

are leaders putting their whole brains to work?

addressing the divided self in contemporary leadership
and its impact on organisational performance

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the divided self in contemporary leadership

Flying back from a business trip a few weeks ago I overheard two travellers discussing difficult and significant organisational decisions they had to make in their corporation. What struck me was that the decision-making process of these senior business leaders was completely reliant on left brain processing; data-driven, analytical and highly reductive. Their arguments were extremely convincing but I was left wondering at the immeasurable potential that was being ignored. The whole conversation felt like two blindfolded people directing each other through a maze. It is not an uncommon conversation but how have we reached such an imbalanced state, where our left brain has bullied our right brain into submission? And what impact does this have on the performance and potential of the organisations we work in?



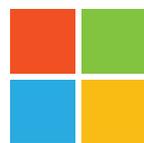
Left-brain and right-brain thinking: a dynamic that is most effective when in balance.

do we bring our whole brain to work?

It's a common misconception that the right hemisphere is solely responsible for our creative output and the left hemisphere for our logical output; both halves manage a diversity of tasks together. Neuroscientists have studied the division of the brain, specifically the division of tasks and responsibilities between the left and right hemispheres, for decades and, in general, it can be said that the right brain's features are intuitive, holistic, synthesizing, and subjective, focusing on the big picture, whilst the left brain is logical, sequential, analytical, rational, and objective, with a focus on smaller parts of the bigger picture.[1] The right hemisphere processes implicit meaning, metaphors, body language and emotional expression and has a disposition for the living rather than just the mechanical. The left hemisphere gives narrow and sharply focused attention to detail and yields clarity and power to manipulate things that are known, static, decontextualised and isolated in nature.[2] However, to function fully as human beings, we need both hemispheres. The brain can only work at maximum capacity by integrating the abilities of both divisions. So why is it we do not bring our whole brains to work?

did microsoft suffer from left-brain domination?

The acclaimed psychiatrist, Iain McGilchrist suggests that the history of western culture – going back as far as sixth century B.C. – started off with a sublime balancing of both hemispheres. However, as times have changed the left hemisphere's point of view has gradually taken over.[3] What McGilchrist claims not only applies to society and nations but also to modern corporate cultures. Left-brain thinking has dominated corporate cultures; a sequential, analytical, rational, objectively orientated mindset based solely on logic and on only smaller parts of the bigger picture.



Microsoft



Does Microsoft's new logo still reflect left-brain dominance?

Take Microsoft's reported demise for example. In the early 1970s, Microsoft entered the tech industry, brimming with creative ideas, risk takers and innovators. Within two years of its inception the company was setting industry standards for microprocessor programming and started doubling and tripling in size every year. In the mid-90s Microsoft reached the pinnacle of success, releasing what would be its largest-selling operating system: Windows 95. Nonetheless, since 2000 – as Apple, Google, Facebook and other corporate giants have taken the reins – Microsoft has failed in almost every aspiration it set itself. Why?

did microsoft suffer from left-brain domination? continued

Some suggest the answer lies in Microsoft's corporate culture and how it has evolved over the years. What started as a lean, well oiled and carefully taken care of machine led by young visionaries, creatives and innovators of unparalleled talent, gradually mutated into a bloated, brutish beast, weighed down by bureaucracy and internal politics as well as a flawed reward system that strangled risk-taking and genuine employee commitment to the company. I base this on various reports I have read, and employees I have spoken to, as well as my own personal experience of working with the organisation at the turn of the millennium.

A question the leaders of Microsoft have to ask themselves is, what was their role in gradually crippling the giant from the inside? Where once the strategy for success was built on the thrill of creating innovations, financial success could increasingly only be achieved by way of promotions; instead of people trying to make a big contribution to the firm, they began to try to move up the ladder. An imbalance within the corporate culture between left-brain and right-brain belief systems and behaviours took root. Under the left-brain dominant system, the managers at the top of the Microsoft hierarchy created a culture wherein employees began to compete with one another instead of the real competitors. Teamwork, team projects and team performance were also neglected.[4] Whilst management alone cannot be blamed for Microsoft's destructive corporate climate, the quality of strategic decision-making, as was the case with my fellow travellers, can determine the longevity and fate of an organisation.[5]

how do we readdress this imbalance?

Of course, the solution to an organisation dominated by left-brain thinking is not to completely eradicate it and replace it with right-brain thinking. Just like an individual who sustains damage to one part of the brain suffers, so would an organisation. Right-brain dominated organisations tend to grow inconsistent and chaotic, failing to produce coherent offerings that make sense to the marketplace.[6] The sports goods producer Puma could be an example of this. It's all about balance and opening the door to both sides, the left as well as the right. What has been seriously overlooked in the education of leaders is that it is their role and responsibility to readdress this imbalance, to hold the dynamic tension between the two, and seek integration.

how do we readdress this imbalance? continued

There is one more aspect of the right-brain that cannot be overlooked when we talk about leadership. The right brain holds a very special functional capability without which leaders and the organisations they work for would suffer the adverse affects. The right brain channels our capacity for empathy and interconnectedness. These vital functions enable us to not just understand others but to also put everything we experience in context. Our capacity for empathy and comprehending interconnectedness is the essence of every leadership role. If we consider the actions of leaders within the banking sector in a neurological context for example, we must ask ourselves: was part of the failure in banking due to a failure in human right brain functioning?

it is up to contemporary leaders to take responsibility

The tragedy is, as Ken Robinson so brilliantly claims, our education systems do not help;^[7] in fact they may even inhibit right-brain growth. The contemporary leader is left alone to look towards their own integration of left and right brain. In my experience, specific interventions like training courses, reading and arts-based activities all help.



←
Sir Ken Robinson,
Educationalist

And constantly seeking feedback and being in open communication with colleagues is key. This is where a great coaching or mentoring relationship can really make a difference. But ultimately this type of integration is an ongoing process of self-awareness, insight and development that the leader self-directs.

There are no guarantees – but one of the aims of this process of personal development towards whole brain thinking is to increase the possibility to achieve the extraordinary. In fact I would go as far as to say that it's the moral responsibility of all leaders – especially those who make significant decisions that affect the lives of others – to be a whole brain thinker.

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