

TAMING THE ANALYTICALS: CURING THE LEFT-BRAIN DOMINATED ORGANISATION

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Last month we considered the process of 'Wrangling the Creatives' – learning how to correct an organisation out of balance with too much right-brain thinking.

When an organisation becomes right-brain dominated it tends to become chaotic and inconsistent, failing to produce coherent offerings that make sense to the marketplace. Often, former glories are overshadowed by flashy, complicated products and services that are pale imitations of their predecessors. As new releases fail to make market traction, resources become scarce and desperation sets in.

Creativity is looked to as a lifeline, but more creativity is not the answer. It's more likely the left-brained guy in the corner with his arms folded tightly that holds the answers.

The solution to an organisation dominated by the right-brain (feel, imagine, instinct, belief, fantasy, risk and possibility) is to open the door to the left brain (logic, details, facts, know, science, reality and safe). Success lies in balance, coordination and in that great 80s management concept: synergy.

If you're a left-brain sort of person, and you read last month's article then chances are you developed a small but discernible sense of satisfaction. A wry grin that expresses your belief that when businesses go wrong it's because of a lack of discipline.

A belief that if only more organisations had KPIs, budgets and comprehensive business plans, then they would soar to the lofty heights of greatness. Analysis, research and evidence: these are the faces of the triune god of the left-brainer.

But there's another side to this story.

Just as the right-brain dominated organisation is likely to explode supernova-style, so the left-brain dominated organisation is destined to implode and die; a big boring black hole.

Left-brain dominated organisations have more than their fair share of problems, and they tend to revolve around being stale.

As with the right-brain dominated organisations, the strategic plan will be a good barometer to start with.

The left-brain organisation will embrace strategic planning because it has become conventional business wisdom, and the left-brain oriented value precedent very highly – it mitigates risk. The strategic plan will be full of business jargon and will probably be a lengthy document. It will be detailed, rational and coherent. It will also tend to be dull and uninspiring, lacking humanity. The strategic plan will often be used as a bastion of the tried and true, as a justifier of repetition of existing business models and outputs. The strategic plan will be a tool for stifling creativity and innovation because these changes are threatening.

Look then to the profit and loss statements, and in particular to trends.

An organisation that is left-brain dominated will probably be seeing some worrying trends. Revenues are likely to be primarily from products and services that have been in the market for some time. Revenue from new products and services (a KPI for companies like Hewlett-Packard) is likely to be minimal. Many inside the organisation will likely be

concerned that market share is shrinking as more innovative competitor products steal customers away.

This organisation, focused on analysis and safety, on patch-protection and conventionality, will find it very difficult to sustain a competitive advantage. By now competitors will have worked out what it does well and will, in most cases, have figured out how to short-circuit or render irrelevant this competitive advantage.

Then talk to some of this organisation's customers.

You will tend to hear a consistency of feedback that follows patterns like 'they've lost touch', 'they don't understand what I'm looking for' and 'they keep doing the same old stuff, but the world has changed'.

Left-brain dominated organisations tend to start life more balanced than they end up. They do good research, good analysis and come up with a well-thought out product. Then they get scared.

They cling to this success, minimise risk and make typically small, incremental changes to products and services regardless of the pace of change the market is experiencing. Customers that start out loyal grow, over time, increasingly frustrated that the company they felt so good about has become detached from the market. They persevere for a while based on the initial goodwill generated by the original offerings, then they shrug and move on to a more balanced competitor.

Sound familiar at all?

It is probably more difficult to identify the left-brain dominated organisation than its right-brain counterpart, because it can look so solid from the outside. The proverbial ducks are normally in a very tidy and orderly row.

There is no chaos or obvious disorganisation. There are processes, systems and policies.

There are not the obvious external injuries of the right-brain dominated organisation, but rather a slow internal bleed.

Those with new ideas find their creativity stifled by a slew of stage-gates, proofs of concept and contradictory precedents. Those wishing to take a risk by doing something new find themselves struggling up an unassailable hill.

The status quo is religiously and skillfully protected by the left-brain dominated. It is safe and knowable and, despite the risks of staying where you are, to the left-brainers those risks are preferable to venturing into the unknown.

The problem in addressing these issues is that the left-brain dominated organisation is inherently suspicious of new ideas. Suggesting a paradigm shift, a re-balancing of how business and design is done, is likely to be met with a frosty reception.

So the key here is good evidence and a solid argument. Left-brain dominated organisations won't change because someone happens to think that's a good idea. They'll need to be persuaded.

The key to unlocking the potential of the left-brain dominated organisation and producing more inspiring and compelling market offerings is to embrace design principles that demand more creativity.

designindustry has crafted a set of Ten Design Principles that ensure that the creative and the analytical are kept in balance. In this article we are dealing with the principles that are

focused on upholding the 'softer' values that the left-brained are inclined to neglect.

The first of these is the 'process principle' of expansion.

This principle describes the process of refusing to be bound by precedent. When design processes skip creativity and jump to obvious conclusions, opportunities are lost. The principle of expansion demands that time is made and tools implemented to dwell on alternatives.

It is during this phase of the design process that the right-brain must be released to roam free. This is the domain of possibility and imagination, of helping and growing and 'what ifs'. The left-brain dominated organisation must embrace the discipline of diversity in order to succeed. This means that dissent must not be just encouraged but demanded. Alternatives to any new idea must be generated whether they are desired or not, just to break the mould of 'beige thinking'.

The second design principles that can aid the left-brain dominated organisation is eclecticism.

This concept, linked closely to the expansion principle, is about rejecting isolationism or insularism. It is about sourcing a diverse range of inputs to stimulate non-traditional and non-linear thinking. It's about getting out and walking amongst the people, reading books and magazines from unrelated fields or strolling through the city with a video camera at the ready.

Eclecticism means broadening your horizons for sources of inspiration. An accountant may come up with a new idea for a service by visiting a fast food restaurant. A computer expert may come up with a new mouse by watching a child stroke a real mouse.

While many of these 'accidents' may happen serendipitously, it's amazing how many connections one can make when one looks for them. Smart organisations ensure that those involved with design of products and services look outwards to the world for inspiration. Left-brain dominated organisations need this even more.

The third design principle requiring attention from left-brain dominated organisations is contextuality.

Contextuality is the enemy of precedent. Contextuality acknowledges that each product and service design must intimately match the particular characteristics of its target market. Simply because an idea or strategy worked for Company A, doesn't mean we can transplant it into Company B and make it work. Creativity cannot be outsourced in this way.

The left-brain dominated organisation must re-attach itself to its target markets and understand how the contexts in which their customers operate change. A product or design that was contextually appropriate last year may now be contextually inappropriate if that context has changed.

As Ferris Bueller said "life moves pretty fast, if you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it".

This notion extends to the fourth principle for consideration, user-focus.

Left-brain dominated organisations can tend to forget that business is not revenue targets, market segments and rational decision-making. Business is the interaction of emotional human beings with goals, aspirations, needs and insecurities.

User-focus is about designing products and services that make an emotional connection with the end-user. Those products that win loyalty are those that intuitively understand how the user wants to feel and interact with them.

Apple has so many raving – and sometimes irrational – fans because it gets this right. It reaches out to the user with its products and says ‘I get you. I know about your life and what you want to do and I have just the thing for you. Oh, and also...it’s coooool’.

Left-brain dominated organisations, not surprisingly, struggle in this department. They tend to distance themselves from end-users to the point of alienating them. They can be aloof and project arrogance and give customers every encouragement to try out the competitor’s wares.

A left-brain dominated organisation has so much right in terms of consistent systems, rigorous analysis and evidence-based management.

It doesn’t act impulsively but is measured, cautious and sceptical, all critical elements in uncertain times.

But the world changes fast and people change fast and the left-brainers can find themselves relegated to has-beens if they do not stay in touch with what’s going on. The left-brain dominated organisation will, if it fails to generate new ideas and exercise creative product and service development, steadily become more and more irrelevant. It will lose market share, see revenues drop and eventually become a cautionary case-study.

Only by embracing the ‘frightening’, ‘uncontrollable’ and ‘wild’ tendencies of the right-brain perspective will the left-brain dominated organisation correct its imbalance and protect its future.

