Are Teams Broken? Or Just Not Using Their Heads – Team Thinking in a New Light

Herrmann International

Better Thinking. Better Performance. Better Results.

Teams White Paper : Paper in Brief

- Discover the limits of "feel good" teambuilding activities, especially when critical business results are on the line.
- Explore a thinking-based system to help teams build trust faster, streamline communications, make better decisions and get the benefit of diverse perspectives.
- Learn how to apply the latest research on thinking and team effectiveness to achieve specific business objectives, whether the team is virtual or co-located, intact or cross functional.
- Get practical tips for overcoming three common team challenges.

"A team is a set of members united around a mission, owning a flow of work and set of outputs, and connected to other teams by what they receive and deliver."

– Robert F. Lynch, Thomas A. Werner, Team Management: Achieving Business Results Through Teams

The acronym VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) is commonly being used to described today's business landscape, and with good reason. People, departments, and entire organizations are dealing with complex new challenges that have no obvious precedents and no clear-cut answers. Competition isn't just growing, it's taking new forms and posing new threats, particularly as everyone pursues the same narrowing slice of market share. At the same time we face ever-more-aggressive demands for faster delivery of products and services at higher levels of quality, even as resources remain tight. Adding to the pressures, rapid technological, economic and global changes are impacting nearly every aspect of how the business runs and competes.

As a result, organizations are confronting some tough questions:

Are we solving problems effectively and efficiently? Are we making the fastest and most prudent decisions? Can we find new ways to go to market and uncover unmet needs? Do we have the discipline as well as the foresight to streamline our approaches, create new ways of doing things, and take full advantage of the resources we have?

Looking for Answers in the Power of Teams

The one obvious place to turn for competitive advantage in this challenging environment is the asset we can leverage to differentiate ourselves—the collective intelligence our human resources bring to bear. The industrial age has used the organizing principle of teams as a means to leverage that intelligence, based on the seemingly logical notion that working together as a group we will produce more than we can as individuals working alone.

When there is a complicated problem to resolve or a poorly functional, outdated process slowing things down, a team's combined know-how and variety of perspectives should lead us to more thorough, higher quality solutions and innovative ideas. And when performing at its best, the collective effort and mutual accountability offered by a team will create the efficiencies we need to get more done in less time, whether it's delivery of a product, completion of a project, or a response to a customer need.

In fact, the upshot of this VUCA environment is that business results have become even more dependent on teams performing at exceptional levels. Better, more efficient solutions, delivered in record time, require greater breadth of thinking. Working across boundaries and borders makes diversity of thinking a pre-requisite to success. All of these factors create an environment where teams could and should be more adding more value than ever.

Teams have become so ubiquitous that a large majority of the workplace spends a high percentage of their time in team-related activities, and this trend

is only expected to escalate: Jeanne Meister, co-author of The 2020 Workplace: How Innovative Companies Attract, Develop, and Keep Tomorrow's Employees Today, predicts organizations will be increasingly focusing their attention toward teams, even to the point of hiring and training teams as a unit to leverage the effectiveness of coherent work groups.

But the looming question remains: Do the sum of the parts really add up to more?

As we all know from our own team experiences, it's not as simple as just bringing people together. From communication breakdowns to competing priorities to conflict, there are a number of obstacles that can—and often do—get in the way of the team's success. These challenges have become so widespread and problematic, entire industries have arisen to try to overcome them, from teambuilding retreats to sensitivity training to personality and productivity workshops.

Yet for all of these options and approaches, too many teams still struggle, and their organizations are losing out. While proposed solutions are often designed to address the personality clashes, build collegiality and trust, and help teams get the most from their diversity, they frequently fail to make a measurable, lasting impact on the team's actual performance or help them achieve the desired business goals.

The teambuilding experience, appearing to be a superficial "feel good" exercise that provides little in the way of long-term change, is seen as too time consuming, too costly and too impractical or, when it's ineffective, actually a deterrent to encouraging teams to pursue any more development. Combined with more virtual teams spread across the globe, the classic negative team dynamics, and the extreme time constraints most people are feeling today, this creates a vicious circle of ongoing frustration, deepening divides and a further drop in effectiveness.

Why Many Team Performance Strategies Come Up Short

What's missing from these approaches? With knowledge workers, you can't develop and maintain an exceptional, consistently high-performing team without focusing first on what drives the team's behaviors and actions at the root level: **thinking.**

"We need to focus more broadly on cognitive diversity, rather than solely on identity as a source of diversity. This allows us to configure teams that generate superior economic value by generating better solutions to real business problems."

— Fred Keeton, Vice President, External Affairs and Chief Diversity Officer, Harrahs Entertainment

Our more than 30 years of research on the brain and performance has shown that when people come together, their ability to communicate, problem solve, and get the most from their diverse experience and perspectives starts with a non-judgmental understanding of how they think, both as individuals and as a group. This is true whether you are dealing with intact teams (co-located or virtual) or bringing people together for a specific project, or if you just need people to collaborate on the fly to address everyday issues.

It also applies to any kind of team, whether the team operates in the workplace or on an athletic field, but it's especially relevant in business because the team's thinking is what drives business results. We're creating teams to bring together and then funnel the knowledge and skills of the members towards solving business problems and achieving business outcomes. While teambuilding exercises can build camaraderie, and personality and sensitivity workshops can develop some mutual, interpersonal understanding to help improve communications, none of these can really take hold without a foundation and specific processes that help the team leverage its collective intelligence to fuel business outcomes. And after all, achieving business outcomes is what they're there for.

There is another reason why a thinking model works so well in team situations. When team members understand the importance of a breadth of thinking and how each person's thinking adds value, differences will be viewed in a nonjudgmental way, and the team will have new context for how they can tackle the inevitable challenges the come up. Once there is an expectation in place that differences will exist, the team will benefit from them, and there is a process they can use to manage through it, frustration levels suddenly drop. A professor who uses this approach in MBA team programs explains it this way:

"Once they get the concept that we all have brains, we just use them differently, and that we need all of those differences to get the job done, they get over the typical quibbling that takes up so much team energy and drags down the team's effectiveness."

The Whole Brain® Framework as a Foundation for Team Excellence

A thinking-based approach to improving team performance takes into account its critical driving business factors, including:

* How different people on the team prefer to think, which in turn affects how they communicate, behave and approach work

* How different styles of thinking contribute to team outcomes and objectives

* How different styles can be leveraged to move from conflict to creative contention

* The breadth of thinking available to the group, including the similarities and differences in individual thinking styles, how their styles change under pressure, and key work preferences

* The process flow the team prefers and how to optimize it to increase efficiency and productivity

* Alignment and gaps in the group's thinking preferences and how these affect their performance — as well as concrete steps to take to get the best results

Getting a composite view of the similarities and differences of team members' thinking styles is the first step to understanding the strengths available to the team and where there might be potential challenges or gaps.

By illustrating how they as a team approach work, communicate internally and externally, make decisions, and solve problems, the Whole Brain® framework gives team members a quickly actionable, business-focused way to not only recognize the group's diverse strengths but to leverage their individual and collective thinking more effectively.

We also know from our research that all styles of thinking are necessary to get the best results, so even teams that are dominant in one or two styles will get exponentially better results by learning how to apply Whole Brain® Thinking skills to tap into the full brainpower that is available to them.

From an organizational standpoint, there are additional advantages. For example, leaders, managers, OD professionals and others will have the data they need to more strategically align thinking resources with the business objectives and challenges at hand.
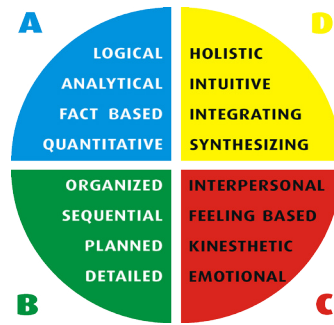
The Whole Brain® Model, which serves as an organizing principle for how the brain works, depicts the four different thinking styles: A – logical, B – detailed, C – people-oriented, D – conceptual. Although an individual may prefer certain modes of thinking over others, everyone has access to all four quadrants. Using the skill of Whole Brain® Thinking, people and teams are able to fully leverage their preferences, stretch to other styles when necessary, and adapt to and take advantage of the preferences of those around them to be faster, more responsive, more collaborative, and more productive.

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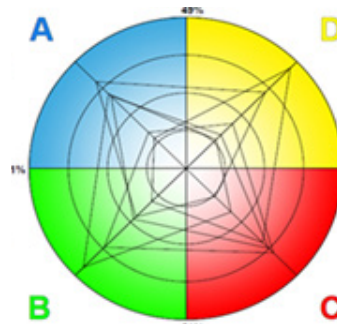
The Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument® (HBDI®) assessments, originally developed at General Electric, measure thinking preferences across the four quadrants of the Model. The HBDI® Team Profile™ includes a composite view of a team's thinking and 11 data-driven reports to analyze and compare.

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players, the Whole Brain® approach
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am ends up with better results—and so

Whole Brain® Thinking is
any situation — a project, project
- and it gives you a neutral
baseline and common ground to start with. It's such an easy process for people to take on board and connect with."

– David Barker, Strategic HR Business Partner, Coca-Cola's London 2012 Olympic & Paralympic Games Project Teams

Inside the Meeting of the Minds: Helping Teams Unleash Their Brainpower

"To understand how this works in practice, let's look at a few case examples of teams and the issues they're facing, and how a thinking-based approach can help the team get past them.

Individual Stars Aren't Shining Together: Team members don't function together or feel a part of the greater whole, and isolation and suspicions are only making things worse.

This team is made up of sharp, highly skilled members who know their jobs inside and out. Individually, they are the best of the best; together, they aren't living up to their collective potential. It's as if they are simply a group of individuals working alone rather than a true team collaborating to reach common goals, which is the whole purpose of a team being assembled. Some efforts are being duplicated, while other tasks aren't getting done at all, and overall productivity and results are suffering. It's hard to pinpoint the exact issue because everyone is quick to place the blame on someone else.

Sample Team Preference Map (The HBDI® Team Profile™)
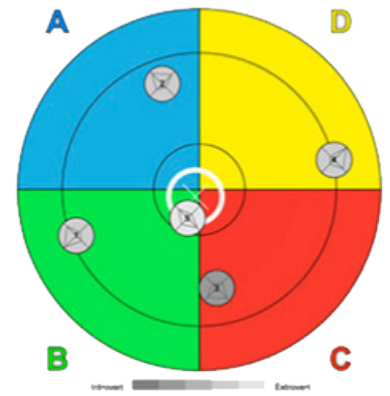
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THE CHALLENGE: Lack of cohesion and trust is impeding productivity.

Use thinking as the catalyst for fostering team trust, alignment and collaboration.

A recent University of Phoenix study found that less than a quarter of workers prefer to work on teams. When you hear the war stories of confrontations, scapegoating, blame and other forms of dysfunction, it's not hard to see why.

All of the contemporary research on teams shows that trust among members is essential to effective teamwork. Too many organizations try to address the issue by focusing on the behaviors creating the interpersonal issues first. But they often end up with only a temporary fix, at best, because behaviors can be affected by a variety of external factors. This kind of approach fails to address, in a non-judgmental way, the thinking that is driving the behaviors.

The trust issue has become even more complicated by the fact that so many teams now operate virtually, from offices across town and around the world. According to the Telework Research Network, telecommuting grew by 73% between 2005 and 2011, and the organization estimates more than five million workers will be telecommuting by 2016. For many of these teams, face-to-face time may be limited to a Skype screen, and its members may never actually meet in person.

At the same time, increased business complexities are requiring disparate people from inside and outside the organization to collaborate successfully to handle specific issues or meet customer demands. On any given day, an individual may be teaming with people in different departments, different locations and different countries.

As a result, new challenges are cropping up and old challenges are becoming magnified. It's hard enough to build trust when everyone is working together in the same physical space. How do you do it when you don't know your teammates, you don't have the benefit of nonverbal cues, and you don't share a common functional or cultural background?

What We Know About Team Effectiveness

US Forest Service Study:

- Teams that are balanced in terms of thinking preferences are more effective; they consider more options and make better decisions.
- Whole Brained teams were 66% more efficient than homogenous teams.
- 70% of the teams were "successful" when Whole Brained vs. 30% when not.
- Size matters: 7 members is ideal.

Our research has identified these attributes of successful teams:

- Common purpose and goals that are clearly understood
- Team role clarity
- Frequent and effective communication — no secrets or hidden agendas
- Agile team leadership, managing and leveraging the difference on the team
- Commitment from all — members care about the project success and support teammates, want to make them and the team successful
- Trust in teammates to do their jobs, be open, accept them for who they are, and be reliable and accountable
- Creative contention — any team that does not disagree is not doing effective work or leveraging their differences. The art is in knowing how to do it effectively.

Other key points:

- Stereotyping of others is a major impediment to team development (he's a "this" or she's a "that").
- The more heterogeneous (mentally diverse) a group is, the more it needs a multi-dominant facilitator/leader.
- Heterogeneous groups can be extremely creative and successful OR they can "crash," unless they take the steps and time necessary to find synergy.
- Because cultural differences can make working as a team even more challenging, more

process time and consistent communication are even more important.

- Virtual teams need a common language even more than co-located teams to increase the speed of relationship building and decrease miscommunication.

In this case, a focus on thinking provides a clear, non-judgmental starting point for teams to get a picture of who they are. Regardless of their make-up and whether they're virtual or co-located, teams run on thinking. By helping the team members understand how they prefer to think and how those preferences impact their approaches to communicating, collaborating and managing work strategies, you give them a shared foundation they can all agree on and a common, easy-to-use language to move forward with. It's a critical point because research has shown that a team's "collective intelligence factor" isn't strongly associated with how intelligent the individuals are on their own; instead, such issues as allowing equal time for input are what drive higher performance.

Here are some ways you can use a Whole Brain® approach to build trust and increase productivity, whether the team is co-located, virtual or temporary:

- **Get the thinking data.** A validated assessment can provide a composite view and critical data points to help the team understand how its preferences impact decision making, process flows, interpersonal communications, idea generation and problem solving (see Sample Team Preference Map, The HBDI® Team Profile™). A data-driven approach focused on thinking vs. personality also helps remove judgment and emotion from those issues a team may have a tendency to overlook or avoid addressing.

- **Link the thinking to the tasks at hand.** Once you have the thinking data, you will be able to start the team on the path to discovering why there are challenges and how the team can move forward more effectively in light of them.

- **Build the team's thinking agility.** This means the team defines and leverages the thinking skills needed for the work required and manages the cognitive load effectively, irrespective of the preference of the group.

- **Develop Whole Brain® Thinking team skills.** Doing so allows the team to work on the task at hand while continually improving their interactions, processes and alignment. Depending on the purpose of the team, logistical issues and other factors, this may entail activities such as:

- In-depth workshops that provide a general understanding of the team's preferences along with skills and tools the team can build, reinforce and apply over the long-term to optimize how it approaches its work.

- Webinar sessions to reach virtual or dispersed teams and provide an understanding of similarities, differences, strengths and gaps within the team, how the team's thinking can be best leveraged, and action planning to move forward most productively.

- Profile debriefing sessions for targeting a focused objective such as strategic planning or a specific project.

- **Incorporate Whole Brain® Thinking into the day-to-day operations of the team**. To keep thinking top of mind, new codes of conduct, guiding principals and job aids will help team members change the old, less functional processes into productive activities such as "walking around" the four thinking quadrants to ensure they have a balanced view of all issues that affect their performance and outcomes.

Once team members understand each others' thinking and have this

common business framework and language they can work from, it's easier to create alignment and build lasting trust, even when new members join the team.

Not your classic teambuilding exercise, this approach is a hands-on, application-oriented process that does more than create familiarity and camaraderie; it helps the team get more done by putting its thinking to work most productively.

Working Together But Getting Nowhere. *Team members work together smoothly and get along great, but they fail to deliver great results.*

This department always meets its deadlines with time to spare. Decisions come fast, and the team members rarely have issues with conflict, miscommunication or dissenting opinions. But they seem to be facing the same problems over and over again, unable to find ways to truly resolve them, and management is becoming concerned their ideas are "one note." The pressure is on this team to deliver: They're dealing with an unresolved problem impacting a multi-million-dollar customer—and they're stuck. Meanwhile, competition is heating up, and the company is starting to lose its edge.

THE CHALLENGE: Inadequate solutions and uninspired ideas are slowing down progress and creating competitive risk.

Bring in the diversity of thought to reach breakthrough results.

On the surface, it may seem that a team made up of people who think in similar ways will be more productive and efficient. In reality, the experience is usually just the opposite (See sidebar: "What We Know About Team Effectiveness").

The complex issues and competitive pressures of today require diversity of thought and perspectives. Research by Edward Lumsdaine and Martin Binks (Entrepreneurship from Creativity to Innovation: Effective Thinking Skills for a Changing World) and others shows that the best solutions and most innovative ideas come from the combination of all four thinking preference. A six-year US Forest Service Study further demonstrated that because this Whole Brain® approach leads to more effective problem solving and decision making, it actually increases team efficiency and speed once it is established as a core process.

Here are some ways you can apply what we know about thinking to improve problem solving and innovation in teams:

1. **Put the best teams to work on critical business problems.** Assemble "diverse by design" teams that bring together the cognitive diversity necessary to address complex problems and generate groundbreaking, workable solutions. Managers, OD professionals and others can strategically deploy the thinking in the organization to create the most effective teams for targeting specific business issues.

2. **Fill in the gaps by building strong Whole Brain® Thinking skills in homogenous teams.** If the team members have largely similar thinking styles, it is critical that Whole Brain® Thinking be top of mind. Team members can learn how to break out of their comfort zones and hold each other accountable for stretching to less-preferred modes to overcome their blind spots.

3. **Provide Whole Brain® Thinking tools for quick application.** There are a variety of tools and job aids teams can use to ensure all four quadrants of thinking are being used in the most effective way in relation to the outcome they are trying to achieve. For example, a "Mapping the Task" process gives teams a way to immediately improve their approach to any task or project.

4. **Encourage teams to pursue outside thinking and perspectives.** Once a team knows its thinking preferences it can use that knowledge to enhance its communication with other teams, groups, and internal and external stakeholders, no matter how diverse those groups are, and when required, bring in the brainpower necessary to get the best results.

Diverse Thinking is Colliding Instead of Coalescing. *Team members bring the right balance of thinking to the table, but project risks — and frustrations — remain high.*

This team is responsible for handling complex projects within tight budgets and aggressive delivery schedules. While the project and technical managers are using tools and methods designed to keep the more creative members of the team on track, project risk remains high, miscommunication is creating confusion, and differences in perceived priorities create slow decision-making and process issues that are threatening their ability to meet critical deadlines. Frustration is high, and team members complain, "It's like we're not even speaking the same language. Why won't they just let me get my work done?"

"Teams that have clusters of members who engage in high-energy communication while other members do not participate don't perform as well."
– Alex "Sandy" Pentland, "The New Science of Building Great Teams," Harvard Business Review

THE CHALLENGE: The differences on the team create silo mentalities and communication impasses that are getting in the way of results.

Give "voice" to the full cognitive diversity within the team.

Cognitive diversity is critical because we need all aspects of thinking at work – all are required – but just having diversity on a team isn't enough. If not managed properly,

discontent, communication breakdowns, squandered talent and missed opportunities can result.

A thinking-based framework helps the team not only understand the value of difference to get a wider range of input, feedback and suggestions, but also provides the tools to ensure everyone is being heard and contributing to the process.

Here are some tips for getting the most from a diverse team's brainpower:

1. **Get the foundation in place.** Everyone needs to recognize how different styles of thinking contribute to overall objectives. Whole Brain® Thinking helps the team understand and acknowledge the differences among team members and then use those differences to make the most of the ideas of each team member.

2. **Build Whole Brain® communication skills.** Team members have to be able to communicate effectively across quadrants, regardless of their own preferences. A structure-oriented project manager with a strong B-quadrant preference may need to adapt his or her approach and methods to make sure a team member with a more creative, strong D-quadrant preference "gets it." Both have a responsibility to communicate and listen in a way that respects each others' thinking styles.

3. **Help team members leverage their own thinking to make lesser-preferred activities more palatable**. Metrics and milestone checks aren't just for process-oriented thinkers, just as creativity isn't merely the domain of big-picture, conceptual thinkers. Working together, team members can use the Whole Brain® framework as a filter to seek out the tools that work best for them.

4. **Bring the thinking together with good leadership and management.** The more diverse a team is, the more important it is to have a skilled leader in place who can manage, facilitate and incorporate Whole Brain® Thinking practices within the team. Someone whose own thinking preferences are fairly balanced is ideal, but there are also tools and methods anyone can use to take on this role.

Harness the Team's Collective Intelligence to Transform Business Results

To ensure teams are operating at the levels necessary to deliver excellence in a VUCA world, remember these key points:

- **Collegiality isn't enough to get results.** Team members have to understand what factors drive business performance and how to optimize what they do on a daily basis, both individually and as a group, to be more efficient and effective.

- **Quick agreement and consensus don't equal success.** The most innovative ideas and solutions come from diverse thinking and "creative abrasion."

- **Use cognitive diversity as a strategic advantage.** As tasks and business issues grow more complex, bring together the balance of thinking necessary to get the best solutions, and equip the team to fully leverage the brainpower available to it.

- **Teams offer a competitive advantage but only if the organization gets the benefit of the team's full brainpower.** Managers play a key role in making sure diverse thinking is respected, managed, heard and applied.

- **Set up teams for success, whether they're virtual, cross-functional or co-located.** The Whole Brain® framework provides a common, business-focused, immediately applicable approach for aligning team members and creating a foundation for productive collaboration, even when face time is rare and projects are intense and pressure-filled.

"The best-performing and most creative teams in our study… sought fresh perspectives constantly, from all other groups in (and some outside) the organization."
– Alex "Sandy" Pentland, "The New Science of Building Great Teams," Harvard Business Review

Shannon Loftis, who led Microsoft Game Studios' Good Science Studio team in its design of the "Kinect Adventures" game for Kinect for Xbox 360, used the Whole Brain® framework to help her team come up with more balanced solutions while accelerating the game development process. Her experience is a perfect example of how a thinking-based approach helps organizations optimize team performance and push the envelope for today's environment:

"We really wanted to break the process apart from the beginning and get away from thinking about game design in a traditional way," she explains. "Part of doing that was making sure all of the thinkers on the team had a voice."

For many organizations, getting teams to focus on the impact of thinking means getting away from business as usual and reexamining the approaches that have been used in the past. And that's a good thing. Every aspect of business is changing; our approaches to team effectiveness need to evolve with them. One of the best ways to do this is to recognize and fully leverage the wealth of thinking power we have in our teams. No organization can afford to have teams burning time, energy and productivity without getting results. And no organization can afford to wait to figure it out, because if they do, one thing is certain: Their competitors will get a significant head start!

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