BUILDING STRENGTH IN ORGANIZATIONS

SO THEY CAN MAKE A BETTER WORLD

The Science Behind Engaging Your Board in a Financially Successful Gala

It's All About the Monkey Brain

Our premise is simple: give your board a real problem to solve — the gift chart, the prospects, the ask — and their brain rewards them for it. That reward is dopamine, and it does more than feel good; it sharpens how they think. Here is the peer-reviewed research behind the claim. Every study below is publicly available.

1. **Solving a problem triggers a real hit of dopamine.**
   High-resolution fMRI shows the brain's dopamine-reward centers — the nucleus accumbens and ventral tegmental area — fire at the "aha" moment of solving, and fire harder for bigger insights.
   Tik, M., et al. (2018). "Ultra-high-field fMRI insights on insight: neural correlates of the Aha!-moment." *Human Brain Mapping.* Read the study →

2. **That dopamine, in turn, opens up deeper, more flexible thinking.**
   The classic neuropsychological account: a dopamine boost broadens cognition — more mental flexibility and stronger creative problem-solving. The reward doesn't just please the brain; it upgrades it.
   Ashby, F. G., Isen, A. M., & Turken, U. (1999). "A neuropsychological theory of positive affect and its influence on cognition." *Psychological Review.* Read the study →

3. **Insight is a reward-tagged "prediction error" — which is why it sticks.**
   Insights arrive wrapped in surprise, reward, and confidence. That reward signal is also what cements the moment in memory — so an engaged board remembers the work.
   Becker, M., & Cabeza, R. (2025). "The neural basis of the insight memory advantage." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences.* Read the study →

4. **Curiosity itself primes the dopamine-learning circuit.**
   When people are curious, the same dopaminergic circuitry that drives reward and memory ramps up. Translation: the more real and interesting the problem you hand your board, the more their brains lean in.
   Gruber, M. J., Gelman, B. D., & Ranganath, C. (2014). "States of curiosity modulate hippocampus-dependent learning via the dopaminergic circuit." *Neuron.* Read the study →

5. **The flip side: passive updates disengage; active problem-solving engages.**
   People taught by actively wrestling with a problem learn significantly more than those who sit through a polished lecture — even though the lecture feels more productive. The predictable report is the opposite of a puzzle.
   Deslauriers, L., et al. (2019). "Measuring actual learning versus feeling of learning…" *PNAS.* Read the study →