

Mission ONE: Integrating Nonprofit Right & Left Brains Exercises for Generating Alignment

by Peter S. Crosby

An established nonprofit was offering consulting services which required half of its highly-qualified staff time. But during the last two years, the service lost twice as much money as it was bringing in. These consistent losses ate up the organization's financial reserves, so no funding was available to alter services or improve the marketing. Yet the Executive Director, staff and Board didn't decide what to do until it was too late. The Result: 80% layoffs, and a forced merger.

We have all witnessed similar management log jams which allowed foreseeable costs, staffing or market factors to overwhelm passive nonprofit organizations. But nonprofits are now under more pressure than ever to adapt quickly because of the accelerating rate of change in technologies, government policies and globalization.

Unfortunately, when forced to change, many organizations become roiled in endless meetings, gossip and indecision. As emotionally-packed values, integrity and mission issues come face-to-face with fact-based reality checks, accounting and governance, debilitating stalemates can ensue.

Recognizing Cognitive Dissonance

Call it denial or culture clash or the ostrich dance, but it is akin to what psychologists call: "Cognitive Dissonance."

INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

This theory states that holding two conflicting options in our minds at the same time can cause unbearable tensions. For instance, the right side of our brain—the generally more intuitive, holistic, subjective side—may want to serve society at all costs. Yet the left side—generally more logical, analytical and objective—knows tough decisions are needed for survival now. These unresolved personal and organizational conflicts can cause a kind of group brain freeze leading to deadlock.

But change—especially rapid change—requires deep alignment of mission, planning and implementation. So recognizing discord in our individual right and left brains can be instrumental. Most critical, however, is fully understanding our team's differing points of view so we can generate common language and agreements for action. Without this fundamental clarity up front, many planning, monitoring and evaluation methods will be ineffective because of single-minded ideals, hidden agendas and subtle sabotage.

Appreciating Left and Right

Before we get started on the integration exercise to follow, let's look a bit more at basic neuroscience to appreciate both halves of the same whole and to see where you fit in. We know that right or

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left-handedness indicates that the inverse side of your brain usually dominates. So left-handers typically find their academic proficiencies in aesthetics, feeling, and creativity—i.e. right-brained. On the other hand, left-brainers, concentrate more on literal thinking, evaluation and accuracy. Most people have a distinct tendency for one of these thinking patterns. Some folks, we suspect many in nonprofits, are equally adept at both modes—more “whole-brained.” (Further details on right-left brain dominance and online tests are in ‘Resources’ at the end.)

Alignment—Finding the Middle Ground

First, we’ll use the discussion framework below to illustrate seemingly divergent nonprofit operating viewpoints—from both right & left brain positions. Its purpose is to demonstrate how polarized points of view may not be so different after all: Middle ground is within reach. The M-I-S-S-I-O-N acronym is only to remind us of the end goal for this exercise: alignment.

To begin, work your way down the list on page 7 one RIGHT LEFT pair at a time. Each twosome is an operating principle to be considered from the “other” brain’s point of view. See which side is a more natural prism for you and your team. Then put yourself into the other, less-comfortable side. You’ll see how both are valid and contribute to the whole. Later, you’ll work to see eye to eye on “middle brain” words that illustrate your teams’ particular alignment needs. The entire interactive process takes less than two-hours and can be

customized by facilitators for their teams.

Creating ‘Middle’ Brain Agreements

Having talked through the range of these seven operating horizons, listened carefully and documented the most relevant comments about your team’s views of each, some disagreement is more than likely. Honest excavation of these attitudes is healthy and downright necessary. For this exercise urge participation and consider that silence equals acquiescence. Clearing the air creates fresh underpinnings for rebuilding common goals for action.

The next step for tangible integration is to revisit the seven polar pairs to agree on shared ‘middle brain’ words that can bridge your team’s known cognitive gaps. Facilitate agreement around terms by incorporating characteristics of the right-left poles, the team’s concerns and a clear vision for future commitments. Move the conversation forward not by consensus per se, but by compromising on target words to which people can agree to act on.

For example, the heartfelt ‘Mission’ to segmented ‘Markets’ range has ‘constituents’ or ‘stakeholders’ in common. ‘Customer-focused’ or ‘client-oriented’ might also fit your situation as the cooperative essence marrying the subjective and objective poles. The “Integrity—ICTech” pair could also be bridged with words like standards, benchmarking or scalability. One organization recognized that taking things ‘step-by-step’ was their workable path for making Support - Sustainable.

A Common Lexicon for Decision-Making

This exercise is not just semantics. You are constructing a glossary for action. The leadership purpose is to make clear decisions on a lexicon that all will sign up for using. These agreed words then become common ground rules for communications, responsibility and authority to act—before strategic and tactical plans are structured.

Use the graphic resource Nonprofit Middle Brain listed in the Resource section as a template for framing your critical operating principles and generating “Middle Brain” words.

Align For Action

Now that your team better understands its context for organizational decision-making—and agrees to work with common terminology—planning can be accomplished more forthrightly. To encourage usage, check in occasionally on the level of clarity and comfort with the “whole brain” words. Then use any number of continuous monitoring methods—such as Balanced Scorecard, Performance Pyramids or Matrix Management—to ongoingly plan, tweak and evaluate strategies and results.

This training is not about the words. It’s about open communications, living agreements and mission / team alignment for rapid change. Organizations that can span right & left lobes, staff factions and political parties, afford themselves more opportunities. Balanced nonprofits generate additional social enterprise

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Nonprofit Brains

LEFT

RIGHT

Market ⇔ ⇐

Personal “meaning” depends on one’s point of view. Segments of populations—such as clients, staff, funders, partners, boards—each have differing needs and wants. Nonprofits must understand what’s of value to each. And most critical now: who will pay for what?

Meaning

For many in the nonprofit sector, choosing to work with a mission of more “significance” is essential. Often it’s a reflection of one’s personal priorities, values, even life purpose: Why am I here? What contributions can we make?

Intelligence ⇔ ⇐

Info and brains—both are key. Gather accurate current research for skilled reasoning and fact-based decision-making. Know your customers, industry trends, the law. Do it consistently and your team will master your playing field.

Insight

The Vision Thing—seeing into the future. Understanding the nature of people, organizations, society. Envisioning and communicating new models or paradigms. Often based on a combination of experience, intuition and courage.

Strategy ⇔ ⇐

Mission alignment & performance are even more challenging in fluid markets. Consistent focus on current needs, core competencies and proactive planning provide regular successes. So say NO to fads, whims and mission creep.

Satisfaction

‘Making a Difference’ may be cliché, but community service, greater good and social change are hard goals to actualize. Staff retention, repeat contributors, and organization growth indicate our actions are matching our words.

Sustainability ⇔ ⇐

Long-term thinking, swift actions and diverse revenue streams provide options for any organization. Also allows for independence to take advantage of opportunities while staying on-mission. Partners, profits and value propositions are vital.

Support

Compassion is heartfelt for many nonprofiters. Our work, our team, our communities take precedence. We want the kindred support of volunteers, contributors, lawmakers and respect for our advocacy.

Information and Communications Technology ⇔ ⇐

Productivity gains from ICT are well known. Data generated by systematic accounting, surveys, statistics, sector benchmarks demonstrate progress. As Galileo Galilei said: “Measure what is measurable, and make measurable what is not so.”

Integrity

Unity, coalitions and consensus are traditional nonprofit watchwords. Yet walking our talk, delivering what we promise, and accountability are critical now. Public scrutiny now demands more transparency, yet it’s healthy for internal alignment too.

Operations ⇔ ⇐

Where plans happen—or not. All those goals, timelines, logistics, personnel skills come together for performance—especially if metrics can illustrate them.

Ownership

Having a real say in any-sized organization’s planning is personally motivating for most. When authority goes with responsibility, then we can ‘own’ our results. Recognition and rewards for those efforts and outcomes reinforces accountability and teamwork.

Numbers ⇔ ⇐

Financials, the life blood of any organization. Accurate real-time accounting, regularly compared to projections and cost/benefit/risk analysis, provide for internal reality checks and timely reporting. Organizations should never wait 6 months to finish year-end financials or 990s.

Now

Responsiveness to emergencies, political contingencies and prospective funding is central to many nonprofits. Yet this organizational capacity to react quickly can be worlds apart from its ability to change proactively, evolve and lead. Capabilities in both demonstrate integration of Right & Left.

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revenues, private-public partnerships and “blended-value” capital for sustainable and scalable models. And a lot less headaches from brain freeze—or layoffs. ■



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Resources:

Social Enterprise Alliance:

➔ www.se-alliance.org/resources_lexicon.cfm

Social Enterprise Typology:

➔ www.virtueventures.com/setypology.pdf

Blended Value Capital:

➔ www.BlendedValue.org

Balanced Scorecard:

➔ www.BalancedScorecard.org

Agreement Methods:

➔ www.ResolutionWorks.org

Right-Left Brain Tests

➔ www.similarminds.com/personality_tests.html

➔ www.brain.web-us.com/brain/braindominance.htm

➔ www.blogthings.com/rightorleftbrainedquiz/

Mission ONE Implementation Tool:

Nonprofit “Middle Brain” Graphic Template

➔ www.sereporter.com/Resources/npmiddlebrain.jpg

Extraordinary Nonprofit Heritage

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the site to make the greatest scope of decisions possible.”

One of the obstacles Gilmartin and his staff have managed to overcome has been “not hearing a message early enough. So we also have people from our headquarters office traveling to each site on a regular basis, in part to spot problems before the customer sees them and they become big problems.”

Gilmartin also believes his company takes customer service a lot farther than most. “If you just do what people expect, and that’s it,” he says, “they almost don’t know you’re there—and when it comes time for

contract renewal or adding contracts there’s no substantial advantage. On the other hand, it makes a difference if you do something a little out of the ordinary—like leave behind your business card with a handwritten note, or leave a Hershey’s Kiss on someone’s desk, or if you find a \$2 bill on the floor and call it to the attention of the ownership instead of shoving it into your pocket and walking away. It can be any number of things.” In many situations, for example, the previous vendor’s employees didn’t wear uniforms. Gilmartin’s employees not only wear them, “but we put our name on them and we let customers pick the color. It all sets a tone immediately that is different than what the customers expect.” ■