

# ATLANTA BUSINESS CHRONICLE

## Josh Turknett harnesses clients' brain power

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Dr. Josh Turknett has found a way to meld musicianship with business leadership skills. Turknett, a board certified neurologist, joined family business Turknett Leadership Group last summer as principal consultant. The pioneer of the “Brainjo Method” for teaching people how to play the banjo, Turknett talks about how learning to change the brain can be a useful skill, whether it’s to master musical instruments or become a better leader.

**What led to your career?** I’ve been interested in the brain, human behavior and neuroscience for a long time. It wasn’t until I read the book “The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat” by Oliver Sacks that I began to strongly consider pursuing training as a neurologist. In the first decade of my career, I practiced neurology full time. I consider my life’s work to be about using my expertise in neuroscience to help people realize their full potential. So in recent years, I’ve expanded my conception of what that could be, partly in an effort to make a bigger impact and to get important ideas into the world.



**Who was the biggest influence in your career (mentor, teacher, relative)? What did he/she do?** One person who had a major effect on my career path was one of my best friends in college, John Jacobson. He was an original and divergent thinker, and applied a relentless curiosity to everything he encountered. I thought education was about getting the right answers. He helped me see it was about curiosity, discovery and asking the right questions.

**What is the biggest challenge in your job?** Changing human behav-

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#### DR. JOSH TURKNETT

**Age:** 42

**Born in:** Atlanta

**Lives in:** Roswell

**Current job:** Principal consultant, Turknett Leadership Group

**Former job:** Neurologist

**Education:** Bachelor of science degree in neuroscience, Wesleyan University; Medical degree, Emory University School of Medicine

**Family:** Wife, two children

**Hobbies:** Banjo, tennis, writing

ior, whether that’s adopting habits that enhance cognitive performance and protect against dysfunction and disease, learning to play a musical instrument, or becoming a more effective manager or leader. We all know that what we want to do and what we end up doing are often very different things. Yet, the work I do is of no value to others if I can’t prompt people to make lasting changes to their behavior, which is why this has been an area of significant focus for me. Fortunately, this has been an area of major progress in the past couple of decades, largely because

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we've developed a more complete understanding of what actually drives human behavior.

**What's the most rewarding part of your job?** I'm now in a place where I get to spend my days learning about the things that interest me most, and then using that knowledge to create things that make other people's lives better.

**What's the hardest business lesson you've learned?** That effective sales and marketing is essential to business success. If you truly believe that what you're offering will solve someone's problem and make their life better, then sales and marketing just become a matter of figuring out how to reach those people. If you have something you truly believe in, then you should feel obligated about trying to reach all the people who need it.

**What inspired you to make a connection between your "day" job as a neurologist and music?** I've been addicted to and obsessed with the process of learning new things for a long time. Initially, this was through playing sports, and then as I got older, learning to play musical instruments. As I began a career, I was drawn to the area of neuroplasticity, or the science behind how the brain changes itself to support learning. Not only does the fact that we all have plastic brains that can remold themselves throughout our lives support that idea that we are capable of learning anything, but it also meant that applying that science could greatly enhance our ability to do so.

**You describe yourself as a "neuroplastician." What does that involve?** Neuroplasticity refers to the brain's ability to change itself in response to our experiences. So, a neuroplastician would be anyone who guides others in utilizing and maximizing this property of their brain to achieve their goals. I like that label because it highlights the importance of understanding that the goal of education of any kind is to change brains, and that the science of brain change should directly inform our approach to educating.

**How did you come up with the "Brainjo Method"?** I'd long felt that the science of neuroplasticity was conspicuously absent from many fields where it was directly relevant, including learning to play music. I'd written about these principles for several years and knew that I ultimately wanted to formalize those principles into a practical methodology, a set of best practices for learning. My primary instrument is the banjo, and so the first application of the Brainjo Method was for learning how to play the banjo. Ultimately, the Brainjo Method is a framework that can be applied to learning of any type.

**How did you meld Brainjo into your work with the Turknett Leadership Group?** The ultimate goal of anyone in the business of leadership development and executive coaching is to change human behavior. And fundamentally, learning of any kind requires changing the brain. We know a lot about the qualities and attributes of the best leaders and companies.

But there's a long way from knowing how we should behave to actually behaving in those ways. Companies spend a lot of money on training and development because they recognize how important it is, but if it doesn't result in lasting change in the brains of those who receive that training, there will be little to show for it. Since the Brainjo Method is really a set of practices for helping to ensure that education of any kind results in efficient and effective change, by incorporating it into our services, we can develop training and development programs that stick.

**How do you see the new Turknett Center for Elite Cognition initiative contributing to the work your company does?** We've learned so much about the brain in the past few decades, yet little of that knowledge has translated to improvements in cognitive health or human intelligence. Part of that is structural, in that our medical system is very restricted in its ability to apply that knowledge. That's been a very frustrating position to be in as a neurologist, and I believe there's a real need to develop new delivery structures so that knowledge can be translated practically. It's hard to overstate just how much potential lies beneath our skulls, and just how much goes unrealized in the average individual. The goal of the Turknett Center for Elite Cognition and the Elite Cognition program is to translate the great progress we've made in the neurosciences into a pragmatic tool kit that organizations can use to maximize their collective human intelligence.