



## ARE YOU REALLY USING THE FULL RANGE AND POTENTIAL OF YOUR BRAIN?

[Ric Roi](#), Professor of Leadership & Organization

Chemin de Bellerive 23  
PO Box 915,  
CH-1001 Lausanne  
Switzerland

Tel: +41 21 618 01 11  
Fax: +41 21 618 07 07  
[info@imd.org](mailto:info@imd.org)  
[www.imd.org](http://www.imd.org)

*What does cognitive diversity really mean for team agility? How can we begin to diversify our own dominant thinking patterns to increase our cognitive bandwidth and thinking agility? Can we start to think in more integrative, holistic ways to address the complexities we face daily as leaders?*

“It takes a whole brain to run a company” is a phrase that sounds like common sense but, in fact, is not very common in practice in the business world.

One of the main reasons we lack cognitive diversity in companies is that most of us have an unconscious bias to hire people in our own image. We simply feel more comfortable with people that think like we do. Through intentionally fostering cognitive diversity in its workforce, a company can access a broader spectrum of thinking styles and benefit from more creative problem solving, innovation, resilience and adaptability.

The Hermann Brain Dominance thinking model offers one way of understanding how we think and learn. The featured image illustrates how this model divides the brain into four sectors, each with a set of psychological correlates associated with that part of the brain. Of course, actual brain functioning is far more complex and nuanced than a four-quadrant model of the brain would suggest. But the Hermann model is still a useful way to gain insight into our own unique cognitive signature and thinking preferences.

### **The four quadrants in the Hermann Brain Dominance thinking model**

The blue, upper-left quadrant represents the “rational self”. Blue dominant thinkers display logical, analytical, fact-based, quantitative qualities. Finance, medicine, academia and engineering are fields that favor blue dominant thinkers.

The green, lower-left quadrant signifies the “safekeeping self”. A green dominant thinker will display qualities of organized, detailed and sequential thinking. Accounting, economics, IT/programming and supply chain management tend to favor green dominant thinkers.

The yellow, upper-right quadrant in the model indicates the “experimental self” where conceptual thinking “outside the box” occurs. Yellow dominant thinkers are attracted to the artistic, entrepreneurial, architectural and teaching fields.

Finally, the red, lower-right quadrant represents the “feeling self”. Red dominant thinkers are good at expressing themselves, at interpersonal relations and can read the room in the situational sense. Red dominant thinkers tend towards fields such as psychology, human resources, healthcare, journalism and music.

### **How dominance develops and can be addressed**

“A useful metaphor to apply in order to better understand the interaction between the cognitive quadrants is to think of the brain as a house where you favor and spend most of your time in a couple of rooms. It’s not that you do not inhabit the whole house and utilize its entire space, but you prefer to spend the majority of your time in particular areas,” explains Ric Roi, IMD Professor of Leadership & Organization.

Our relationship with the different quadrants of our brains works in a similar way. We all have a creative, right brain upper quadrant (yellow), but some of us spend a lot more time there than in other quadrants. This is how dominance develops.

Dominance is a common feature in our own bodies. For example, one of our eyes provides visual dominance over the other eye, which follows our lead eye. If you play sports like football you know that one foot is dominant over the other when kicking or passing the ball.

Once we grasp the model, it becomes easy to see how a management team can fall prey to hiring in its own image and hire team members that have the same thinking style. But when everyone in your top team thinks in the same way, no one can imagine doing things differently and agility is lost.

There was a time when the consensus was that the brain could not be changed. However, things have moved on. MRIs of the brain's continual development prove that neuroplasticity is available to all of us. Although we cannot fundamentally change our dominant brain quadrants, we can certainly bring aspects of the others online through active engagement and practice.

In doing so we develop our whole brain cognitive reasoning skills and balance our dominant areas with other, complementary capabilities. And learn to appreciate the thinking styles of others.

### **Your whole brain communication checklist**

Start building your own cognitive agility by encouraging integrative thinking in yourself. A good place to start is in the area of organizational communications in which you can rewrite messages and, in doing so begin to finesse a whole-brain approach. Use the following checklist to reassess your organizational messaging before you hit send button.

#### **Blue Style: consider the “why?”**

Energize the rational, upper-left quadrant of your brain by applying the following measures to your missives.

Does it show clear analysis? Does it use facts to reinforce arguments? Is it quantified, to the point and logical? Is the rationale of the business case for the change sound and defensible?

#### **Yellow Style: consider the “what?”**

Give the creative, upper-right quadrant of your brain a workout by making sure your team emails reflect and convey more conceptual considerations.

Does your communication look at the big picture or offer an overview of the situation or project? Is it visual and colorful? Could your use of metaphors be raised a notch? Does it look to the future and is it conceptually sound and clear?

#### **Red Style: consider the “who?”**

The heart-centered lower right quadrant of your brain governs your people-focused side. Encourage its activation by ensuring your written documents contain the following relational factors.

Is your written output helpful and user-friendly? Have you included a story? Have you included helpful examples to illustrate your key points? Does it use experiences that relate to the audience? Does it convey the history or context around a change or decision? Finally, does it acknowledge emotional issues people will experience during the change?

**Green Style: consider the “how?”**

Galvanize the safekeeping lower-left quadrant of your brain by verifying that your dispatches are organized well.

Is the material you have shared in the appropriate format and level of detail? Is it neatly presented and sequential in order of argument and process? Does it provide the right level of details required by the audience? Does it describe the sequence of events or milestones involved in the change?

It's time to start using your whole brain at work!