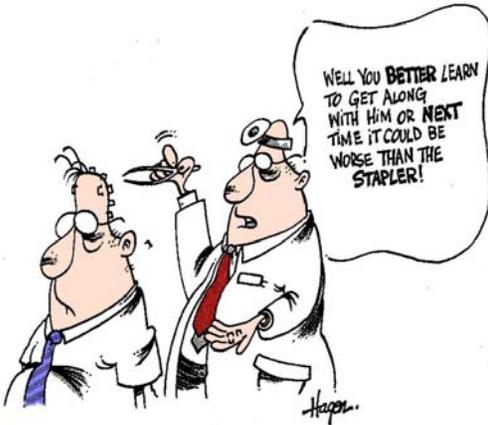


## Mentoring Human Action



In this newsletter, I use an actual experience to illustrate why the whole-brain approach may be useful to consider. Then, I give a brief explanation of the whole-brain approach. In the next newsletter, I focus on how to use the whole-brain approach in the workplace.

### Example of an Incident

This spring, I was in a session with an intact team, talking about a type of learning conversation in which people exchange *hard-to-hear feedback* with each other for the purpose of increasing the capacity for learning for all parties involved. The learning conversation model that I use is based on a whole-brain approach. When I introduce this model, I describe the overall concept of feedback as a system, rather than as a skill, and provide some general principles about using learning conversations as feedback to enhance learning.

Learning conversations do not distinguish feedback as positive or negative. In a learning conversation, all words and silences are important learning points, all of which provide feedback to all parties involved. This is a particularly difficult concept for participants to understand because they have a mental model about feedback as being about correction (you've done something wrong and I need to tell you), rather than about learning (you've done something and I've done something and we need to learn about what worked and what didn't). This is a very different way of looking at feedback. As a result, I often get challenged on this systemic approach to feedback.

When the incident occurred, I was explaining the difference between how we traditionally view feedback and this systemic approach to feedback. One participant (we'll call her Barb) challenged me. Barb described a specific situation in which she was in a feedback session with a colleague. Her colleague asked her to state her perspective on her performance on a specific project. Barb complied. "I thought I had done quite well in my performance during the project. I'd say I was feeling pretty good at the time." Then, she said, "He ripped me to shreds. I had been quite honest with him and he attacked me, telling me that I had not done very well at all. I was devastated and angry." Barb claimed that she had done exactly what I was saying and that it hadn't worked. "I know this stuff doesn't work."

As she spoke, it was clear that we had conflicting points of view. If we had continued to stress our own conflicting points of view, the result would have been conflict that had the potential to be serious. Using the whole-brain approach, I asked Barb and the rest of the participants to examine Barb's and my thinking preferences:

- I was *generalizing* about feedback as a system. In the whole-brain model, I was using the right-hand side of my brain.
- Barb was *analyzing a specific situation* and paying attention to its *specific details*. In the whole-brain model, Barb was using the left-hand side of her brain.

This analysis resulted in a collaborative learning conversation in which neither party was wrong. The power of the whole-brain approach is

### Becoming an Expert Learner Part 4A:

#### Whole-Brain Thinking

by Marilyn Herasymowych, BSc

"The Whole Brain approach, an organizing principle of mental processes, presents a unique new method of diagnosing business situations and provides an understanding of key business and leadership issues that have resisted measurement until now."

— Ned Herrmann, *The Whole Brain Business Book* (1996)

In the last two newsletters, I have focused on how expert learners strive to become aware of their learning orientations, and how their cognitive biases and shortcuts translate into behaviour, especially when making decisions, solving problems, and taking actions. In this newsletter, I examine the whole-brain approach, in order to dig deeper into the thinking processes that drive behaviour. Over the last 25 years, Ned Herrmann has developed the whole-brain approach and created the Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument® (HBDI). According to Herrmann, "The HBDI profile illustrates and explains the way you prefer to think, learn, communicate, and make decisions."

that it allows people to value conflicting or differing perspectives. The whole-brain approach values conflict as a signal that people are using different ways of thinking.

### **The Whole-Brain Approach**

For more than 20 years, Herrmann has studied the human brain and how it functions. Herrmann took the concept of left-brain and right-brain and married it to his discovery that both the neo-cortex (the conceptual part of your brain) and the limbic system (the experiential part of your brain) have the capacity for thinking. As a result, he came up with a four-quadrant model.

Through his research, he has discovered that we have the capacity to process information in four very distinct ways. One way of describing these four ways is to imagine that you have four different selves at your disposal:

- **Quadrant A: The Rational Self** is driven to analyze and solve problems by processing facts, figures, technical information, and financial information.
- **Quadrant B: The Safekeeping Self** is driven to take preventative action by organizing information, paying attention to controls and procedures, and to getting things done.
- **Quadrant C: The Feeling Self** is driven to recognize the interpersonal needs of the individuals involved in the situation by anticipating how others may feel, and by fostering enthusiasm.
- **Quadrant D: The Experimental Self** is driven to seek possibilities by speculating and inferring what might occur.

According to Herrmann, the most

effective individuals, teams, and organizations take advantage of a whole-brain approach. This means that, in any situation, all four ways of viewing the world are considered to be valuable. For example, in many organizations, people are often asked about measurables. Most of us think of something as measurable if we can attach a number to it, or see a concrete product or result. However, these are only two ways of thinking about measurement. Using a whole brain approach, there would be four ways to measure:

- **Quadrant A: The Rational Self** would quantify the measurement (e.g., numbers, percentages, figures).
- **Quadrant B: The Safekeeping Self** would evaluate the measurement (e.g., results, documentation, research).
- **Quadrant C: The Feeling Self** would consider the measurement in light of the experiences of the people involved (e.g., testimonials, intuition).
- **Quadrant D: The Experimental Self** would consider the measurement in light of a variety of possibilities (e.g., speculation, interpretation).

According to Herrmann, “Brain dominance is expressed in terms of how we prefer to learn, understand, and express something. I call these cognitive preferences, or *preferred ways of knowing*.” Most of the population (97%) shows preferences or biases in either one, two, or three of the quadrants. This means that most of us are shortcutting at least one of the four quadrants when we are processing information.

For example, if you have a bias for quadrants A and B (left-brain) thinking, you would have difficulty spending time in a meeting discussing how team members need to work

together. You would be focused on task and hard facts. On the other hand, if you have a bias for quadrants C and D (right-brain) thinking, you would have difficulty spending time on task completion and hard facts. You would be focused on generating possibilities, and making sure that people were being heard. This is often the source of conflict — two people, coming from different thinking processes, do not value the other person’s perspective.

Herrmann has found that we can be functionally whole-brained, even if we display biases and shortcuts in our thinking processes. I would suggest that expert learners are functionally whole-brained. Being functionally whole-brained means that we consciously pay attention to all four ways of thinking, rather than only the ones that we prefer. As expert learners, we recognize that conflict is a signal of these differences in thinking processes, and that conflict gives us the opportunity to explore whole-brain thinking.

“If we strongly prefer one mode, we may actually reject another. For some fact-based learners, even the idea of intuition is suspect, whereas for an intuitive person, factual data can seem distracting or boring. Thus, someone who strongly prefers to function in one mode usually finds it difficult or impossible to problem solve in the other.”

— Ned Herrmann, **The Whole Brain Business Book** (1996)

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