





The Neuroscience of Leadership

*Stress, Conversations
& The Happiness
Advantage*



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The 3 Big Questions

- How do I manage my stress while leading others?
- How do I handle difficult conversations without defensiveness?
- How do I build a happier, more productive team?

Stress and Leadership

- 71% of leaders report significantly higher stress levels than in previous years.
- Leadership burnout increased from 52% in 2023 to 56% in 2024.
- 75% of employees believe their leader's stress affects their team's morale and performance.
- Chronic stress shrinks parts of the brain that impact memory and learning.
- Stress is contagious.

•**Decision Making:** High stress levels can negatively affect a leader's ability to make sound decisions.

•**Team Performance:** Burnout can lead to a decline in team performance and productivity.

•**Turnover:** Increased stress and burnout can lead to higher turnover rates, especially among leadership teams.



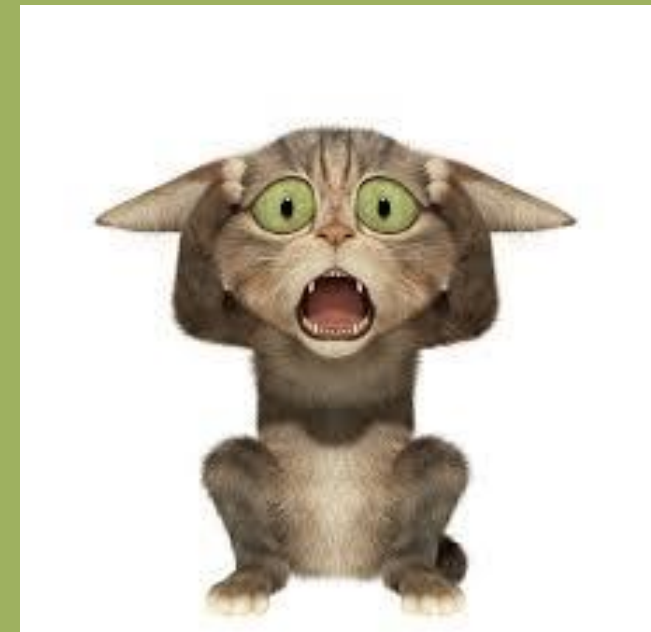
Amygdala hijack (fire alarm in your head!) leads to impaired decision-making, increased reactivity, and poor communication.

What IS Stress?

Stress is a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from challenging or demanding circumstances. It is the body's response to **perceived** threats or challenges, which can trigger physiological and psychological changes.

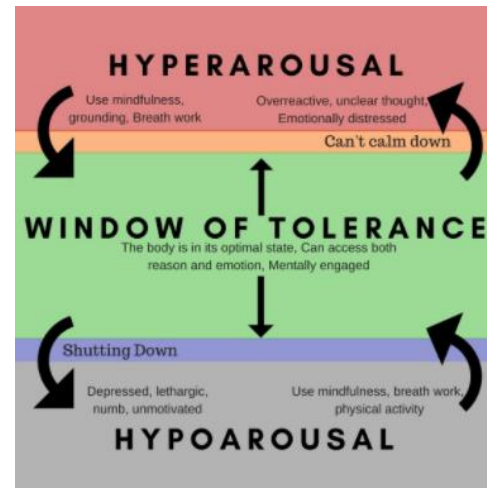
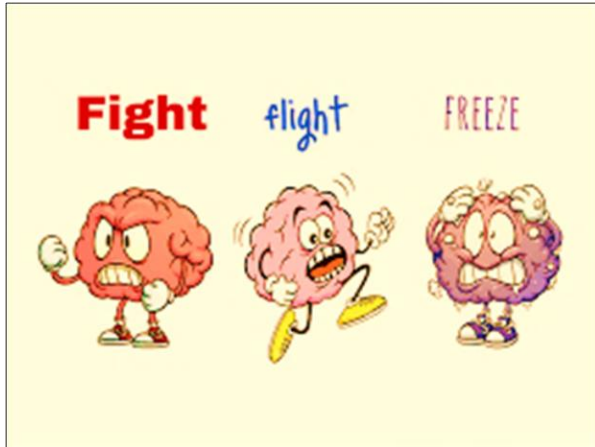
- External Factors
- Internal Factors
- Personal Factors

What's Causing It?



The Neuroscience of Stress

- **Perceived Threat/Stress:** A situation is perceived as dangerous or stressful.
- **Brain Detection:** The amygdala (the brain's fear center) detects the threat and activates the stress response.
- **Sympathetic Nervous System Activation:** The amygdala sends a message to the sympathetic nervous system.
- **Physiological Response:** The sympathetic nervous system releases stress hormones, leading to:
 - **Fight/Flight:** Increased heart rate, rapid breathing, muscle tension, and energy mobilization.
 - **Freeze:** A state of dissociation or shutdown, sometimes described as hyperarousal where the body is "stuck".
- **Calm State (Homeostasis):** Once the threat is gone, the parasympathetic nervous system takes over, calming the body and restoring its normal functions.



Opening the Window

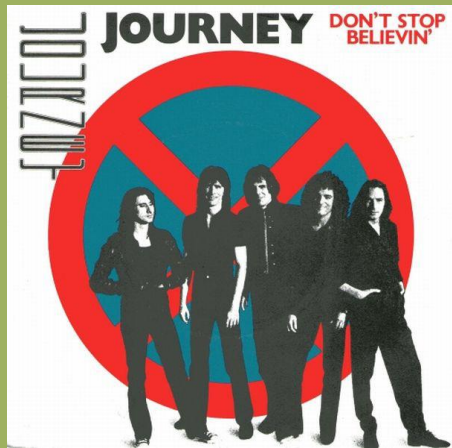
Name It to Tame It (Labeling Emotions)

Grounding With Your Senses

Movement Reset

The Exhale Trick

Relation Regulation

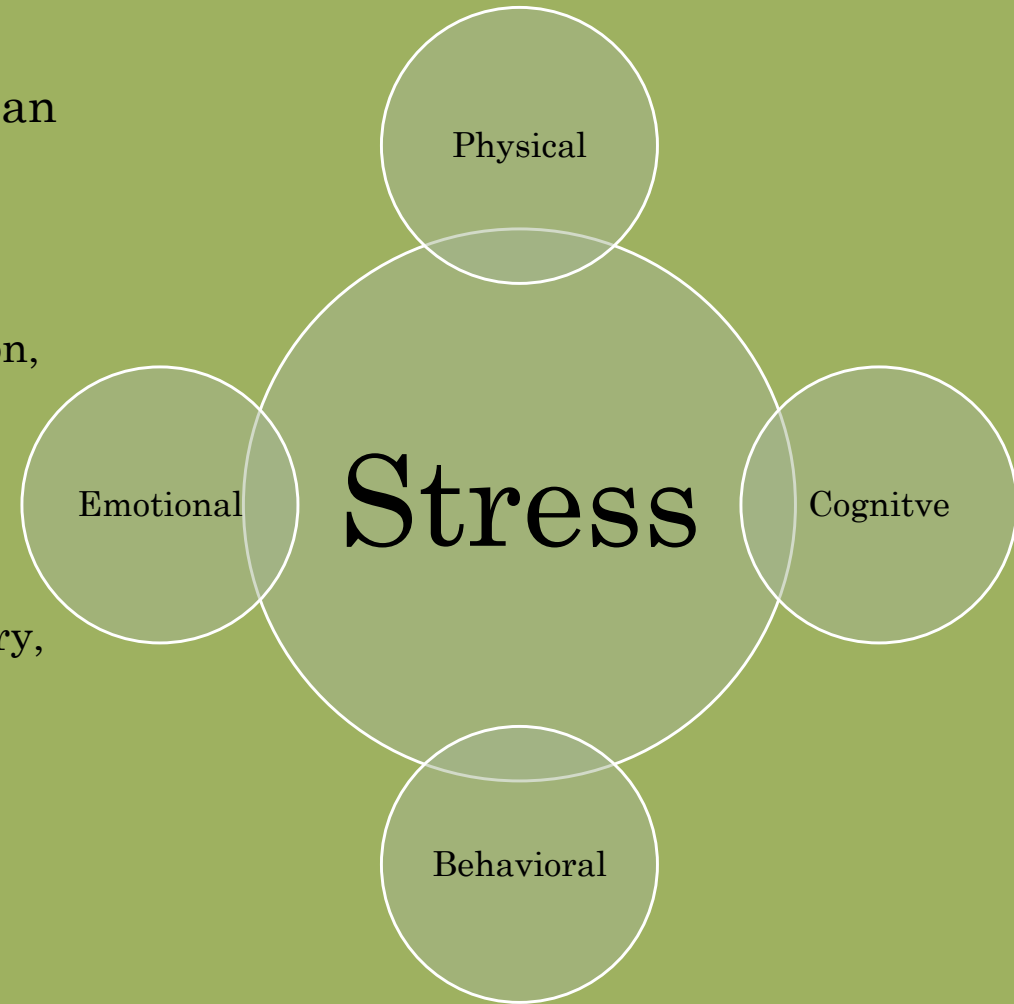


Reframe

Identify your glimmers (positive triggers)
These are the activities, people, or environments
that help you feel relaxed, calm, and bring you to
an optimal nervous system state.

Mapping Your Stress

- What situations, events, or even thoughts seem to consistently initiate your stress response? These can be internal or external factors.
- Identify your stress response patterns
 - Physical: Do you experience headaches, muscle tension, stomach problems, changes in sleep, or fatigue?
 - Emotional: Do you become irritable, anxious, overwhelmed, sad, or withdrawn?
 - Cognitive: Do you struggle with concentration, memory, decision-making, or experience racing thoughts?
 - Behavioral: Do you find yourself procrastinating, avoiding responsibilities, overeating, using substances more, or isolating yourself?



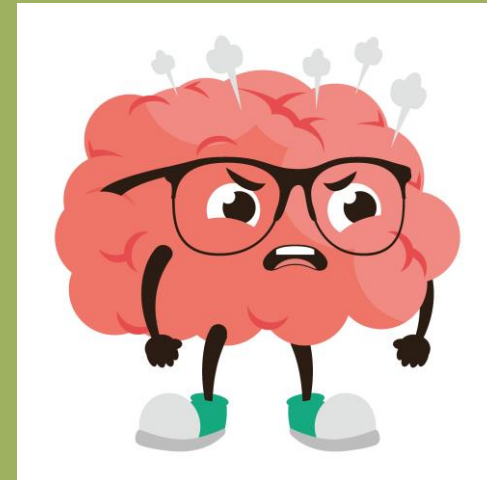
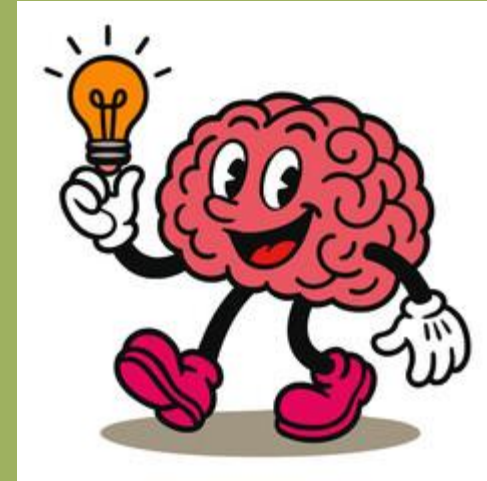
Difficult Conversations:

Two Nervous Systems Meeting

In every conversation, our brains are asking
‘Defend’? or ‘Discover’?



- Pause before pounce
- Name emotions to open the window of tolerance.
- People will listen if you communicate two things:
 - 1) personal respect for them,
 - 2) shared goal(s).



Having Intentional Encounters

Aim: What matters most?

Attitude: Is it helpful?

Attention: What should be the focus?

Assumptions: Examine them.

Promoting Growth:

Goal – ideal situation

Reality – current situation

Options – theirs first

Way forward - what is needed from each



Curious or Furious?

What in the hell were you thinking?

Curiosity = Trust = Discovery & Problem Solving

Tell me your ideas about this?

•**Competence:** The desire to be effective and master skills. It is satisfied by activities that provide a sense of accomplishment, like learning a new skill or completing a challenging task.

•**Autonomy:** The need to feel that your choices and behaviors are your own, not compelled by external forces. It is about having a sense of control and choice in your life.

•**Relatedness:** The need to feel a sense of belonging and connection with others. It involves feeling accepted, cared for, and part of a social group.



Self Determination

Let's Practice...

Where do you need to GROW?

How can you shift from furious to curious?



Let's Talk (The Advantage Of) Happiness...

- “I’ll be happy when I succeed.”
 - “I’ll ~~be happy~~ succeed when I’m ~~succeed~~ happy.”
- Our brains are 31% more productive when we are **happy**.
 - Employees are 13% more **productive** when they are happy.
 - 42% of US employees say their **mental health** has declined since the beginning of the COVID19 pandemic.
 - Teams with high psychological safety outperform others by 76% (Google Aristotle Project)
 - Social connection is the #1 predictor of resilience (Harvard Study of Adult Development)
 - Organizational **culture** is the key differentiator in successful businesses.

Because...Defend or Discover.

**BROADENING & BUILDING
EFFECT**

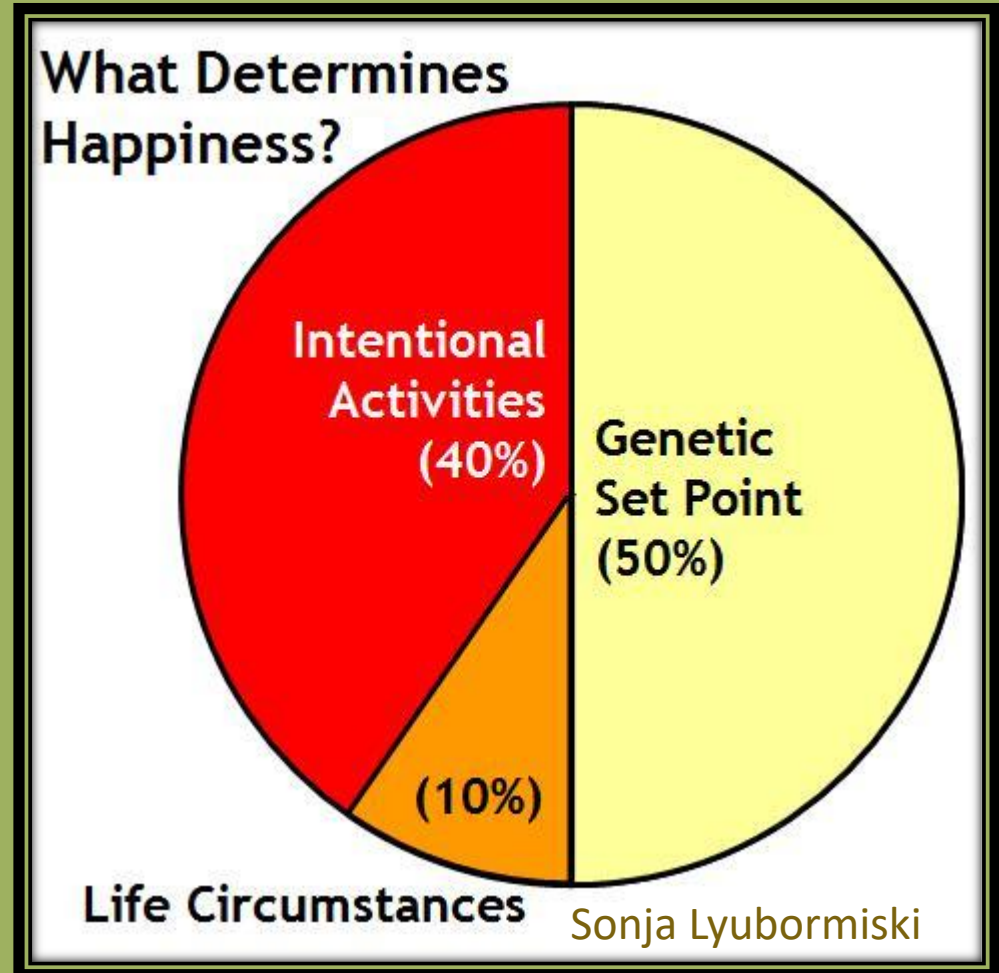
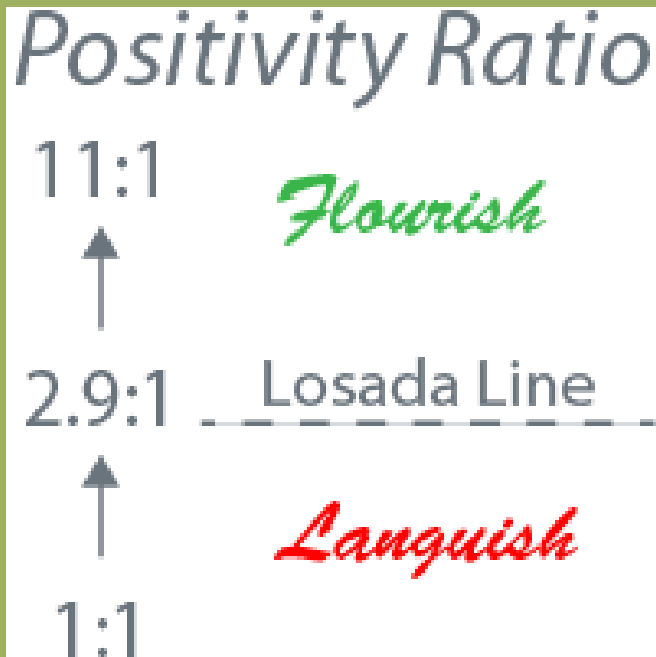


Happiness is predictive of workplace success. And when you dig deeper to explore what “happiness” at work means for employees, it comes down to **positive relationships**. (HBR)

What 'makes' us happy?

50% set --- 10% circumstances ---
40% intentions (aka what we **do & think**)

One of the biggest drivers of success = Belief that our **behavior matters**; That we have control over our future.





**Whatever we focus
on expands.**

**Both solutions and
problems. What
are you focusing
on today?**

**We control
exactly two
things...**

Our Attention

Our Actions

Neural Pathways: Your Brain's Highways & Byways



Why Change Feels Hard

- The brain craves efficiency and safety-it follows the **path of least resistance**.
- It hates ambiguity = anxiety.
- New habits are like **unpaved roads**-slower, uncertain, and uncomfortable at first.

- Every thought or behavior activates a **network of neurons**.
- **Based on past experiences/pairings**.
- Repetition strengthens those circuits they become **superhighways**.
- Automatic actions/Stress Responses -1/4 second.
- These default routes then reinforce how we think, feel, and lead.



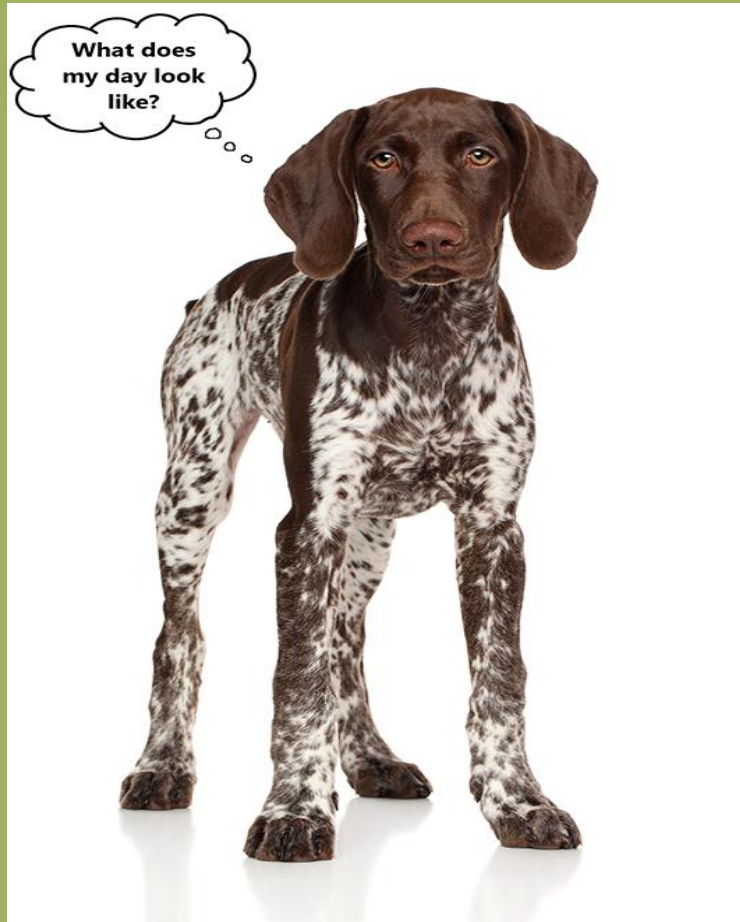
How to Build New Pathways

- **Set The Intention**
- **Take the Pause**
- **Reframe the Thought**
- **Choose Your Action**



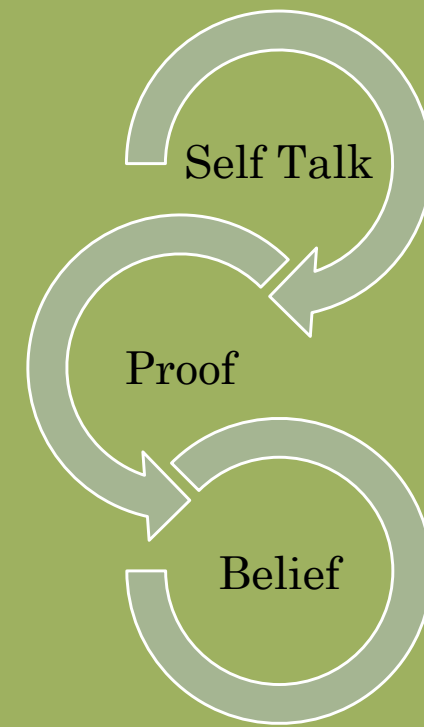
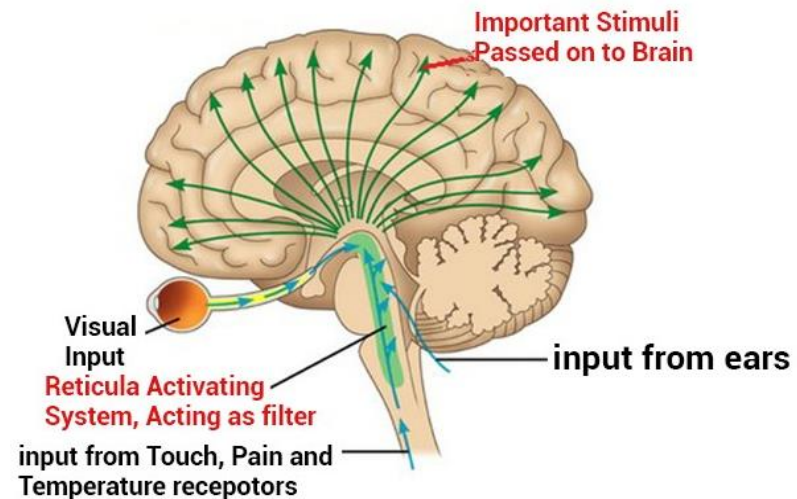
Habits & Happiness

About 80% of what we do is automated.



We create neural pathways based on our beliefs and habits.

2,000,000



We do what we **do** and **think** what we think because at some time, these things were **adaptive** or **rewarding** for us. Our habits provide protection or pleasure.

G Grateful for

L Learned

A Accomplished

D Delighted by

D Discovered

A Accomplished

T Thankful for

E Experienced

The Neuroscience of Gratitude

- **Activates reward pathways:** Expressing gratitude activates the brain's reward system, leading to the release of dopamine, the neurotransmitter associated with pleasure and motivation.
- **Lowers stress hormones:** Gratitude is linked to lower levels of cortisol, the stress hormone.
- **Strengthens neural connections:** Regular gratitude practice strengthens neural pathways associated with positive thinking and has been linked to increased brain volume.
- **Enhances cognitive function:** Higher gratitude is associated with better cognitive function.
- **Impacts brain areas:** Gratitude activates various brain regions, including the prefrontal cortex (responsible for emotional regulation and empathy), the hippocampus, and the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (VMPFC), which is involved in reward processing and emotional responses.

Mental health benefits

- Reduced mortality risk
- Lower stress and burnout
- Improved life satisfaction
- Decreased anxiety and depression

The Relational Edge

- Stress is personal *and* relational.
- Conversations can lead to defense *or* discovery.
- Happiness builds engagement & performance.

One Thing

1 Stress Habit to **STOP**

1 Conversation Shift to **START**

1 Relational Strength to **CONTINUE**



Resources

Shawn Achor – The Happiness Advantage

Alex Korb – The Upward Spiral

Caroline Webb – How To Have A Good Day

Thank You To Bozeman Chamber!