

CASE STUDY

Developing Strong Leaders and Elevating Team Effectiveness at Cirque du Soleil

How Leaders and Teams Leverage Their Diversity of Thought to Produce Moving Masterpieces



Executive Summary

Canadian entertainment company Cirque du Soleil is the largest theatrical producer in the world, known for its breathtaking shows that combine mind-boggling physicality with signature artistry.

But as it grew, it needed to develop stronger leadership, improve decision-making, and assemble high-performing teams to meet an ambitious schedule and sustain its high-flying standards.

By introducing the Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument (HBDI®) and Whole Brain® Thinking, Cirque was able to encourage an increased appreciation for and application of diversity of thought, leading to increased team effectiveness and a Whole Brain® leadership approach that fits the Cirque culture.



Background

Established in 1984, Canadian entertainment company Cirque du Soleil is the largest theatrical producer in the world, known for its breathtaking shows that combine mind-boggling physicality with signature artistry.

Today, the company has nearly 4,000 employees worldwide, including close to 1,200 artists, representing 80 nationalities and speaking 36 different languages. More than 100 types of occupations can be found at Cirque.

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Danièle Bienvenue

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Challenge

Producing such complex and imaginative shows with ever-expanding teams of diverse people is a true feat of creativity, technical prowess, determination, and flow. Acknowledging the importance of leadership as part of the Cirque production has been a gradual process. In fact, just saying “leader” had the connotation of a four-letter word in the culture of Cirque, as it implied a corporate hierarchy that represented everything Cirque is not.

However, for Cirque to sustain its ambitious expansion schedule and reputation for continuing to outdo itself, the company would have to embrace and cultivate the qualities leaders embody. Cirque would also need to learn how to quickly replicate its high-performing teams.

“Those who were here in the early years of Cirque felt the pain of starting an organization. They said, ‘We were successful and we don’t want corporate models. We have our own way of achieving success,’” says France Dufresne, Director for Organizational Development and Training at Cirque. But after some serious discussion, the value of potentially adopting “leadership” was accepted.

Cirque du Soleil is a “flat” organization, one that eschewed the hierarchical approach to management and success. So when the idea of implementing leadership development was introduced, it was met with some resistance.



Solution

A perspective that emphasized the importance of coaching skills turned out to be the entry point into Cirque’s leadership development approach.

“At Cirque, we have this unique strength of coaching high-caliber athletes and artists, and we wanted our leaders to become good coaches to employees, so the decision was made to teach coaching skills,” Dufresne says.

But the emphasis expanded once the organization discovered Herrmann International’s [Whole Brain® Thinking](#) approach. Cirque believed that not only could it serve as a vehicle for developing leaders and coaching skills, it could help the organization understand what makes it “tick” and how to keep that ticking functioning at its highest possible level.

Robert Paris introduced Whole Brain® Thinking and the [Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument® \(HBDI®\)](#) as the self-awareness portion of a Cirque du Soleil leadership program. The HBDI®, which defines and describes a person’s degree of preferences for thinking across the four quadrants of the Whole Brain® Model, enables people to better understand how they think and approach work. By learning how to apply Whole Brain® Thinking, the highly diverse teams would be better able to communicate with others whose thinking preferences differ from their own.

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Setting the Stage

Danièle Bienvenue, a consultant who worked with Cirque, developed a creative way to introduce the Whole Brain® Model to this creative audience: She hired a cartoonist to draw four characters illustrating different aspects of thinking preferences.

In the introductory Whole Brain® session, Bienvenue conducted an exercise where attendees could choose four activities in a diversity game. Each activity happened to coincide with a thinking preference and related quadrant of the brain. She then revealed the Whole Brain® concept by unveiling the cartoons and asking the participants to add the appropriate dialogue. This helped people make a quick connection between thinking preferences and activities. It also showed them that, in a diverse world, a multitude of thinking is best.

The game and the cartoons were successful in piquing the interest of Cirque participants.

“People recognized that, wherever they go in the world, this diversity of thinking styles will exist, and that their understanding will have a big role in how things turn out,” she says.

Next, participants went online to take the HBDI®. Between the preparation exercise and their awareness that they would receive a highly personalized, in-depth package that would reveal their own thinking preferences, the Cirque group shared an air of heightened anticipation.

Bienvenue then delivered a “Getting to Know Myself” debriefing that helped participants not only understand themselves better but also decide what kind of leader they wanted to be.

Dufresne adds that she appreciates the fact that the debriefings and discussions are conducted by [Certified Practitioners](#), who ensure the information isn’t misinterpreted.

The human resources managers at Cirque are also briefed in the Whole Brain® Model so that they understand it at the same level as the organization’s leaders and speak the Whole Brain® “language.”

Dufresne says that the reaction of senior managers upon receiving their HBDI® profile debriefing has been consistently positive.

“They say things like, ‘Wow, this model is amazing. It’s helping me understand so much,’” she says. Among the typical reactions she reports hearing:

- “Now I understand the differences between my boss and me, and I want to work with him.”
- “I see another perspective, totally. I want to work with this person because they’re different from me.”
- “This is like a gift to us, to understand ourselves, and our team, better.”

Team Support

As part of her coaching at Cirque, Bienvenue supports leaders as they face challenges with their teams. To address issues, she orders HBDI® Team Profiles for each member of the team. Before presenting the results, Bienvenue asks each team member to write their team’s challenges on a 3-x-5 card, and keep it to themselves.

Then she presents the results — showing a PowerPoint slide of the Whole Brain® Model, with each team member’s HBDI® results plotted on it.

“Seeing it that way, it’s easier to understand why they have these challenges, and makes it clear what strategies they are missing for a Whole Brain® approach to address those challenges,” she says. Solutions soon follow.

“I would ask, ‘What would make your team smarter? Stronger?’ The answers are always in their diversity of thought,” Bienvenue explains. “And so Whole Brain® Thinking became a pillar, a lighthouse constantly reminding us of this knowledge about members of the team. We focused on how we can use these insights to make better decisions.”



Results

By increasing employee appreciation for and application of diversity of thought through Whole Brain® Thinking, Cirque has increased team effectiveness and developed a Whole Brain® leadership approach that fits the Cirque culture.

Directors, executives, and middle managers at Cirque are now applying and getting the advantages of Whole Brain® Thinking by taking the HBDI®. Teams benefit from a unique understanding of the thinking preferences each team member brings to the fore and how to use these insights to bring a Whole Brain® approach to their work at Cirque.

“It’s very useful for this organization to understand where our thinking preferences are in order to realign or understand our differences,” Dufresne says. “We will have different thinking preferences in production vs. creative vs. corporate. The Whole Brain® concept is very powerful, and the trends are very important to acknowledge and accept.”

As a result of using Whole Brain® methodology, Cirque has achieved:

- A better understanding of interdependencies
- A greater openness about different thinking preferences in the organization
- Increased team effectiveness

For example, each show has a directorship committee, with members that change every 18 months to two years. Administering the HBDI® and sharing each committee member’s thinking preferences is the foundation of the team-building exercise for that show.

When Cirque’s top team re-formed, they discovered that the combined thinking preferences of the team represent a Whole Brain® approach to leading Cirque. While that wasn’t by design, the creation of this particular team means the organization’s future promises to be well-represented by the full diversity of thought at the leadership level that its teams need.

Additionally, each Cirque du Soleil new show has its own creative director and production director. These two people — drawing from diverse thinking preferences to create a phenomenal show — practically live together for the year and a half the show is being developed.

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Director for Organizational
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Armed with an understanding of Whole Brain® Thinking, “the managers realized they had put together teams that work so well by covering the full spectrum of thinking” required to get top-notch results, Dufresne says.

That’s the magic of combining Whole Brain® Thinking with Cirque’s inimitable moving masterpieces.