



Brainpower

Ann Herrmann-Nehdi explains how understanding how everyone thinks can be the key to higher team performance

Great people. An abundance of ideas. Why do teams struggle to deliver?

Organisations are relying more and more on teamwork to get things done in today's environment, whether it's an intact department or a group brought together specifically for a project or initiative. With virtual teaming, flatter structures, more complex problems, less time and fewer resources, team performance requires people to be able to put their heads together and work productively with a variety of colleagues and customers to address today's business issues and objectives in a timely manner.

These same workplace circumstances, however, often make it that much more challenging for teams to work together effectively to reach the results they need. Whether collaborating with one other person or an entire group, you may have experienced it yourself as you struggled to meet goals and get things done, wondering *why is this so hard? Why don't they get it?*

While you may not literally be speaking different languages, there are very real communication and thinking barriers in the way. To get past them, you have to start with the best tool available: your brain.

It's not *what* they think, it's *how* they think

Everything we do – from how we approach tasks, solve problems and direct our attention to how we communicate and want to be communicated to – is influenced by the way we prefer to think. Someone preferring methodical, sequential thinking, for example, will take a very different approach to getting the job done to someone who prefers to look at the big picture and think conceptually.

Neither is 'right' or 'wrong' and, in fact, all styles of thinking are essential to getting the best outcomes from a collaborative team effort but, if they are not understood and managed appropriately, communication breakdowns, delays and frustrations are often the result. When that happens, we end up with non-productive meetings and the waste of valuable brainpower.

When we're assembling teams, we may decide to bring together different perspectives and approaches intentionally for added value. All too often, however, those skills are squandered because people tend to think and interact in the way that is most comfortable for their own preferences, not in the way that will be most effective for their colleagues. Without an understanding of the thinking aspects involved and a process to leverage difference, we hit a wall.



All styles of thinking are essential to getting the best outcomes from a collaborative team effort

There is no shortage of methods and tools available for enhancing teamwork. Many of them concentrate on how the team members behave. So what makes a thinking-based approach different? A variety of internal and external factors can have an impact on behaviour; the thinking that drives behaviour, on the other hand, is what's constant – and most often not addressed. In a business environment, there's an additional important consideration: psychological approaches don't lend themselves to the kind of business-directed conversation and application a group gets from focusing on the way people think, make decisions, solve problems and get work done.

Ultimately, effective collaboration is about getting the most from both individual and collective brainpower. Here are some ways to apply what we know about the brain and performance to ensure every team achieves its potential.

Start with thinking

The first step is to make sure everyone understands their own and others' thinking preferences and how each contributes to the team's overall objectives.

A useful way to understand the different thinking preferences is the Whole Brain Model, which was originally developed for use in business more than 30 years ago at General Electric. A metaphor for the brain, it depicts four distinct thinking styles:

- A quadrant (upper left): Logical, analytical, fact-based, quantitative
- B quadrant (lower left): Organised, sequential, planned, detailed
- C quadrant (lower right): Interpersonal, feeling-based, kinesthetic, emotional
- D quadrant (upper right): Holistic, intuitive, integrating, synthesising.

While we can use clues to try to guess at, or determine, our own or others' thinking preferences, a validated assessment provides a data-driven approach to determine individual preferences as well as analysis of the entire team. Once a team's preferences are analysed, you can apply a

proven process to address the impact of dominant thinking and uncover how the team could more effectively leverage its strengths, where there might be gaps and why specific challenges keep coming up.

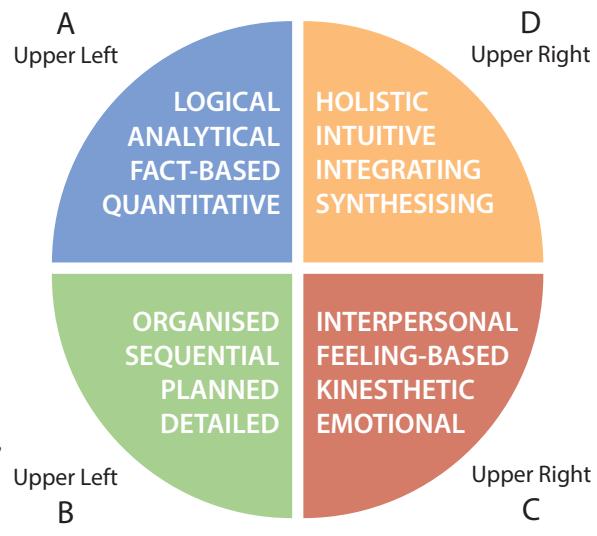
For the team members, this often provides a breakthrough moment. They suddenly see, in a non-judgmental way, why certain communications, processes or interactions frustrate them, or why it's easier to be 'in sync' with some team members while others just don't seem to 'get it'. They also gain an appreciation for what others' thinking styles bring to the equation, and they learn the value of a process to present information in a way that recognises, respects and satisfies different thinking preferences. This is the only way to ensure the needs and expectations of colleagues and customers are being met.

To help team members fast-track, unblock and enhance communications, encourage them to think about the needs of the listeners based on their thinking style:

- what information is most important to them?
- what will they care about and pay most attention to?
- what might I need to adapt in my approach to make sure my own preferences aren't getting in the way?

Since most groups include people with a variety of thinking styles, the best course of action when

The Whole Brain® Model



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communicating with the team as a whole is to take a Whole Brain approach and present information in a way that will resonate with all thinking preferences.

Go diverse by design

You might be tempted to say let's just assemble teams made up of people with similar thinking preferences instead. (And, often, this occurs by default in functional groups where breadth of thinking is less available.) Wouldn't that be a better way to get the job done? In fact, a six-year study conducted at the US Forest Service found just the opposite¹.

True, like-minded teams can quickly come to agreement, but the study showed that teams with a balance of thinking styles were actually 66 per cent more efficient, and they were also more effective – they considered more options and made better decisions.

The study went on to find that a greater number of teams were successful when organised by thinking preferences, concluding that, if you want to increase a group's productivity and efficiency, you should design mentally balanced teams and give them a process to improve their 'operating system', rather than leaving it to the team leader or a haphazard process driven solely by the task at hand.

The complexities of the issues and speed required to address them in today's environment, make the need for this collaborative diversity of thought essential. We are facing more challenges that don't have clear-cut answers or obvious precedents. The environment is pushing teams to find new ways of doing things, faster than ever before, and innovative solutions to difficult problems. The path of least resistance isn't going to produce the results we need.

When assembling groups, make a deliberate effort to bring in the diverse perspectives necessary to see all points of view and consider all potential options. If you are working with an intact team or a group that is more homogenous in its thinking styles, encourage members to stretch and think outside their mental defaults. No one is 'stuck in their style'; we all have the capacity to think in ways that aren't necessarily our preferences.

Reference

¹ <http://www.hbdi.com/Resources/Research/improve-group-productivity.php>



Effective collaboration is about getting the most from both individual and collective brainpower

Use the Whole Brain Model as a filter to help the team pay attention to areas they might otherwise overlook.

Use abrasion to your advantage

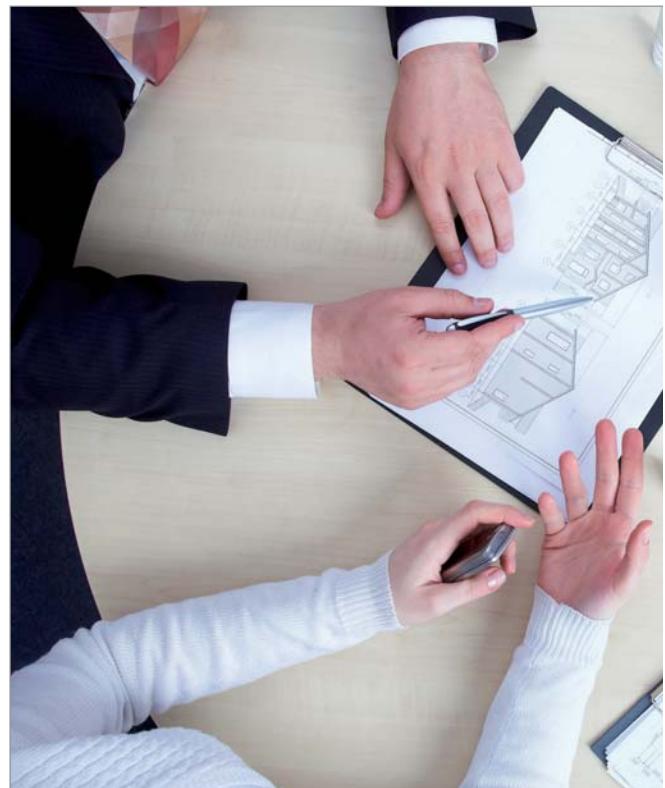
Innovation and complex problem-solving rely on cognitive diversity and the 'creative abrasion' these differences bring in order to push the boundaries and come up with new ideas and approaches. But if it's not managed properly, the team can fall into conflict and chaos. Particularly in the case of heterogeneous groups, an effective leader or facilitator is essential to keeping the team on track.

The most successful team leaders value the differences in the team and encourage people to bring their best thinking to work, helping to both bridge the diversity of thought in the group and keep the Whole Brain in mind so all perspectives are heard. Don't discount the importance of this key role, whether it's a manager, team leader or even a more informal rotating assignment.

Here are some tips for managing the team's collective brainpower and making the abrasion that sometimes occurs an advantage:

- encourage team members to learn about, and share, their preferred thinking styles and discuss the impact of differences and similarities among them on the team's performance
- understand the strengths of the group and how the dominant preferences can be effectively harnessed to reach its objectives
- recognise and bring in the diversity of thought necessary to get the best results
- use the Whole Brain Model as a framework to guide the team's actions. At the beginning of a project or periodically throughout the team's engagement, ask questions from each quadrant, such as:
 - do we have clear performance goals, objectives and measurements?
 - do we have clear priorities, a plan and a timeline?
 - do we have an understanding of our 'customer' and each other?
 - are we taking appropriate risks to challenge ourselves and come up with new ideas?

Teams with a balance of thinking styles were actually 66 per cent more efficient



Turn team brainpower into action

A large international hotel organisation I've worked with is a good example of how a thinking-based approach can transform team performance and drive improved outcomes.

I was speaking with the executive responsible for overseeing the company's new-hotel-opening teams – critical players in its worldwide expansion efforts. She told me the team members were bright, enthusiastic, committed to the hotel's mission and brimming with ideas. The project managers on the teams came with successful track records and had all the best tools at their disposal.

"We knew the projects they were working on were complex," she explained. "That's why we made sure to bring in people with project management expertise."

Yet project risk remained high and delivery was consistently delayed. The teams were growing increasingly frustrated, and so was management.

She noticed that, when the project managers discussed things like Gantt charts and critical success factors, the rest of the team 'shut down' – they just didn't seem to get it. Accustomed to rigorous, step-by-step processes, these project managers seemed to be floundering in this highly innovative and creative culture that emphasised



freeform communication, relationship-building and adaptability to get things done.

After analysing thinking preferences, it became clear the project managers primarily preferred the 'left-brain' styles of A- and B-quadrant thinking and, as a result, they were bringing templates, tools and processes to match. But they were teaming up with people whose preferences strongly aligned with the kind of organisational culture you might expect at a hospitality company: interpersonal-focused, imaginative, relationship-driven and open to change and accommodation. If the team members were going to speak the same language, they first needed to understand their own. But they also had to recognise that preferences are just that: they aren't competencies or abilities, they reflect how we prefer to think. In fact, everyone has access to all four styles of thinking (and from our research, most have varying degrees of preference for more than one style).

Once people and teams understand how they prefer to think and the role different thinking styles play in achieving results, they can then learn how to leverage their preferences more effectively and think and act outside them when the situation requires it by applying the skill of Whole Brain Thinking.

The thinking that drives behaviour is what's constant – and most often not addressed

The interpersonal relationship aspects of a team initiative may not be top of a project manager's mind but that doesn't mean he can't learn to stretch his thinking to accommodate the needs of the project and the rest of the team, just as a highly creative, conceptual thinker can learn to use processes and timelines to be more efficient.

This is exactly the kind of shift that happened with the hotel-opening teams who, according to the executive, are now getting attention for how well they collaborate, meet deadlines and manage project risk. The word of mouth has spread, and other teams throughout the organisation are following their lead.

So, how can you start getting similar results? Take the opportunity to make sure a team's thinking is working for them, not against them. If you have a team that is highly dominant in D-quadrant thinking, for instance, you may want to find more visually engaging process and project tools to appeal to their thinking preferences and help them more easily stretch to less-preferred modes. A recent example is a leader who provided a budget overview with visuals and humour instead of just relying on spreadsheets.

For a team that prefers more step-by-step, organised approaches, encourage them to develop processes that will provide them with the comfort level they need to take appropriate risks and explore new ways of doing things. A senior team I know mandated on the agenda of each of their meetings "white space time", in which they declared it was okay to just play around with ideas. The structure and formality of the approach freed them up to feel more comfortable with stretching their thinking.

Don't be surprised when you start hearing things like *have we considered all quadrants?* and *we need to bring in some more A-quadrant thinking to make sure our objectives are clear*. When Whole Brain Thinking becomes the common language, the communication breakdowns and frustrations diminish, to be replaced by higher engagement, productivity and results. That's collective brainpower at work. **TJ**

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