

The mind of successful sales leadership

How to use better thinking to get better results from sales people and processes

by Ann Herrmann-Nehdi, CEO Herrmann International

Introduction

“The significant problems we face today cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them.”

— Albert Einstein

When Forrester Research surveyed B2B companies about how well their sales and marketing teams were aligned, the results made a statement: Only 8 percent of the respondents reported tight alignment.¹

You might be inclined to say this is not news; sales and marketing teams have traditionally butted heads. But when 92% of organisations still haven't found a way to adequately address the problem, it shows us there's a huge benefit for those few that are getting it right.

It's not just a sales-marketing issue. In your organisation, it may be an issue between sales and finance or product development and customers, or maybe just between a sales manager and a sales person. When alignment is missing, problems inevitably occur and opportunities will be missed. (See sidebar: Why worry about alignment?)

What made the Forrester survey even more interesting was the number one reason cited for the lack of alignment: the conflict between long-term thinking by marketing and short-term thinking by sales.

How we think is behind everything we do. It directs what we pay attention to, how we process information, how we interact with others and how we make decisions. It's no wonder then that a difference in thinking approaches would make alignment challenging. In fact, how well we understand and can adapt our thinking goes beyond alignment; **it's integral to successful sales leadership at every level.**

Consider the typical types of thinking required of sales leaders on a daily basis. They may have to move in rapid-fire succession from dealing with a client issue to handling a

Why worry about alignment?

If you have ever owned a car, you know how important tyre alignment is. When tyres aren't aligned, the ride is not as smooth, steering may be off, fuel consumption goes up and the tyres wear out faster. We can still drive the vehicle, but without taking care of the alignment, our long-term performance will be affected, and we may even end up in an accident. It's not difficult to calculate the cost of poor tyre alignment. What is the cost of your organisation not being aligned?

A client we worked with is a typical example: The leadership set a new strategic goal, sales management decided this goal would require new marketing (which takes time), and the field was left unprepared for the new direction even though their quotas were immediately impacted. When sales organisations are misaligned, symptoms begin to emerge: missed targets, low morale, energy and time wasted on putting out fires due to poor planning, or lost customers who may get caught up in the confusion. As the Forrester study showed, misalignment is often rooted in differences in thinking—different mindsets will be focusing and acting on different things.

¹ B2B Sales and Marketing Alignment Starts with the Customer, Forrester Research, January 2011

By using the tools and models introduced in this paper as your framework, you'll be able to turn agile thinking into a way of doing business.

sales rep's pricing request, to putting together a long-range revenue forecast. We know that everyone is overloaded these days, but the specific, moment-to-moment thinking shifts required of sales leaders—navigating internal politics, coaching sales reps, understanding client business issues, making sure revenue goals will be met, keeping pace with an unpredictable economy and environment—can be especially jarring.

The problem is, we often move between vastly different mental tasks without actually shifting our thinking approaches to match the needs of the job, and that's keeping us from getting the results we need. Adding to the disconnect is the fact that even though this volatile business environment is now our reality, many are operating with a continual, short-sighted crisis mindset. We're so busy trying to survive the day to day, we don't have the cognitive bandwidth to get more proactive and address obvious alignment issues.

That's also why a 92% misalignment statistic isn't all that surprising. When every day feels like a battle for survival, who has time to reinvent the entire organisation?

The good news is we don't have to. Instead, we need to take a closer look at the engine that drives our sales results: the brains of those who make it happen and the systems they engage to achieve those results. Too many of us are wasting time, energy and effort and risking revenue because we haven't paid attention to the core—the thinking that produces results.

Thinking dexterity can be developed when there is a system and tools to measure and understand it. And because sales leaders and their teams touch on so many areas, when they build the dexterity to shift their thinking effectively when necessary, they are able to achieve dramatic and far-reaching results no matter what's going on in the external world.

Rather than throwing out all of the existing models and processes you've been using, this approach will allow you to focus on how you can leverage thinking to get more from your existing resources.

You'll need to consider several key questions:

- ◆ Is our current thinking working for us or is it getting in the way?
- ◆ How does the way we think impact our systems and processes, and critically, whether or not they really work?
- ◆ In what ways could we better leverage the brainpower available to us to become more efficient and more effective?

Evaluating the thinking of people and critical processes and examining how effective they are is the first step. From there, you can begin addressing alignment issues and developing the thinking skills needed to significantly improve results and outthink the competition. By using the tools and models introduced in this paper as your framework, you'll be able to turn agile thinking into a way of doing business.

Current Thinking: In sync or crossed wires?

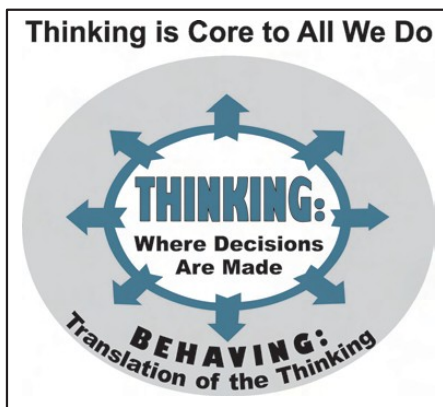
Getting smarter about your thinking

"All that we are is the result of what we have thought. The mind is everything. What we think we become."

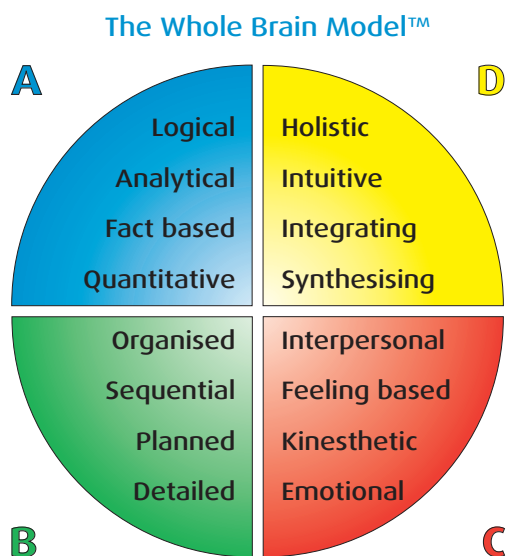
— Buddha

A frustrated sales leader recently commented, "Thinking? Why focus on thinking? I'm interested in changing behaviour."

In the sales world, we often focus only on behaviour and not the thinking that drives it. There are many systems and tools that are based on behavioural models but do not diagnose the thinking behind behaviour, and they often fail to deliver long-term change. Why? Because they're not addressing the cause of the behaviour. To change behaviour for long-term results, we have to first understand the thinking behind both the systems we use and the people we employ.



Different roles, perspectives, processes and even organisational cultures impact where and how attention is directed, and they all draw on different types of thinking. The Whole Brain® Model (shown below), based on 30 years of research, is a validated metaphor for how we think, providing a useful framework to diagnose and describe the different types of thinking involved in any organisation. It divides thinking into four quadrants, two on the 'left brain' side and two on the 'right brain' side. All four of the different thinking styles are in use and available to all of us, but we tend to prefer certain types over others.



The Whole Brain® Model graphic is a registered trademark of Herrmann International

The Whole Brain® framework makes it easy to describe the thinking 'DNA' of a wide array of systems, both collective and individual. For example, how might you describe the thinking culture of a company like Apple or Virgin? How about Microsoft or WalMart? What about your organisation? What about you? As leaders, our thinking is at the crux of our own productivity and sets the tone of the culture we create. As the former CEO of Visa, Dee Hock, stated: "If you seek to lead, first lead thyself."

You probably have examples from your everyday work that demonstrate how your thinking DNA comes into play as a sales leader. If you are working on financials, you will rely on your analytical and quantitative, detailed-oriented thinking, more so than your creativity. If you're looking for bold new ideas for solving revenue shortfalls, you may need to let go of controlled, methodical thinking and allow yourself to imagine all possibilities. If your preference lies heavily in the lower-left B (green) quadrant of the Whole Brain® Model, making that mental shift will be more of a challenge for you because it's not the type of thinking you're most comfortable with. Our research shows you can do it, but your thinking preference will impact how you do it.

You also likely experience it in your work across departments and functions. How many times have you thought, "They just don't get it", when you're dealing with seemingly trivial requests in the midst of critical client negotiations?

The diversity of mental tasks required of sales leaders today demands a practical way to quickly understand these thinking preferences, how each is involved in achieving outcomes, and when and how to stretch to get the best results—a skill called Whole Brain® Thinking. When you're working with a sales rep to close a significant new account and leadership is asking for revised forecasts, and marketing wants your input on a new branding campaign, Whole Brain® Thinking provides the tools necessary to better leverage your thinking and access other thinking modes to handle this tug-of-war more productively.

By optimising thinking, your own as well as your team's you will find that you can manage the day-to-day more successfully and you'll also have more time to be proactive and future-focused. Getting to the thinking behind behaviour makes it possible.

The Whole Brain® Model provides an effective way to diagnose and describe the mentality of key elements in the sales process.

Outthink it:

Consider how your own thinking affects your perspective and behaviour. How could you adjust your approaches to get better results with those you regularly work with, eg:

- ◆ the leadership team
- ◆ key client contacts
- ◆ individual sales managers, reps and/or direct reports
- ◆ marketing
- ◆ customer service
- ◆ finance.

How could you adjust your approaches to handle different tasks more effectively?

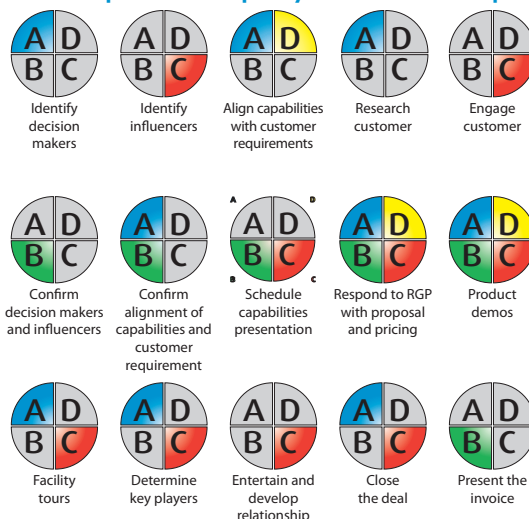
Tip: Start by writing down:

- ◆ a list of those who frustrate you most, or don't seem to 'get it'
- ◆ processes that seem to take more time than they should
- ◆ tasks that you find mentally draining, that sap your energy.

Look at the thinking style behind the behaviour or task at hand. Is it different from yours? How might you stretch or reach out to others so you can improve the process?

Consider the thinking involved with each phase of the sales process: How do they correspond with the thinking preferences of the people who have to use them? Just as the periodic table provides us with a way to organise and identify the elements, the Whole Brain® Model provides an effective way to diagnose and describe the mentality of key elements in the sales process. In this way, it can serve as an organising principle for the sales processes our organisations rely on for success.

Sample sales process steps by Whole Brain® quadrants



It is interesting to note that the process above engages each of the quadrants at one point or another. Our data shows that most effective processes encompass phases that cover all four quadrants of the Whole Brain® Model. A global beverage company actually proved this with a project to compile the best practices of all of their sales organisations around the world into one unified process and toolkit. They ended up identifying four primary sales process phases, each of which fell into one of the four quadrants of the Whole Brain® Model: Connect (Red-C quadrant), Create (Yellow-D quadrant), Align (Blue-A-quadrant) and Execute (Green-B-quadrant).

The company then organised training, support and other materials with this in mind, colour-coding the sections of the toolkit for easy identification and quick reference. The resulting Whole Brain® System and sales process allowed users to target the areas they needed to focus on most.

When you look at sales processes with the Whole Brain® Model in mind, it explains why some reps seem to perform better with certain stages than others. Their thinking preferences drive their behaviour and ultimately the results they get. This is why it's so important to start off by analysing the thinking in your sales organisation—how individuals prefer to think, what the team's thinking looks like as a composite, the leader's style compared with that of his/her direct reports, and the processes themselves. Then you have a blueprint to move forward in a cohesive way.

And as the above example shows, when we start with a focus on thinking, we can develop a clearer and more strategic method of setting people up for success, no matter what their individual preferences are.

Outthink it:

Do you know how your key resources are thinking?

Tip: Visually map out the mentality of your culture, products, customers, managers and reps. What can you learn? Where is there misalignment? Prioritise your alignment initiatives based on how quickly they will impact your results.

Leveraging thinking: Outpacing the competition by putting brainpower to work

A faster route to targeted, successful coaching

"The bottom line: Sales enablement initiatives will fail without sales coaching. Ensuring successful adoption of any initiative requires tailored sales conversations as a core enabler—especially when the initiative is designed to drive a sales transformation."

—Brian Lambert, senior analyst at Forrester Research

Sales leaders often tell us that coaching is one of the most important development tools they have for helping sales reps improve performance. They also tell us it's something they never seem to have enough time for. Optimising the cycle time spent on learning and coaching can make a huge difference in the manager-employee relationship as well as the bottom line.

One large financial services company realised that their sales management coaching process was just not producing results. The managers did not really understand the thinking behind the reps' behaviour, and as a result, it was difficult for them to effectively coach them to change their behaviour. Once they understood their preferences and the alignment with the 'thinking DNA' of each rep, and after being trained in how to coach effectively using a Whole Brain® approach, they were able to communicate with and coach the reps in a more productive, efficient way to meet their needs. By going back to the core—thinking—they transformed the coaching process and achieved the speed, behavioural changes and results they were looking for.

In many instances, getting people trained faster is the biggest challenge. When a large pharmaceutical company was ready to launch their latest wonder drug, they knew they had to ramp up their sales team fast if they wanted to establish a foothold before the competition followed them into the market with 'me-too' copycats.

The company already had a strong coaching culture, but they were able to improve the effectiveness of the leaders' coaching by bringing thinking preferences into the equation. Similar to the financial services organisation, leader-coaches learned how to refine and align their coaching based on their own thinking preferences, the thinking preferences of the rep, and the mental demands of the sales job itself.

The mental demands of the job were depicted in 'job maps' that each sales rep received in a session in which they also learned about their own thinking preferences. They were immediately able to see the journey they would be taking and how their thinking aligned with the requirements of the job—including which aspects they would have a natural affinity for and which aspects would require them to stretch their thinking.

The company also adjusted and tailored their existing sales training programs to be more targeted to the mental demands of the pharmaceutical sales job. By embedding Whole Brain® Thinking into their existing training and coaching process, the company was able to improve incremental performance standards and reduce the time it took new sales reps to reach job mastery from 24 months to just seven.

Our studies have shown that teams with diverse thinking preferences are 66% more effective than homogenous ones (similar thinking styles)³

Outthink it:

How does your thinking style impact your coaching effectiveness? What steps can you take to increase speed by better aligning coaching and learning initiatives with the thinking demands of the sales job?

Tip: Ask those you coach (and anyone who coaches you) what they need most for effective results. How is your thinking aligning with their needs? Create a checklist together to ensure both yours and the coachee's needs will be met in future sessions.

Stop wasting your resources

Sales leaders themselves can improve their own effectiveness by understanding the value and need for diverse mental perspectives. Our studies have shown that teams with diverse thinking preferences are 66% more effective than homogenous ones (similar thinking styles)³, and other studies have found similar results. Are you truly tapping into the full brainpower available to you—your own as well as that of others? It's only natural that we default to our own preferences, but by becoming more fluent in the language of Whole Brain® Thinking and recognising the role each type of thinking plays, we will be able to tackle the complexities of today's sales environment head first.

³ *How to Improve Group Productivity: Whole Brain® Teams Set New Benchmarks*, Charles G. DeRidder and Mark A. Wilcox, 1999.

Sales strengths of each Whole Brain® quadrant

- ◆ Gathering facts and doing research
- ◆ Analysing customer needs
- ◆ Rational responses to objections
- ◆ Precise and accurate study of issues
- ◆ Problem solving logically
- ◆ Financial analysis, estimating, quoting
- ◆ Understanding technical elements
- ◆ Critical thinking and situation analysis
- ◆ Working numbers, statistics & data
- ◆ Dealing with legal aspects
- ◆ Determining probabilities and feasibility of opportunities

- ◆ Reading fine print and finding overlooked details in documents, contracts
- ◆ Closing and driving for execution
- ◆ Problem solving issues practically
- ◆ Organising and keeping track of information
- ◆ Standing firm on policies and process
- ◆ Articulating in a clear and orderly way
- ◆ Maintaining quality and standards
- ◆ Providing follow-up as expected/promised
- ◆ Keeping account records up to date
- ◆ Account planning and scheduling
- ◆ Following processes, procedures

- ◆ Tolerating ambiguity of direction and train of thought
- ◆ Visualising the customer's big picture and needs
- ◆ Problem solving intuitively
- ◆ Recognising new possibilities
- ◆ Integrating ideas and concepts together
- ◆ Taking risks and challenging established approaches
- ◆ Synthesising unlike elements into new ideas
- ◆ Inventing innovative solutions
- ◆ Reading the signs of upcoming change and trends
- ◆ Simultaneous handling of different inputs
- ◆ Dealing with changing customer situations

- ◆ Interpersonal aspects and building relationships
- ◆ Handling complaints and customer emotions
- ◆ Sensing and anticipating how customers will feel
- ◆ Intuitively relating to customers
- ◆ Picking up on critical non-verbal cues
- ◆ Engendering enthusiasm and energy
- ◆ Diplomacy, persuasion and conciliation
- ◆ Teaching, training, facilitating, presenting
- ◆ Sharing and expressing ideas and solutions
- ◆ Understanding emotional elements
- ◆ Considering values and cultural aspects
- ◆ Communicating, writing proposals

Putting that diverse brainpower to work requires leaders who can pull it all together. To understand why, try this exercise: Picture your current living room or a favourite room you know well, taking a moment to 'see' in your mind's eye the items in that room. Now imagine that you are an insurance agent looking at that room: What would you pay attention to? What might you ignore? Next, imagine that you are a person coming to clean the room. What would you notice most? How about an event planner preparing for a big party? Or an interior decorator? How would that change your perspective?

Without effective leadership, if all four were simultaneously approaching the room with their own perspectives and objectives in mind, confusion and problems would inevitably emerge. Your sales team likely has the same variety of thinking styles within it. This can create conflict and potentially stifle input, or it can deliver huge benefits. The key, for both you as a leader and the individuals within the team, is recognising the different preferences, understanding how each contributes to results, and then learning how to leverage them in a positive way.

As you look at the cognitive diversity within your sales organisation, you may also find that your preferences are keeping you from taking full advantage of the brainpower available to you. If you have a strong preference for 'left brain' A- and B-quadrant thinking, you may be discouraging a sales rep with a strong D-quadrant preference from exploring new approaches—and you may be losing out on significant opportunities as a result.

If you are more 'right brain' C- and D-quadrant oriented, you may be sabotaging your progress by moving from one idea to the next without a clear cost-benefit analysis of your efforts, leaving those who need clear structure confused. Sometimes, you just have to get out of your own head to really see what you might be missing.

This works at a broader organisational level, too. Going back to the Forrester study about the long-term thinking by marketing and the short-term thinking by sales, we know that sales has to focus on the short term. Today's survival depends on it. But we also know that focusing on the short term alone isn't enough. Getting the longer view is what will move us out of that perpetual 'fire drill' crisis mode and position the team for sustained results. Sales leaders who recognise the need for the broader perspective, and effectively reach out and bring together differing points of view, will have the competitive advantage in the long run. It's a process that can be somewhat uncomfortable—but that just means you're doing it right! It means you are truly bringing in different perspectives and challenging your mental defaults.

Outthink it:

How are your preferences impacting your decisions as a leader?

How could you better leverage the full brainpower in your team and within the broader organisation to better manage today's complexities?

Tip: Refer to the list of 'frustrations' you created, and use the Whole Brain Model to identify those different perspectives that would be useful. Resist the temptation to bulldoze over different perspectives before you truly understand them for the value they bring. Use the sales strengths model above to see the benefits of each thinking approach.

Herrmann International Asia works with leading companies and academic institutions to improve employee and team performance.

About Herrmann International Asia

Herrmann International Asia works with leading companies and academic institutions to improve employee and team performance.

Herrmann's work focuses on practical ways to leverage differences in individual thinking styles. Building on research originally begun at General Electric, the company has developed applications that range from developing strategy at the executive level to increasing sales force productivity.

More than two million people have completed the Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument (HBDI), the assessment tool at the heart of the company's approach. Herrmann International Asia is headquartered in Sydney, Australia with offices in:

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The Originators of Whole Brain Technology® and the Creators of the Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument® (HBDI®)

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