It’s a Right Brain, Left Brain World

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During a long plane ride to Seattle last Thursday I made additional progress on my journey through *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, the latest book by religious historian Karen Armstrong. In the preface to the book Armstrong cites the research of Roger Sperry of the California Institute of Technology on the differences between the “left brain” and “right brain.” Armstrong writes that Sperry’s research revealed that “while the left brain reasons, explains, and analyzes and is concerned with words, distinctions, precision, and cause and effect, the right brain emotes, weeps, responds to symbolism, and is the home of art, music, and the ‘softer,’ more ‘pliable’ emotions.”

As I read these words I wondered whether brain chemistry plays a role in how humans respond to risk in organizational life. I know from consulting with leaders over the past 15 years that individuals approach risk-taking differently. Until now I’ve attributed those differences to hard-to-see biases and filters, including personal experience. But Karen Armstrong’s book has led me to wonder how brain chemistry influences our risk-taking tendencies and risk management skills. For example, is a left-brain leaning nonprofit leader more likely than her right-brain leaning counterpart to insist on a detailed cost benefit analysis before investing in a new youth-serving program? Would a right-brain leaning leader be inclined to discount downside risks and focus on the emotional response the program is likely to generate?

One of my personal rules for reading is that it’s okay to read more than one book at the same time. I’m not referring to actually “reading” two or more books at once, but putting one down before finishing and picking up another. A clear downside of this approach is that I sometimes have to backtrack a few pages to reconnect to the flow of a book I’ve put aside for a few days. A decided upside is that the insights in one book sometimes inform my understanding of the lessons in another. I haven’t quite finished *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, but the references to right brain/left brain functioning led me to jump into another book: *Your Brain At Work*, by David Rock. The author writes that “Workers everywhere are experiencing an epidemic of overwhelm.” He explains that in this age of “overwhelm” we harness brainpower in various ways to reach our goals and think things through, using five functions to do so: understanding, deciding, recalling, memorizing, and inhibiting.

As gas prices soar, I’ve been thinking about various ways to reduce my fuel consumption. I began by recalling the local trips I’ve taken in recent weeks and reflecting on the purposes of those trips. This simple mental exercise revealed the number of times I made separate trips, when a combined trip would do. My analysis is that armed with a simple “things to do” list before setting out I will be able to save time and my car will require

less frequent, increasingly costly fill-ups. In *Your Brain At Work*, David Rock shares a number of "surprises" about how the brain works and some corresponding energy-saving tips. His list of "surprises" about the brain include:

- Every time the brain works on an idea consciously, it uses up a measurable and limited resource;
- Some mental processes take up a lot more energy than others; and
- The most important mental processes, such as prioritizing, often take the most effort.

Rock offers the following tips for getting better mileage from your brain. First, because priority-setting is an energy intensive activity that can also conserve energy in the long run, we need to train ourselves to "prioritize prioritizing." Next, we should always try to tackle attention-rich tasks when we are fresh and alert (think back to the board meeting where the discussion of "strategy" was held until the very end). Third, wherever possible, we should harness our brains to compare, rather than store information. We can do this by creating written lists (rather than trying to memorize a "to do" list) and by creating visuals (mental models) for complex ideas.

With respect to the benefits of visuals, Rock explains that "One way to reduce the energy required for processing information is to use visuals, to literally see something in your mind's eye." He explains that an image "contains a huge amount of information" and reflecting or remembering the image requires *less energy* than reflecting on or remembering all of the words associated with the image.

Leading a nonprofit organization in an increasingly complex world requires both left brain and right brain power. Although thinking about risk may sometimes make your brain ache, learning to harness the capabilities of both hemispheres will serve your nonprofit best.

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