

WRANGLING THE CREATIVES: CURING THE RIGHT-BRAIN DOMINATED ORGANISATION

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Last month we lamented the lost potential that was the Britten Motorcycle. A great and brilliant man allowed his company to become dominated by the ambitious and creative, and the chance to build a legacy was forever lost. It's easy enough to track back through history and see what went wrong. It's even easier to pass judgement on decisions that were made without the benefit of hindsight.

The real trick is to be able to stand back while you're in the midst of doing business at a frenetic pace and insightfully declare: "something is amiss here!"

Right brain dominated organisations

This month we present the first part of a two-part series on re-balancing an organisation that has got itself out of kilter. This month we look at the right-brain dominated organisation; next month it's the left-brain dominated.

Let's begin with a couple of clarifications. Right-brain, as we use it, is the creative aspect of ourselves. Think of words like feel, imagine, instinct, belief, fantasy, risk and possibility. These form the foundational lexicon of the right-brain. The left-brain, on the other hand, represents the analytical. The left-brain is more comfortable with words like logic, details, facts, know, science, reality and safe.

You will often hear reference to right-brained and left-brained individuals, but in reality few operate at these extremes. Those of us with a bit of an ego will insist that we are perfectly balanced in the middle, but the middle ground is a quiet and sparse paradise of geniuses. We are all left-brained, and we are all right-brained, but almost all of us will feel naturally inclined towards operation in one or other hemisphere. Thus when we talk about an organisation being right-brain dominated, we are describing a business where operational and/or design power lies in the hands of those that are more comfortable operating in the realm of the creative and instinctual.

This is far from being an inherent problem, but the further skewed towards right-brain thinking individuals are, and the heavier the overall dominance of this perspective is in an organisation, the more likely problems are to arise.

So what do these problems look like?

Take a good look at the strategic plan as a starting point. Generally speaking, a heavily right-brain dominated organisation will shy away from strategic planning. Those in charge will tend to dismiss it as 'out-moded' or 'stifling creativity and innovation' or claim that 'business moves too fast to make strategic plans'. Instead 'gut instinct' is valued. The leader's sense of the market and its direction will be prized above all else. 'Look at what we've achieved so far' they will say; 'trust me, I know what I'm doing'.

Now look at how design and innovation decisions are made. A right-brain dominated business will have few, if any, agreed criteria to evaluate new ideas or to guide innovation and creativity. The 'creative process' will likely be seen as sacrosanct; as too precious to be stifled by 'rules and processes'. It will be difficult to see how all the organisation's products and services 'hang together' as a cohesive whole. There will probably be a sense that certain opportunities and possibilities have been chased at the expense of core business. Overall one will get the feel of 'reactivity' rather than 'proactivity'.

Then look at the organisation's track record. There will probably be some early stellar successes, followed by a string of misses. There will be a good deal of frustration, with much disagreement as to why the wins of yesterday are not being replicated. The left-brains will assert that there are no systems and processes and everything is chaotic, while the right-brains will insist that success will return when the risk-taking creativity of old is embraced once more. Genuine insight will be low, and there may be a reluctance to talk to the market or, worse, an active ignorance or skewing or feedback from the market to support current endeavours.

Finally, consider the organisation's outlook. Cashflow will likely be tight as a result of unsuccessful investments in product or service development. Customers may be unhappy that they have been treated poorly by the organisation. This may be due to what the right-brains view as 'unreasonable demands and expectations' placed on them by their customers. Building deep and lasting customer relationships is unlikely to feature at the top of the priority list. Staff who detect the inherent problems will be nervous, and key individuals may be lost.

All in all, despite a culture of creativity and innovation, the right-brain dominated organisation is a stressful, frustrating and insecure place to be. Even for those that lead it. It is capable of major feats of brilliance, but is prone to inconsistency, unrealistic optimism, entropy and, eventually, premature demise.

So can anything be done?

Can the creatives be wrangled? Can the awesome, creative forces within an organisation - the sources of fresh ideas and innovation – be balanced and channelled to build lasting value?

Absolutely. But, like all paradigm shifts, it requires discipline and commitment. It's more moderation and exercise than fad-diet. The solution lies in understanding design principles and appreciating which ones are being neglected when an organisation lurches toward right-brain dominance.

designindustry's 10 Design Principles are focused on ensuring the right-brain and left-brain influences in any organisation are kept in balance.

Four of these principles should be of particular interest to you if you found yourself nodding your head (and maybe grinding your teeth) as you read through the descriptions of the problems facing the right-brain dominated organisation.

1. Contraction

The first of these principles is called contraction. Contraction is the process of objectively and rigorously evaluating design ideas. It demands pre-agreed criteria that are based on the strategic objectives, vision and values of the organisation. It ensures that all product and service offerings are consistent and reinforce the company's brand. And, of course, it presupposes and requires that all the left-brain activities like determining values and brand identity and strategic planning have been done. Contraction is not about constraining creativity, it's about getting the best creative output. It's about figuring what good design is for your organisation in the cold light of day.

Before someone's creative effort is on the table. Before egos and deadlines become primary influencing factors.

Contraction also ensures that there is a business case for a new product or service. Business considerations like cost, timeframe and production capability are the kinds of consideration that the Contraction Phase of a design process takes stock of. If it doesn't make sense and meet the goals of the business, it's back to the drawing board.

Contraction keeps wild creativity in check. It is the sceptical voice of the left-brain captured in an objective business process. It is the quiet voice of reason and reality when the excited din of creativity can overwhelm.

2. Functionality and 3. Simplicity

The second and third design principles that the right-brain dominated organisation needs to dwell on are functionality and simplicity.

Functionality dictates that a design – a product or a service – must excel at its raison d'être. It must do that thing that it is meant to do, and do it well. It matters less how sexy and stylish it is and more whether or not the darn thing actually works.

Simplicity ensures that creativity doesn't morph into endless tinkering. Simplicity requires that a 'design' is restrained and – heaven forbid – conservative (at least in terms of avoiding flashiness. The iPhone is 'conservative' in this sense). Feature overload is the antithesis of simplicity.

These principles need to be focused on in the right-brain dominated organisation for the simple fact that they tend to get overlooked in the right-brain dominated organisation. They are the parts of the design process that are unglamorous and can be viewed by creative people as constraining. But, as the left-brain advocate would say, simplicity and functionality are critical in well designed products and services. They help prevent user frustration and, indeed, show a depth of respect for the user and the problems or needs they present. A well-balanced organisation will consider the simplicity and functionality of its products at every step in the design process.

4. Sustainability

The final design principle that should be considered is sustainability. Right-brain orientated people often have an affinity for the statement 'it is better to burn out than fade away'. In fact, right-brain dominated organisations are just as likely to fade away as burn out spectacularly. Innovative genius and outstanding creativity are not enough to sustain an organisation. The principle of sustainability requires that design of new products and services, and indeed the organisation itself, is done in a way that is able to be maintained.

It doesn't burn out or fade away, it grows and builds over time. Sustainability stands in contrast to opportunism which tends to characterise right-brain dominated organisations. Sustainability requires a little more thought and reflection in the design process, and that's where the left-brains are required.

If you have come to realise that your organisation is right-brain dominated, know that this is hardly the worse situation in the world. An over-abundance of creativity and risk taking? Many should be so lucky. The solution to this imbalance is, simply and unsurprisingly, introducing more left-brain rigour into the process of designing new products and services.

Time must be made to create and constantly revisit the strategic plan. Values, brand personality and the 'humanity' of the organisation must be determined.

Creativity must not be viewed as a virtue unto itself, but rather a powerful force that needs to be moulded and shaped in order to create something of value. The organisation that allows itself to be dominated by right-brain thinking is on a pathway to brilliant, inspiring, admirable...failure.

Only balance in design will build a lasting legacy.

