

Focusing on Customers & Achieving Alignment

It is generally accepted that the combination of good leadership, engaged employees and satisfied customers is a recipe for success. What is less well understood is the importance of right-brained thinking in all of them.

Thanks to the Nobel prize winning work of Roger Sperry we know that the two hemispheres of the brain process information in different ways; while the left-hand side deals with more logical, sequential and structured thinking, the right-hand side thinks in a more holistic, simultaneous and unstructured way.

Until Sperry's ground-breaking work in the 1950's and 60's, the right-hand side of the brain was thought of as being relatively unused, a defunct throw-back to a previous era of human evolution perhaps.

Even today, you only have to look at the world around us to see how left-brained thinking has dominated our lives – our education system, the hierarchical structure of organisations, our measurement systems for aptitude and intelligence. This is not to decry left-brained thinking – our logical and structured approach over

phrases to describe excellent customer service. The sort of things they write are as follows:

- Listened to me
- Treated me as a person
- Were respectful
- Really seemed to care

Interestingly, people rarely say things like “the product worked” or “does what it says on the tin”. These “utility” factors are taken as given, excellence then is going further, it is about connecting with customers on an emotional level.

The point is that, not only is great customer service a right-brained concept, but consumers are willing to pay extra for it.

The difficulty for many organisations is that due to history, the pressures of the stock market, nepotism, and a host of other excuses, the Board tends to be dominantly left-brained, while the products and services they offer increasingly need to be more right-brained. This creates tension where the two approaches meet.

For example, I once had a customer who had good reason to be dissatisfied with the company I worked for at the time. As their account manager, I knew what we needed to do to correct the situation. I therefore submitted a request to the Board to supply the necessary products free of charge. My next instinct was to spend time with the customer to rebuild confidence and trust.

The Board took a different view. They insisted that I wrote detailed reports and attend lengthy internal meetings to discuss the situation. The more time I spent away from the client, the worse the situation got, until the only solution was a meeting between the CEO's of the two companies. Wouldn't it have been better if the Board's instinct had been to sort out the customer first and hold the inquest later?

The solution is for the organisation to be “whole-brained” at every level. For the Board this requires them to be more leadership oriented and less managerial. If you quickly write a list of words you would associate with management, and then write a similar list for words you would associate with leadership, you will notice two things: The first is that whereas the management words tend to be very logical, structured, specific and eminently measurable, the leadership words are more aspirational, unspecific and much less measurable. The second thing is that the management words tend to be more left-brained and the leadership ones more right-brained.

This is not to say that management is bad and leadership is good or vice versa. As the great management guru Peter Drucker once said; “Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.” Both disciplines are important and both are necessary.

Getting the two in balance produces a more “whole-brained” organisation which in turn produces better alignment between the objectives of employees at all levels in the hierarchy, from the “shop floor” to the Board room.

In aiming to achieve balance it should not be taken as a foregone conclusion that some of the people have to be changed. Brain dominance is an indicator of preference, not ability. For example, I am dominantly right-handed, but I can also catch a ball with my left

hand and, given time, I could probably learn to write with my left hand. What is important is an awareness of brain dominance. Although most people will know whether they are right- or left-handed, very few are aware of their thinking preferences or of those of other people. More importantly, very few teams are aware of where the “thinking gaps” might be or be aware of the subjects that might not be given sufficient consideration because the consensus within the team might be too strong.

The subject of brain dominance is therefore not simply a curiosity that might be of interest to a few people; it is a subject that should be considered as a basic element in organisational life.

About the author

Alistair Schofield is Managing Director of Extensor Limited.