

The Business Brain

## The chemical that fosters team loyalty

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What makes your employees loyal? Is it a decent pay and benefits package? A product they believe in? The chance to move up, or to work for a leader they respect? Or is it the transformational power of a teeny-tiny hormone that spurs them to put the group's interests first?

The answer is all of the above – including that increasingly versatile little molecule, oxytocin. A hormone produced deep in the brain, oxytocin has long been associated with triggering orgasm, labour, breastfeeding, empathy and nurturing in women. But men produce it too, and new research shows that guys with higher concentrations of oxytocin circulating in their bloodstreams are more than three times more likely to prioritize their group's interests over their own.

"Oxytocin drives people away from an egoistic [self-serving] strategy," said Carsten De Dreu, a professor of organizational psychology at the University of Amsterdam, and lead author of two new studies on how oxytocin affects decision-making. "People are born with neurobiological tendencies that allow us to be loyal and trusting. Our research is about understanding why people have these basic tendencies to make sacrifices and commit to the group."

He and his colleagues wanted to test how oxytocin – often called the "cuddle chemical" because it fosters TLC – affects people's willingness to invest in a group project. They recruited 50 men and gave them each €10 to play a classic economics game that gives people choices about how to spend a windfall.

To investigate the role of oxytocin in fuelling loyalty, the participants were divided into two randomly selected groups. Those in the first group squirted the hormone up their noses with a nasal spray right before playing. The control group used an identical-looking spray with no added hormones. The two groups were then divided into teams. Though players couldn't see each other, they knew their team mates were out there (just as office workers know that there is corporate life beyond their cubicle, and tele-workers know they have colleagues at other sites).

Players were given three choices on how to spend their money: on themselves; on their team (which would give each member, including the player, a smaller amount than if they were selfish); or on a third source (which would give each team member a bit more, while deducting an equal amount from another team).

The results were dramatic. Among those infused with oxytocin, 58 per cent invested in their team while 17 per cent invested in themselves. The results were reversed for the men using the placebo: 20 per cent invested in their team, while 50 per cent invested in themselves.

"The implication for business is that people have a strong, almost hard-wired tendency to commit and be self-sacrificial to their in-group," Dr. De Dreu said. "And you can play around with the conditions that make them more loyal," such as providing the time and place for them to socialize. "If people share their time and secrets with each other, that promotes oxytocin secretion," he explained, which prompts them to put aside self-interest. "This requires a psychologically safe climate where you don't have to fear each other," he emphasized.

Secondly, you can reward the team, or give members individual bonuses. "The latter undermines the loyalty to the group. People are not inherently selfish, needing a carrot and a stick."

On a final note, don't be tempted to buy oxytocin via the Internet, where it's often sold as "liquid trust." Anyone who trusts that work relationships come in a bottle is very likely to be scammed.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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