

Your Brain, Your Leadership: A New Call to Action

The challenges of 21st century leaders are played out in today's arenas of a struggling economy, natural disasters, global unrest, and political contention. This is not all gloom and doom for the healthy leader who has a sense of himself/herself through the power of awareness that is sharpened by a focused attention. Such a leader is critical to an organization that continues to grow through its innovative creativity.

Over the years leaders have used professional assessment tools published and presented to the work world that promote creativity, collaboration, team work, and leadership training. The DiSC and Myers-Briggs personality inventories have richly inspired companies to focus on mission and vision statements that would enhance performance and productivity. A late-comer to this cadre of professional development is OneSmartWorld. This company is providing a reach beyond training programs that do not sustain their original intent. OneSmartWorld establishes its sustainability on the fact that human beings are rational, thinking creatures still evolving in the cognitive and emotional richness of being human. If we truly understand the power of creative, analytic, and critical thinking that is animated by the dynamics of human emotions, then we open the unlimited potential of human thought and imagination. 21st century leaders must take advantage of this new direction in training and coaching.

On July 17, 1990, the Presidential Proclamation 6158 declared the Decade of the Brain as prompted by House Joint Resolution 174, designating the decade to begin on January 1, 1990. The Proclamation opened with the statement "The human brain...that controls our activities is the most magnificent and mysterious wonders of creation." Though the Proclamation was couched in the context of treating mental and cerebral diseases and disorders, subsequent literature shared the findings of this "magnificent and mysterious wonders of creation." The



stellar publication of Jeffrey Schwartz' monumental work, **The Mind and the Brain** (2002), opened the secrets of neuroplasticity. His book could be briefly summarized in that the Mind through focused attention directs the brain to create new synaptic connections that reshape the brain and broadens its capacity to learn. Neurogenesis is a companion concept of neuroplasticity in that the brain makes new neurons over the life span of each human being. We will return to neuroplasticity after explaining thinking styles and the need to be able to shift our thinking through the various kinds of creative, analytic, and critical thinking.

Man is described as rational, "homo sapiens." Rational means reasoning or thinking, a feature unique to humans. Admittedly there is mindless thinking when we just flow with the stream of disjointed thoughts that pass through our brain. As William James wrote "Thought goes on." Better, there is focused thinking that happens through focused attention to what is important. It is Robert Sternberg who takes credit for classifying thinking into three kinds, creative, analytic, and critical. His book, **Thinking Styles** (1997), details the characteristics of each type of thinking. OneSmartWorld picked up on Sternberg's three thinking styles and developed an assessment tool that not only measures a person's preference for a thinking style but also demonstrates the emotional valence of each preference. This assessment is described as a total intelligence assessment that includes thinking preference, emotional intelligence, and personal spirit. These features provide a sustainable depth that most other assessments do not. OneSmartWorld updates "homo sapiens", rational man, to the 21st century. Click here to take a quick look at this assessment tool: <http://bit.ly/on6Uar>

Let's look at how this total intelligence assessment works in depth. Each thinking preference is expressed through thinking strategies; there are six thinking strategies for each style of thinking. Each group of strategies carries a cognitive and emotional valence described as cool thinking (cognitive) and warm thinking (emotional). In creative thinking the cool or cognitive style expresses itself in strategies of brainstorm, challenge, reframe, and envision. Creativity is open to divergent thinking wherein all possibilities remain open; each possibility is appraised and/or evaluated. On the other hand creativity can be emotionally driven by flash of insight or inspiration as well as by the flow of one's life experiences. One might consider this thinking style as mainly a right brain activity. In reality, creativity is a whole brain endeavor that uses both the cognitive (left brain) and emotional (right brain) potential. In today's psychological circles there is much caution in referencing brain activity as right and left.

The analytic thinking preference again has both cognitive and emotional thinking strategies but in this style there are three cognitive and three emotional strategies. Analytic thinking is balanced in its right brain, left brain activity. Cognitively analytic thinking uses scan, structure, and clarity to grasp and understand the thoughts being considered. Analysis looks for details in the big picture. The analytic mind needs connections. Much like an accountant who crunches

the numbers an analytic person needs to have the details in place with an explanation for those details. Analysis depends on structure, logic, and order. Everything has to fit. On the emotional side the preferences of the analytic thinker do not overlook the people in the equation. An analytic individual can tune into situations in order to empathize with anyone involved; he or she is able to express concern and feelings about both situation and persons in the situation. The analytic thinker is compassionate. Dan Goleman's emotional intelligence theory fits easily into this warm thinking style in which self and social awareness play an important role.

Finally, we come to the critical thinking style. This likewise is supported by six strategies, four cool and two warm strategies. The cool or cognitive strategies are crux, conclude, validation of conclusion, and experience. The warm or emotional strategies are values driven and "trust your heart" strategies. The critical thinker prefers to be decisive, come to a conclusion, and move on. This person usually gets to the point without much fanfare. A critical thinker sees the crux or gist of a situation and when a decision needs to be made this person prefers to conclude rather quickly. Because this person prefers critical thinking, validation of the conclusion is important. Critical thinking should not be a precipitous exercise. Often such a person will have learned from experience which can be a great asset for decision making. On the emotional side of this style of thinking a person could be driven by personal, social, or cultural values as part of the thinking process. Values can have a great impact on the decision making process. On a more personal side one's gut feelings could enter the process; it's the right thing to do; it just feels right. This strategy is a powerful emotional factor if the decision making process is heated or highly contested. It should not be minimized.

The OneSmartWorld assessment includes a fourth dimension; this is why it is called the four dimensions inventory of total intelligence (4D-i). This fourth dimension is the personal spirit that underpins the three thinking preferences. Personal spirit comprises one's outlook, one's sense of control, and one's initiative. One's outlook is a personal disposition and active process of experiencing the world founded on the belief that an optimistic and constructive approach to life and its challenges enables that person to find and harness one's hidden potential and meaning in any situation, task, or with others. This success factor is important; it creates a proactive mindset and provides a belief in one's ability to transcend events. It contributes to good health and well-being.

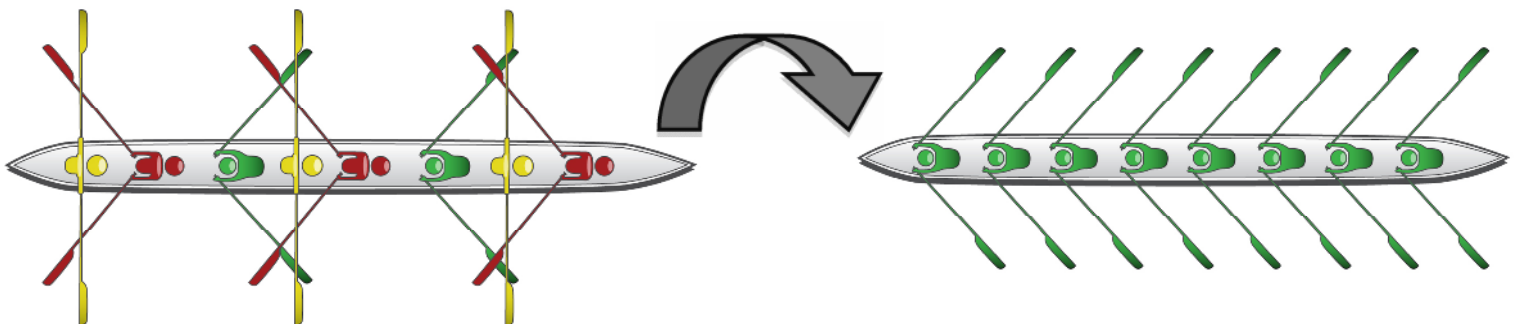
One's sense of control is a deep belief that one can exert personal control through one's own effort to have an impact on an outcome and make a difference. It is having "an abiding certainty based on past experience that they can influence the course of their lives to a major degree" (Pelletier, 2007). This, too, is vital for one's personal health and well-being. A person takes charge of his/her life and surrounding situation. This is a critical factor in the face of

difficult circumstances that demand facing issues head-on; a person can do something about a situation. This is a personal power that moves us from inaction to action; it is an inner challenge to gain control of one's mind and heart.

Finally, initiative is the personal disposition and active process based on the belief that one should attempt to go beyond conventional boundaries if necessary to do what it takes to complete important tasks, achieve goals, and assist others in problem solving. Initiative is the single most important characteristics of high performers in the workplace (Kelley, 1999). This is a key element in personal spirit, because it is not so much what we have in our heads but what comes out of the heart to push us toward a goal and beyond. It is the quality of a self-starter. It is the spirit of responsibility and ownership of one's tasks at hand. Personal spirit is the driving force of human thinking styles.

What do we do with this framework of thinking styles and personal spirit? Everyone possesses all the thinking styles and personal spirit. How do we use them? The secret to good thinking is our ability to shift from one style of thinking to another especially in conversation with others. This is critical in group dialogue. The purpose of the 4D-I inventory is to bring our preferred styles of thinking to our awareness; are we aware of our preferred thinking style? With this awareness we have the facility to change our thinking style to fit the moment at hand. We realize that thinking is both cognitive and emotional in that we understand our thoughts while giving them an emotional valence. The 4D-i inventory invites us to know that our ease of shifting from one style of thinking to the other will give us an edge in our relationships that alerts us not only to what is being said but also how it is being conveyed with emotional overtones, whether at home, at work, or anywhere in our human encounters.

The ability to shift our thinking styles facilitates our communication skills. If I am usually a creative thinker and I have to consult with an analytic colleague, it would facilitate our conversation if I shift into the analytic thinking style until that person might need some creative suggestions; then I invite the colleague to shift to his creative thinking with me. In groups as in corporate meetings it is important that the group comes to an agreement to be on the same



thinking style page. This demands that the group shift to a common thinking style as issues are discussed. This moves us to the OneSmartWorld program called Smarter Meetings available on the OSW website (www.onesmartworld.com).

Coming back to neuroplasticity as promised above let us take a look at this cerebral phenomenon and how it impacts our thinking brain. What are the brain-based underpinnings of our thinking? Up until now we have been talking about the mental process of thinking, what the Mind does with the brain. We need to recall that the brain is at the service of the Mind; the Mind uses the brain for thinking. So what is the brain doing while all this thinking is going on? Due to limited space in this paper we will not be able to explain the anatomy and physiology of brain activity of thinking. However, an insight into neuroplasticity should help you make the appropriate connections and applications.

Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to reorganize itself. New neuronal connections occur through one's internal process of thinking/feeling or through the environment where we learn new experiences. The brain re-maps itself. When a student concentrates on a subject, new synaptic connections are made between neurons or nerve cells; learning takes place and the memory stores the new knowledge. This is neuroplasticity, the brain's ability to act and react to ever-changing circumstances, making us learn new things and gain new insights. Learning is actually a physical process that leaves physical traces in the brain called synaptic connections. The brain is constantly laying down new neural pathways throughout life that provide learning, new memories, and adaptation through experience. An old dog can learn new tricks!

The fundamental key to neuroplasticity or new learning is focused attention. Our student trying to master new concepts must concentrate, that is, focus his/her attention at what has to be learned. It is this focused attention that triggers new connections. When we reflect on a problem we need to solve, our brain scans the store house of memories to connect pieces of knowledge in a new way. We focus on related bits of information that come together in a new way. On the other hand solutions or answers sometimes drop out of the blue. Who hasn't experienced that sudden moment of insight while just sitting still



or day dreaming? This is a common reality after we have had a good night's sleep. Whether concentrating or "sleeping on it" focused attention generates the new connections of neuroplasticity.

Returning to our shift in the preferences of creative, analytic, or critical thinking, we might begin to see that through a focused attention we can engage one another in a common thinking communication that would benefit both speaker and listener. It is a given fact that good listening is the foundation of good dialogue. Through the realization of neuroplasticity we can focus on our thinking styles with the attention that good communications need. These dynamic conversations can trigger neuroplasticity whereby we gain new insights, learn new perspectives, and make new synaptic connections. We should be constantly learning from one another. Neuroplasticity is an ongoing phenomenon of the human brain.

What does this have to do with 21st century leadership? We have to be in charge of our thinking patterns and styles. We might have preferences but we also have opportunities to be flexible in whatever situation that makes a demand on our ability to shift and meet the challenge. We must find new ways to thinking, understanding our world, and communicating. It was Albert Einstein who defined insanity as always thinking in the same way expecting different results.

Shifting our thinking styles is not easy; internal change is challenging. It demands discipline and ardent practice; it requires courage, determination, and commitment. We have tools to do this. Every serious author on the subject of neuroplasticity prescribes that focused attention be done through the process of meditation, which is mindful training involving the ability to apply and maintain attention to a particular object, be it a concept, an abstract, a thing, or just one's breath (Pillay, 2011). It is the Mind that controls the brain to focus. It has been shown that meditation improves efficiency via improved sustained attention and impulse control (Kozasa, 2011). This assists the 21st century leader to focus on what is different about change or how new change manifests itself. Not all change has value. Does the leader understand the difference?

Returning to our opening paragraph, our 21st century leaders must find new ways for dealing with a struggling economy, natural disasters, global unrest, and political contention. This is not all gloom and doom for the healthy, focused leader who has a sense of himself/herself through the power of awareness that is sharpened by a focused attention. New findings in neuroscience are radically changing our old views of organizational operations. These findings are uncovering the brain activities and brain waves of leaders who have made it to the top by their dynamic styles of thinking and leading. Can we teach people how to change their styles of thinking and their brain activities in such a way that we will have enough inspirational leaders our society needs to deal with today's issues? It is the firm belief of this author that

OneSmartWorld has the tools our 21st century leaders need to maintain their edge in today's competitive and challenging world.

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