



EDWIN KNEW HE WAS THE ENVY OF THE WHOLE OFFICE FOR BEING TOTALLY SUPERIOR IN ALL FOUR QUADRANTS OF THE BRAIN.

Becoming an Expert Learner Part 4B: Whole-Brain Thinking and Conflict

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“There is hardly a single topic more fundamental to the business process than communication. I believe it is also true that there is hardly any process more susceptible to failure than the everyday activity of businesspeople talking, writing, and somehow signaling to each other. A major contributor to the success or failure of the communication processes we use is the way our different mental preferences influence the way we send and receive information.”

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

In my work with intact teams, one of the tools that I use is the whole-brain approach. This useful tool helps team members to understand how to communicate with each other in ways that manage conflict constructively. In one activity, team members identify how they like to receive information from others, what frustrates them in communicating with others, and how they prefer to receive feedback on their performance. Then, they share their preferences with each other.

Team members are often surprised to find out that one person prefers “just the facts,” while another person wants “all the details.” This information helps team members to understand why their way of communicating doesn’t fit everyone. It also helps team members to understand how to manage any conflict that can arise from these differences in communication needs.

To understand these preferences, consider this list of certain expectations from each thinking preference:

- **Quadrant A:** People with a preference for this quadrant want precise facts, and they react unemotionally. They appreciate critical analysis, a good debate, and efforts to spend time wisely.
- **Quadrant B:** People with a preference for this quadrant require punctuality, and they react cautiously. They appreciate very low risk, written communication before a meeting, proof that things have been thought through, and scheduled appointments.
- **Quadrant C:** People with a preference for this quadrant need to feel enthusiasm from others, and they react spontaneously. They appreciate a personal touch, sensitivity to feelings, group discussion, consensus, and a harmonious approach.
- **Quadrant D:** People with a preference for this quadrant prefer concepts, and they react by thinking about ideas. They appreciate initiative,

imagination, connections to other approaches, a *fun* approach, and minimal details.

Let’s examine a conflict situation, in order to better understand how the communication styles from each quadrant work. Often, conflict arises when people do not understand each other’s points of view. For example, consider a conversation between Tim and Jan. Tim has a thinking preference in quadrants A and D, and Jan has a thinking preference in quadrants A and B. This means that:

- Tim is interested in possibilities and ideas (quadrant D) and in precise facts that back up the possibilities (quadrant A).
- Jan is interested in the facts that support or negate the possibilities (quadrant A) and the details about whether or not the possibilities would work (quadrant B).

During a meeting, Tim might bring ideas and possibilities to the table, while Jan might consider the risk involved in each idea. To Tim, Jan might appear quite critical of his ideas. To Jan, Tim might appear quite reckless and unrealistic. In reality, both people are trying to communicate with each other, and neither intentionally means to irritate the other person. However, even with the best of intentions, conflict can arise, because neither person is receiving the information in the way that he or she needs, and neither person is able to listen to the other in a way that values these different perspectives.

If Tim and Jan understand that they begin with different thinking preferences, the situation doesn’t escalate into unmanageable conflict. Instead, the situation becomes a

learning conversation in which each of them:

- Listens to the other person
- Recognizes that each person sees the situation from a different, and valid, point of view
- Manages the diversity by focusing on the *purpose* of the conversation

Another way to use the whole-brain approach is to identify the types of communication styles that frustrate you. For example, if you have a thinking preference for:

- **Quadrant A:** You may be frustrated by inarticulate *off-the-track* communication, overt sharing of personal feelings, and unrealistic or *touchy-feely* approaches.
- **Quadrant B:** You may be frustrated by disorganization, conversations that *go on and on*, a lack of closure, and too many ideas being discussed at once.
- **Quadrant C:** You may be frustrated by a lack of interaction, insensitive comments, being cut off or ignored, and an avoidance of face-to-face communication.
- **Quadrant D:** You may be frustrated by repetition, a lack of flexibility, resistance to new approaches, and an absence of humour or fun.

In the example of Tim and Jan, Tim may be frustrated by what he perceives as Jan's lack of flexibility and her resistance to new approaches. Jan may be frustrated by what she perceives as Tim's disorganization and his inability to deal fully with one idea at a time.

What Tim and Jan may need to understand is *how* to approach each

other in a conversation. Below is a list of how one might approach each type of communication style:

- **Quadrant A:** People with a preference for this quadrant appreciate someone who articulates the facts in a logical, *well-thought-out* format.
- **Quadrant B:** People with a preference for this quadrant appreciate someone who takes the time to explain the details in a consistent and structured manner.
- **Quadrant C:** People with a preference for this quadrant appreciate someone who has a people-focused attitude that displays empathy and develops rapport.
- **Quadrant D:** People with a preference for this quadrant appreciate someone who thinks about future implications and keeps the conversation moving.

By using the above information, Tim could meet Jan's need for more details by stating that this is just a brainstorming session to get ideas on the table, and that Jan will have plenty of time to work out the details later. Jan could meet Tim's need for brainstorming possibilities by asking Tim whether he wants to discuss each idea in detail, or simply to put his ideas on the table. When Tim and Jan work towards understanding each other's styles, they are practicing the art of being expert learners (**InfoMine**, Vol. 5, No. 1).

Expert learners seek to understand their own styles of operating, as well as the effect that their styles have on others. By seeking this knowledge, expert learners move towards high performance, both as individuals and as members of teams. Learning styles and thinking preferences provide information that assists individuals

and teams in moving towards high performance, by creating a non-threatening and safe environment that fosters transformational learning. How one thinks (the *Whole-Brain Approach*) drives how one behaves (*The Learning Cycle*). The combination of these two approaches leads individuals and teams to discover effectiveness in accomplishing the work that needs to be done. All of this creates an environment that fosters respectful interactions among people. The result is a workforce that not only achieves business goals, but surpasses them, because value is placed on people and the relationships among people.

"It's quite likely that most of us think that we see the world exactly as it is, and that our view is complete and accurate. My studies indicate that for the vast majority of us this is simply not the case. In essence we are experiencing the world around us as filtered through our profile of mental preferences. Where we have strong preferences we are seeing and hearing things close to the way they actually are. However, in our areas of lesser preference we are likely to be partially blind and deaf. And in our areas of avoidance there is little doubt that we don't see or hear accurately at all."

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

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