

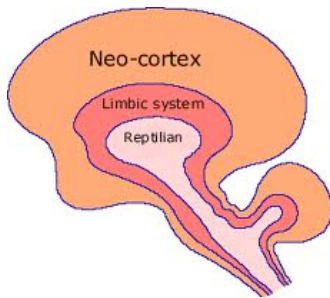
You Had Me At Hello! How we get to 'know' so quickly

In the film 'Jerry Maguire', Tom Cruise gives a long-winded explanation of his recent behaviour to his new girlfriend, Rene Zellweger. His apparently redundant speech, (beyond the first word, hello) says something about how quickly we can make up our minds about important decisions.

Whether it is about a decision to trust someone, whether they will be a good fit with the team or if there is something fishy about them we often 'know' before we know. Call it a hunch, a gut feeling or [intuition](#); we seem to 'know' without going through the due process that good practice now dictates.

Intuition has cultivated a semi-mystical reputation, a conjurer's gift that some people are born with that marks them apart from the rest of us. The science of neurophysiology reveals not only how the trick is done but also that we all have the apparatus to perform it. In fact we all *do* perform it but some are less aware of it than others.

The human brain has evolved over millions of years since leaving the primordial soup. That evolution has included several significant leaps that have resulted in the brain being made up of three separate, but interconnected parts - the [Triune Brain](#).



Firstly, the oldest and most basic 'reptilian brain' looks after the autonomic nervous system that controls blood pressure, temperature, heart rate, breathing etc. We don't

have to consciously think to perform these vital functions and in fact we have little conscious control over many.

The next qualitative step came when mammals evolved from reptiles, sporting a second layer of brain called the limbic system that sits on top of the reptilian brain. Mammals show a distinctly different orientation to toward their young than their reptilian ancestors. Rather than being disinterested and unattached they nurture, interact and care for their young. It is the limbic system that makes this behaviour possible.

Finally the neo-cortex evolved. In humans this provides the ability to conceptualise, speak, reason, be self-aware and exercise willpower. This new brain is so powerful that it overshadows its earlier forerunners to the point we might think it has superseded them. But the two 'lower' brains continue to function without our conscious attention. Moreover they are in charge of, rather than slave to, the neo-cortex in their own particular fields. We can no more control the size of our pupils than we can decide with whom to fall in love.

Whilst the three parts of the brain are interconnected, these connections are by no means flawless. Like the evolution of software related technology, the parts of the brain are not entirely 'backward compatible'. The cell structure of the limbic system is of a far more primitive organisation than its cortical neighbour. Consequently messages between the two require significant translation resulting in potential distortion, if they are transmitted at all.

If we want to know how someone feels, asking for an explanation requires that they use their neo-cortex that, frankly, doesn't know. It has to ask the limbic brain and the translation is often awkward or not forthcoming. This is why we often have difficulty saying how we feel. We may be irritable without knowing why or even knowing that we *are* being grouchy!

Our social communication, nurturing, and emotional drives all have their roots in the limbic system which communicates with other people's limbic systems through a myriad of non verbal cues of which we can be entirely unaware. When we meet someone our senses pass information directly to the limbic system not to the cortex. Only if the neurons in the limbic system excite sufficiently will they trigger a message to the cortex that indicates a feeling. By the time we know that we like someone else our limbic systems will already have been on the third or fourth dance! This [limbic resonance](#) is the indefinable something we call 'chemistry'.

Most of what we achieve in organisations is done in [relationship](#) with others; the better those relationships the better our co-performance. Quieting the chatter of the cortex allows us to hear the messages being sent. Being able to tune into our emotions takes a little effort but the benefits to be gained are enormous. Now, the next time someone says 'Hello'...

See next months Provocation "Raising Awareness"