

Thinking Agility and Leadership

By Jeff Cowart

“We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.” – Albert Einstein

Leaders operate with near-constant deficits of time, energy, resources and focus.

That’s a conclusion drawn by strategist Jesse Sostrin, author of *The Manager’s Dilemma*, writing in *strategy+business*. He notes that this reality “erodes quality contemplation.” He writes we tend to measure thinking in minutes when we should be practicing our “thinking agility,” which reflects our “capacity to reflect dynamically” in a constantly shifting landscape.

Physicians are already partially trained to do this in the context of medicine. They sort quickly through and categorize relevant and irrelevant information and create action/treatment plans accordingly, assessing outcomes and modifying actions as needed in response to discovery. They overlay empathy and engagement with patients as part of the process.

The imperative for physician leaders is to recognize and leverage this skill set in the non-medical context of business and management decisions related to practice operations, projects and initiatives. Sostrin, drawing on the Whole Brain Thinking theories of Ned Hermann, outlines three strategies to help develop thinking adaptability, problem-solving, creativity and innovation:

Know Your Thinking Sweet Spot: We all have dominant thinking tendencies – analytical, logical, data-based; practical, task-driven, operational; relational, expressive, engaging others; experimental, leveraging, challenging status quo.

Uncover Your Thinking Gaps: Being honest about your dominant thinking tendency allows you to consciously cultivate other dimensions to round out and strengthen overall thinking. Research shows the majority of us have limited range across all four thinking dimensions. The strongest leaders have more range – and it typically comes through conscious cultivation of thinking outside our comfort zone.

As Situations Change, Let Your Thinking Change: Once you know your sweet spot and recognize your gaps, Sostrin says “you can begin to cultivate thinking diversity by considering the ideal response” to a changing variety of situations. You can choose the best thinking dimension that fits the problem rather than always defaulting to your thinking sweet spot.

Many years ago, one of my enlightened bosses took a dozen senior leaders from our organization to a workshop on Whole Brain Thinking led by Ned Hermann himself, who pioneered this model and method of improving thinking capacity. Seeing that we were serious business executives, Ned started the workshop by passing around a box of children’s toys and

our sole focus for the next half hour was playing with the toys individually and collectively. Somehow it opened our minds for a type of discovery and thinking that we didn't anticipate and it remains one of my most memorable leadership learning experiences. For those interested in digging deeper into expanding personal thinking capacity, a good place to start is by reading "The Whole Brain Business Book," written by Hermann in collaboration with Ann Hermann-Nehdi.

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