book apart is how it merges theory with neuroscience, offering both empirical evidence and actionable frameworks. For instance, the authors draw on Paul Zak’s research on oxytocin to explain why vulnerability, recognition, and shared control enhance trust (p.119). Dr. Zak builds on psychological constructs including reappraisal, showing how shifting one’s interpretation of events can transform emotional responses (p.76).

The book also introduces four behavior performance patterns, each with unique strengths and limitations. By identifying your dominant pattern—be it task-focused, people-focused, analytical, or cooperative—you can begin to understand and refine your behavioral tendencies. These patterns reflect the book’s central claim: **Behavioral capacity is the new competitive edge** (p.204).

Ultimately, **“Leading With Your Upper Brain”** is both a science-based leadership guide and a call to personal transformation. It challenges readers to turn inward, reflect deeply, and grow behaviorally—not just intellectually. Its core message is captured succinctly: **“You will never be able to conquer your outside world until you first learn how to calm and conquer your inside world”** (p.221).