

Communicating Right, Left, and Center

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IT WAS A TYPICAL CORPORATE CONTEST designed to elicit employee's suggestions on ways to improve the company's performance. While a number of good ideas emerged, the winning submission was one simple word, "communicate." So obvious, so seemingly simple, the insinuation is that people are either intentionally refusing, or just not bothering, to share critical information. Could it be that the business world is saturated with people determined to undermine their companies, and their own jobs, by refusing to communicate? While effective communication has received its fair share of attention, and much of the information is viable and useful, there is a critical component that has remained unrecognized. It lies within the little-known differences between right- and left-brain dominance. Most of us are familiar with broad stroke overviews of the right-brain conceptual person vs. the left-brain analytical person. Yet few truly recognize the depth of influence right- and left-brain dominance has on every aspect of our lives, from whom we marry, to which sports we engage in, to — you got it — how we communicate.

Do you know if you tend to be more right- or left-brain? Here is a simple test to find out. Close your eyes and picture a tree. What do you see? Of course we all use both sides of our brain to varying degrees. However, the more left-brain you tend to be the more difficult it is for you to visualize. Perhaps you remember a tree that you are fond of. Or maybe you cannot picture anything at all, you can only think about a tree. On the other hand, someone who operates more from their right-brain will see the tree, the swing hanging from the branches, someone on the swing, the grass, the flowerbeds, the butterflies, and the further we progress up the continuum toward right-brain dominance the more detail the picture will include. The image in most people's mind's eye is one of a basic tree or some part of a tree. That would tend to indicate a fairly balanced use of both sides of the brain. Only about five percent of the population falls directly in the center. So even though you may be close to the middle, you will still most likely have a tendency toward right or left-brain dominance. It's a matter of degrees.

People who operate from opposite sides of the brain not only "see" things differently, they also "say" things differently. Left-brain dominant individuals speak directly, but hear in inferences. What does that mean? When this person says, "You look nice," they mean exactly that, nothing more, nothing less. But when that same person is paid the exact same compliment "You look nice," what they actually hear is "You didn't look very nice yesterday," or "I'm buttering you up because there is something I want from you." Left-brain people infer meaning from other people's comments. No wonder communication can become so dicey. So how do you get a left-brain person to hear the message you are intending rather than letting him or her extrapolating his or her own meaning from a comment? It's really not as difficult as it may initially appear. For example, instead of saying, "You succeeded!" which can be interpreted a number of ways such as "you don't usually succeed," or "pretty amazing for someone as incompetent as you," consider saying, "That was even more successful than usual." "More successful" infers that the person

is already successful and becoming more so. Of course not all left-brain people extrapolate negative meanings from comments. Influences from ego to narcissism can cause inflated interpretations as well.

Communicating with right-brain people also has caveats as well as advantages. These individuals hear exactly what you tell them, yet their own comments are laden with inferences. That is both the good news and the bad news. If you are going to give directions to a right-brain person they need to be explicit because right-brain people do exactly as they are told. We all know examples where someone followed instructions to a "T" and the results were disastrous. The person performing the task was probably highly right-brain dominant and received direction from someone who was also right brain dominant. This combination means a lot of the instruction was inferred rather than stated, but the person listening could only hear exactly what was said. On the other hand, since right-brain people tend to imply issues rather than state them head on, they are masters at such things as public relations. All communication is a double-edged sword, wielding potential for good and bad outcomes. Recognizing how our styles of interaction are hardwired into our personalities can open up new possibilities as well as help us avoid pitfalls. Now when you think someone wasn't listening, you can realize that perhaps they just couldn't hear you.



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