

Servant Leadership, Creative Thinking and the HBDI® (Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument)

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How many times have you heard someone say, “I’m just not creative” or “We should leave that one to the creative types”? For many years, the common school of thought was that creativity couldn’t be taught. Enter Dr. Ann McGee-Cooper.

From many decades of working in the public and private sector, Ann has been a pioneer in changing beliefs about the creative process.

“Everyone has the potential for creative breakthroughs if we only tap into our inner genius, use the abilities we have to push down blocking assumptions, and risk trying something new.”

One of the first concepts I learned from Ann 32 years ago was how to

look at any problem, tough challenge, or bad event in your life as an opportunity for a creative breakthrough.

In 1978, as a public school teacher, I was given classes of students performing below the 30 percentile in reading and mathematics. Yet, they were assigned to a “talented and gifted” program. After some creativity training from Ann, I began to look upon this problem as an opportunity for fun instead of a hopeless work assignment. The prevailing public education view at the time was one of rote memorization, repetitive tasks, worksheets, and conformity. With some encouragement from Ann, I stepped out of sync with the status quo and began innovating. After donning a few costumes to introduce assignments, taking

students on fieldtrips to interesting work environments, and creating an Academy Awards evening to honor research projects, I became a believer in the power of creativity—the program became a proven success and a tour stop for educators.

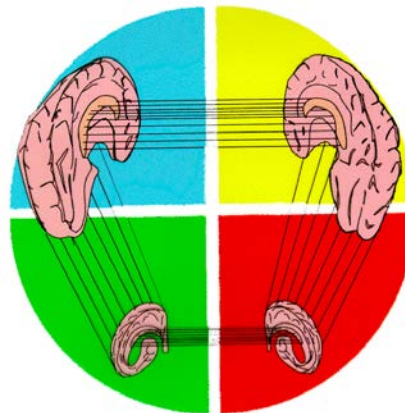


As Ann and I became business partners, we continued our exploration of creativity with business professionals. We worked with talented people at the top of their fields. We learned that there were often two roles around creativity in successful organizations—creative

mavericks who challenged the status quo, pushed the limits, and often made traditional thinkers nervous. And, there were creative champions... those seasoned executives who knew the policies, procedures, systems, and political channels; these creative champions looked out for the mavericks and helped them maneuver their way through the landmines that existed for creative types. It became very clear to us, that

creativity was definitely a whole-brained venture with room at the table for everyone, regardless of right-or left-brained dominance.

In the early 90's, we expanded our work in hemisphericity and found extremely helpful the work of Ned Herrmann, an electrical engineer who managed the Management Education Program at GE. As we used his model and the HBDI profile with our Clients, we found that it provided answers and insights to teaming, conflict resolution, and daily work task execution. In addition, the HBDI can be of great help in understanding a whole-brained approach to the creative process. The HBDI is a carefully researched inventory which measures the thinking style preferences of the four quadrants of the brain.



The D-Quadrant (Upper Right Brain) and Creativity

At first glance, the quadrant most obviously associated with creativity is the D quadrant. This is the quadrant that always shakes up the plan and asks, “What if?” or “Why not?” It can easily see a new perspective on the issue.

D's not only will break rules to solve a tough challenge, but delight in the process.

One definition of creativity “looking at the same thing as everyone else, yet seeing something different” fits the D-Quadrant to the core.

The C-Quadrant (Limbic Right Brain) and Creativity

Also a part of the right hemisphere and classically associated with the

creative process, the C-Quadrant involves people, relationships, and networks to think creatively about problems. “Let’s pull people together, talk about it, and use our collective resources to come up with some new insights.”

The emotional traits of the C-Quadrant can add engagement, fervor, passion, enthusiasm, and excitement to the creative process

and encourage others in discovering the creative leaps.

The B-Quadrant (Limbic Left Brain) and Creativity

Not generally thought of as a “creative” quadrant, the B-Quadrant is essential for a whole-brained creative process. The ‘aha’ moment or the breakthrough idea is just the first step of creative thinking. To produce a successful creative solution, good planning skills must be called upon. Organizing an approach with steps for pilots or trial implementation requires details, sequencing, and scheduling...all specialties of the B-Quadrant. A plethora of information comes from brainstorming sessions; the B-Quadrant can organize, prioritize, and communicate the many different ways to go so that good informed decisions can be made.

Innovators without B-Quadrant skills or B-Quadrant Partners can be the reason many great ideas or creative solutions never leave the flip chart.

The A-Quadrant (Upper Left Brain) and Creativity

Often thought of as the arch enemy of creativity, the A-Quadrant is the force that frequently says, “that will cost too much money” or “the research doesn’t support the claim” or “you haven’t factored in X.” But surprise! The A-Quadrant can support and help the creative process if appreciated and worked with as a Partner. Robert Greenleaf taught us that great servant-leaders are ones that make timely decisions. But there is a dilemma. Greenleaf tells us, “On an important decision, one rarely has 100% of the information needed for a good decision no matter how much one spends or how long one waits...on most important decisions

there is an information gap between solid information and what is needed. The art of leadership rests, in part, on the ability to bridge that gap by intuition, that is, a judgment from the unconscious process.

The person who is better at this than most is likely to emerge the leader because she/he contributes something of great value...Leaders, therefore, must be more creative than most; and creativity is largely discovery, a push into the uncharted and the unknown.” At some level, after all the facts are in, we must make informed judgments on which of our creative ideas have validity and are worth pursuing.

In order to make good judgments, we need “to have done our homework.” We must have checked the numbers, examined ideas critically, analyzed our new approach,

done research on what others have done similar to our new idea before, and given it a good “once over.” The A-Quadrant is an expert in this line of thinking and can help the creative process be more successful, if we appreciate rather than fear this scrutiny.

To see how all of the quadrants can contribute to the creative process, we have to look no further than Southwest Airlines’ response to a life-threatening world event...the aftermath of 9/11 on their daily operations. All airlines, including Southwest were faced with a monumental challenge of survival after the unthinkable happened.

Over the months that followed 9/11, Ann

interviewed key leaders at Southwest and was briefed on many of the creative strategies used in responding to the challenges the airlines faced.



As we have analyzed these, we are not surprised that it was a very whole-brained process. Ann relates:

First, from the A-Quadrant... Southwest had chosen not to carry a high debt level which was counter to their industry and counter to the strong advice of Wall Street, but they wanted to have a large cash reserve if an emergency hit...which it did. Because of this cash reserve, they had some response time and could protect the jobs of their Employees. Not one person was laid off and 4,000 more people were hired in the following 12 months while other airlines laid off thousands of their people. “We manage in good times so that we’ll do well in bad times” is a key business philosophy. They

had done their financial homework and were prepared.

Second, from the B-Quadrant... Southwest put a high priority on planning, implementing, and communicating the plan as it unfolded. There were daily challenges as security mandates changed hourly from the Department of Transportation. Leaders communicated hourly to every station and every Employee what was happening. They also knew that flight schedule and frequency was important to their Customers and they honored their full schedule of flights when the signal was given that planes could return to the air. They were one of the first back in the air and gave out stick-on buttons that said “KEEP AMERICA FLYING/I flew Southwest Airlines today” to encourage people to trust in the future.

Third, from the C-Quadrant... Southwest never lost their Customer and people focus. In Southwest style, on September 12th, a large team from SWA Reservation Center in Dallas went to the American Airlines Reservation Center with food and gifts as a gesture of sympathy and support. Also, they had empathy for their Customers. They knew some would be afraid to fly for awhile. Although it cost them

revenue, they refunded nonrefundable tickets. After years of giving the public “The Freedom to Fly”, Southwest was now giving people the freedom NOT to fly. Very few people chose to return tickets.

Lastly, from the D-Quadrant... Southwest came up with some creative solutions to challenges. The security lines were long and slow, especially at first and the TSA security Employees were impacting SW Customers. They had no training in Customer service and felt little responsibility to bring a highly positive attitude of service and leading with a servant’s heart. So Southwest Employees began taking food to TSA Employees and showing appreciation in a zillion creative ways to lift their spirits, knowing that Southwest Spirit is contagious. Through these acts of kindness, they knew the most effective way to transform behavior was to inspire others with genuine caring and their own role model. Southwest viewed TSA as an extension of their Customer Service culture and welcomed them to the family. Leaders at some stations would brainstorm with TSA to help improve efficiency and spirit.

Another creative response from Southwest Airlines was with the Skycaps. Skycaps were dependent on tips for their

livelihood. With fewer people flying, there were far fewer tips. Southwest immediately began subsidizing the Skycaps’ tips. One skycap explained to me, “Thank God I work for Southwest Airlines. I have two young children. My supervisor said, ‘The Company will help us through this. We can count on having a job. Southwest needs us to find every way possible to help each Customer have a positive, encouraging experience as they fly again. Every way you can cheerfully lift their spirits will help them fly with us again and tell their friends. Because you are the first point of contact at the airport, you are our most valuable Ambassadors.’”

Yet another creative response came when new security measures required carry-on luggage searches at the gate for some travelers. Southwest quickly designed fast, efficient processes; and to keep spirits high, creative Employees sometimes employed lighthearted diversions—on at least one occasion, an Employee held up a pair of XXXXXL men’s briefs and, in a loud, mock surprise asked, “Whose are these!?”

And finally, Southwest Airlines long known for their comic commercials to make you burst out laughing, knew the fears provoked by 9/11 were no

laughing matter. They quickly shifted gears and created a message of hope and inspiration. The message became...America, together we will overcome and rise above this terrible threat. We are a nation with the courage and ingenuity to recover from any situation. Together we can make our nation strong again. We are here for you!



More often than not, servant leadership requires a creative response. One of the most compelling charges that Greenleaf gave to those of us wanting to make a difference as servant-leaders was the assignment of institution building. He encourages us with this mission:

This is my thesis: caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built. Whereas, until recently, caring was largely person to person, now most of it is mediated through institutions – often large, complex, powerful, impersonal; not always competent; sometimes corrupt. If a better society is to

be built, one that is more just and more loving, one that provides greater creative opportunity for its people, then the most open course is to raise both the capacity to serve and the very performance as servant of existing major institutions by new regenerative forces operating within them.

“Regenerative force” requires an extra dose of creativity. By a long shot, the most effective creativity integrates the gifts of all four quadrants:

big picture logic and profitability, planning and details, leaps of the imagination, and nurturing the human spirit. All of these come together in Southwest Airlines to create Positively Outrageous and unmatched Customer Service...the Spirit of Southwest Airlines. And thanks to insights from the HBDI, we all can have a distinct role in creating innovation in our own circles of influence to change our institutions and make a better world for all of us.

Seminars and additional resources are available from Ann McGee-Cooper and Associates, Inc. 214 357-8550 or visit us at AMCA.com

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