

Brain-Based Leadership Development

by Audie McCarthy

In our constant search for ways to grow, develop, and hone our leadership skills for better performance and to more effectively motivate and engage those on our teams, we, as leaders, can look to neuroscience to help us achieve these goals.

Neuroscience tells us that we might change the way we lead as a result of our brain as our brains are social organs focussed on improving connection with others.

Let's start by looking at what we know about the brain.

Dr. Brynn Winegard, an award-winning professor, speaker, and expert in business and brain sciences tells us the brain is the 'controller' of our thoughts and behaviours.¹ The neurons (nerve cells) in our brain transmit electrical impulses telling us what to do and what to think and are always active. The average size of the brain is only three pounds (size of your fist), and 95% of our brain's activities are hardwired.

This suggests that almost all our decision making is done by the non-conscious brain.

Our brains are hardwired to do things on auto-pilot – to do things the way we have always done them. Therefore, it is hard to change, or to break habits. But it is also good because hardwiring keeps us safe. Imagine what our lives would be like if we had to think and decide about every little thing that happens. If our brains weren't hard wired to tell us to not to touch a hot stove, we'd be spending a lot of time in emergency.

What implications does this have?

We make decisions and solve problems based on what we have always done (hardwired); on what we have always believed to be true (biases), our pre-conceived notions. We base everything on experience. The good news is you can rewire on top of the hardwiring, according to Neuroplasticity. Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to change, remodel and reorganize for more capacity and better ability to adapt to new situations. We can learn to think differently; we can learn to overcome pre-dispositions and biases.

'When we learn something new, we create new connections between our neurons. We rewire our brains to adapt to new circumstances. This happens on a daily basis, but it's also something that we can encourage and stimulate.'²

1 <https://www.drbrynn.com/biography>

2 Nelson, A., The 7 C's of Change Management: Making Change Easier with Neuroscience, gethppy.com/tag/neuroscience?utm_source=Basis-Leadership-Neuroscience&utm_medium=In-LineCTA&utm_campaign=In-LineCTA

This process is loosely analogous to the way a powerful search engine works. When you search Google, for example, for a term or phrase, the software takes note. It also tracks the results you search and records your selection. The next time you use the Google search engine, it will feature more prominently the terms and results that you chose before, because it is designed with the assumption that this is closer to what you want. You get more of what you've already looked for; the results in your future echo the choices of your past.

Let's take a step back in time.

How many of you think you are right brained? Left brained? With which “side” do you naturally align?

Roger Sperry won the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1981 for the concept of split-brain lateralisation.³ In other words, he brought the terms left brain and right brain into everyday use. According to this theory, everyone has one side of their brain that is dominant and determines their personality, thoughts, and behavior. Because people can be left-handed or right-handed, the idea that people can be left-brained and right-brained is tempting.

What this means is if you are naturally more logical it is difficult for you to understand someone that is more emotional. In fact, you probably don't WANT to understand them! The belief is that your brain is hardwired to be logical. The left and right sides of the brain are connected by a great number of nerve fibers. In a healthy brain, the two sides communicate with one another.

A 2013 study looked at 3-D pictures of over 1,000 people's brains. They measured the activity of the left and right hemispheres, using an MRI Scanner. Their results showed that a person uses both hemispheres of their brain and that there does not seem to be a dominant side.

However, a person's brain activity does differ, depending on what task they are doing.

Situation! Budget Cuts

You and your colleague must reduce your budgets by 15%.

If you are right-brained, you will want to protect the “people” side of things.

If you are left-brained, you will want a take a process approach.

The right-brained person starts with the big picture. You might hear them say things like, “Let's look at our strategic plan, let's brain-storm to see how we can cut 15% out and still meet our goals”. You might want to protect your budget because it is the one you built. You need to check your biases.

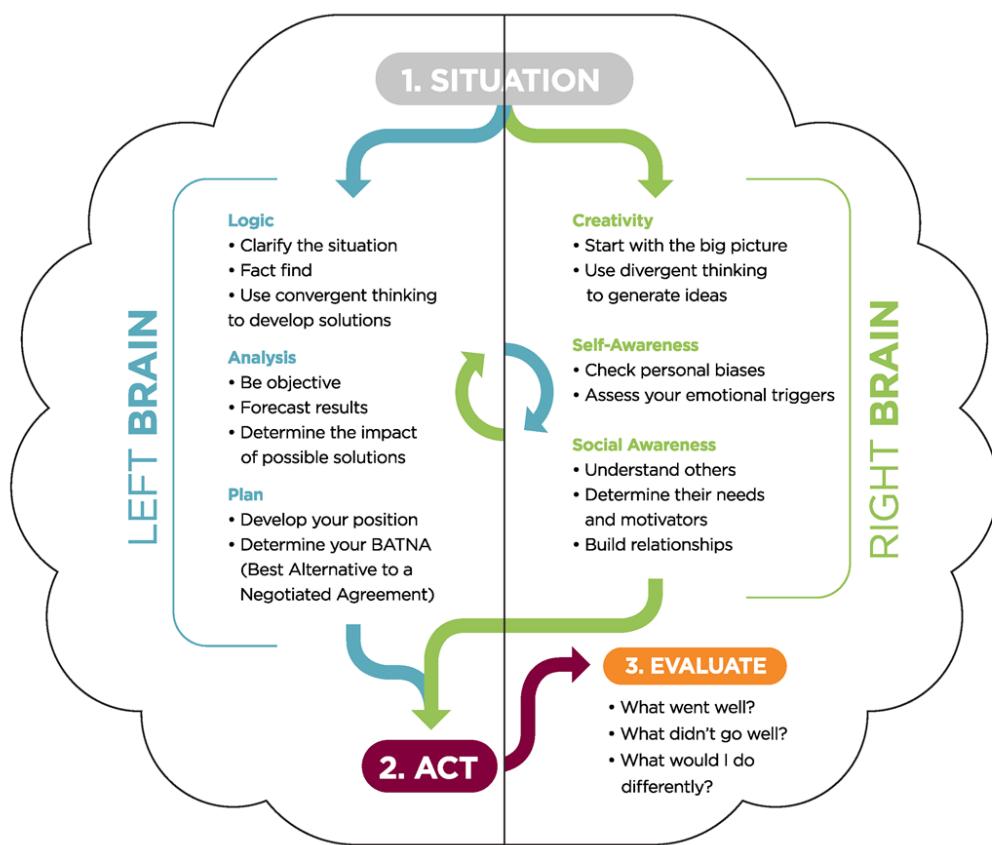
The left-brained person would start with clarifying the situation and might says things like, “Let me be sure I understand. You want a 15% reduction on the bottom line? What is driving this?” They will most likely resort to fact finding such as what other departments are doing first before taking any action. They will most likely be more objective in their assessment of the request and seek out a compromise.

³ MLA style: Roger W. Sperry - Facts. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2019. Fri. 19 July 2019. www.nobelprize.org/prizes/medicine/1981/sperry/facts/

Another study in PLoS Biology reports that the language centres in the brain are in the left hemisphere, while the right hemisphere is specialized for emotion and nonverbal communication.⁴ Popular cultural exaggeration of these findings led to the development of beliefs of left-brain and right-brain personalities.

What does this mean in terms of leadership?

At Mohawk College Enterprise, (MCE), we think about the right- and left-brained concepts as one. Our brain-based model expresses how our brains, as leaders, work to address a situation from both sides, the logical and the creative, through three steps – Situation, Act, Evaluate.



No matter what the situation, our leadership brains apply both logical steps and creative ideas to assess the situation and make decisions about how to proceed, what actions to take to engage and motivate others for better performance.

Simultaneously, as the leader is proceeding through the logical process, they are applying creativity to each step in their analysis. The effective leader starts with the big picture using divergent thinking to generate ideas. Once this is done, the diagnostic (logical) part of the thinking kicks in as the leader works to convert ideas into possible solutions.

⁴ Dehaene-Lambertz, G., Monzalvo, K., Dehaene, S., The emergence of the visual word form: Longitudinal evolution of category-specific ventral visual areas during reading acquisition, March 6, 2018 <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.2004103>

The right brain addresses personal biases and emotional triggers through the Emotional Intelligence skills of Self- and Social Awareness. Leaders need to check their biases (remember previous discussion about hardwiring in our brains?) and assess how their preconceptions, based on experience, affects their capacity for being objective and how their decisions will affect others. Various tools such as DiSC®, Personality Dimensions®, Myers-Briggs Inventory®, etc. help leaders to raise awareness of their preferred styles of work and communication.

Social Awareness, the capacity for understanding others and how leadership decisions might affect them, helps the leader to continue to build those relationships necessary to the team's and organization's success. As Brené Brown says, 'When I lack self-awareness as a leader and when I'm not connected with the intentions driving my thoughts, feelings, and actions, I limit the perspective and insights that I can share with people I lead.⁵ This reminds us that our brains are social organs seeking connections with others.

Finally, in Step 3, we apply a process of evaluation, assessing how the action we decided to take worked. When in the Evaluation step, both sides of the brain continue to work, simultaneously, to determine what, in anything, needs to change.

Summary:

We know a lot more about the brain than we did even 20 years ago. We know we can't change those habits and learned experiences that are hardwired but we can create different paths.

Neuroscience presents us with a more holistic view of leadership development; it's about making connections and building relationships. The MCE Brain-Based Leadership Model creates a visual representation of neuroscience at work, as the leader works to engage and motivate others for best performance. *Cont.*

Scenario!

2 People, 1 Brain

Now – think of the following scenario as not TWO PEOPLE but your brain. How will you make the best decision using both sides of your brain?

Scenario:

You and another leader are co-leading a project team. Both of you have been assigned responsibility for different milestones for the project and so each of you have different team members assigned to you. However, the IT expert must work for both of you.

You need his help today because your first milestone is fast approaching, but your co-leader feels she has the same issue – needing his expertise to meet her 1st milestone.

What should be the solution? How will the two leaders work together so they both get what they need?

After the conversation, you would need to do the last step of the model – EVALUATE.

You should anticipate this before ACTING in hopes of achieving a better outcome.

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Think about your creative and logical sides, your right and left-brain hemispheres, and find ways to increase your leadership skills through working them both. This will help you to become a better decision-maker and problem-solver, and ultimately, a better leader.



Although not a neuroscientist or researcher, Audie McCarthy has always been interested in how the brain functions. Attending lectures and mini-med school at McMaster University heightened her interest. Curiosity led her to read extensively on the topic and together, with her training designer at MCE, Audie developed a Brain - Based Leadership Model.

Audie McCarthy is the President and CEO of Mohawk College Enterprise. Mohawk College Enterprise is a business-to-business corporation established by Mohawk College to prepare people and companies with the skills and expertise required to succeed in today's fast-paced world. Through their expert trainers, they provide

