

The Whole Brain Project Team

By Norah Bolton

Scott Brown is discouraged. “My project team just doesn’t seem to get it. I tell them my vision for the project and their eyes roll”. Moving over to the team, one hears the same story. “Scott comes in, blasts off something that makes sense to him, but we don’t really have a clue what he is talking about. He’s out in left field.”

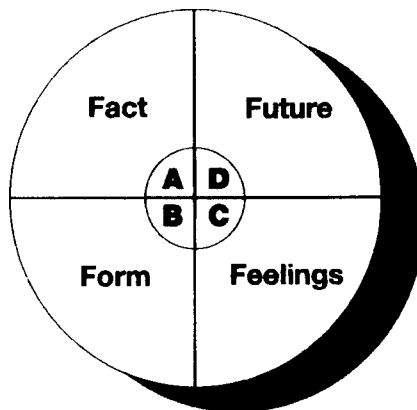
The scene is common in high tech companies such as this one. Scott is starting to attribute the problem to personality conflicts and if things don’t change, he may be right. But the problems are not caused by abrasive personalities. They indicate diverse thinking styles that the participants aren’t aware of.

All the players on this project team are engineers and their educational backgrounds have much in common. They are all competent, experienced and know their stuff. But the team is faltering because they don’t know about thinking diversity. Such diversity is common even among persons in the same field because we are products of many influences – genetics, family, early and professional education, hobbies and work experience. A brief time-out from their current problems could create new understanding and really mobilize this potentially competent group of players.

Ned Herrman was aware of such problems as manager of management education at General Electric and set out to do something about it. His research coincided with a renaissance of brain research, and he actually wired up hundreds of employees to watch what was going on in their

heads when they were engaged in different kinds of work situations.

The end result was a thinking style model based on physiology that identifies four distinct thinking preferences. Since the brain has two connecting systems, Herrmann divided the preferences into an upper and lower system representing the cerebral and limbic systems as well as the more familiar right and left brain divisions. He ultimately developed an instrument that identifies and measures thinking style preferences and displays them both graphically and numerically.



The model identifies four distinct thinking style preferences. It is important to note that these are not a measurement of competence but of how we prefer to think.

Quadrant A, the upper left prefers facts, numbers and hard data. **Quadrant B**, the lower left, focuses on organization and sequence. **Quadrant C**, the lower right, likes expressiveness and emotion. **Quadrant D**, the upper right prefers the visual and the big picture.

It wasn’t surprising that Scott, as project leader, had a different preference than his colleagues. His big picture thinking style puts him in quadrant D and allows him to keep tabs on all the aspects of the project simultaneously. It’s a common attribute of leadership. What he doesn’t recognize is that the others don’t share the preference. He’s also strong in the C quadrant and more attuned emotionally so he is sensitive to their rejection of his ideas.

The other members of the team form a small tribe of Quadrant A. Their common preference allows them to get along well with one another although they will probably quibble about small details. Their focus on facts and numbers make them intolerant of Scott’s big picture preference and his ability to visualize, which they lack.

The Herrmann model allows for both individual and group assessments and when the entire group was portrayed on a common map, there was quite a surprise. No one fell in the B or C quadrants. This means that this particular team will have trouble actually getting the job done, because that’s what the B quadrant people do. They may also have trouble managing the project politically because there is no strong proponent of the

people issues. Such a person usually falls into quadrant C.

Scott decided to add a couple of people to the project team who added the missing preferences. He also realized that he should put his directives in writing and make them more factual. But he also encouraged the team to look at the big picture through the use of a graphic organizer so that they would be more aware of how their particular part of the work contributed to the whole.

When project teams use the Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument as a guide to understanding diverse thinking styles, positive results are almost immediate. We start by thinking that everyone else thinks the way we do. Realizing that others are not wrong or weird but just different is a big step forward. The next step is understanding and valuing the impor-

tant roles that all the thinking styles play in the completion of a project.

We are all capable of using all four thinking styles and no one has ever scored a zero in any. Many of us are double or triple dominant and some – including most CEO's - are quadruple dominant. The assessment helps people to become more confident in areas that they obviously prefer and to give way to those who shine in other areas.

It's very important to the project to include all the thinking styles at various stages. The leader has the responsibility to walk the project around all the quadrants repeatedly. The team has the responsibility to champion their ideas in areas of strength and to improve areas of avoidance or at least give way to those who do.

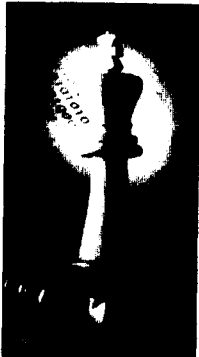
If you want a project done well, it

may be most efficient to choose a like minded group who will produce good work and come in on time and on budget. But if you want a project done superbly, take the time to discover the thinking preferences of the participants, balance the team, walk all parts of the assignment around the quadrants to make sure you are covering all the bases – and the results will be not just good but outstanding. PT

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