

# The benefit of balance: Aiming for center-brain leadership

13 December 2016 by Steve Goldstein — [Leave a Comment](#)



Since the 1970s, we've been hearing that each hemisphere of the brain manages different tasks—that if we favor one type of thinking over another, we can be classified as favoring the left or right hemisphere, making us “left-brained” or “right-brained.” Scientists are still debating the right brain/left brain personality distinction, and many have debunked its validity; however, pop psychology or not, it's still a useful way of categorizing people's basic personality differences.

According to this theory, people who are right-brain dominant are better at creative tasks; they are more intuitive and are better at recognizing faces, and at expressing and reading emotion. People with left-brain dominance are more adept at tasks that involve logic, language and analytical thinking. The left-brainers are often

described as being better at numbers and reasoning.

In my experience, most leaders tend to be more left-brained than right-brained. Naturally, the vast majority of leaders who rise up to senior levels in the business world have done so because they have generated strong performance and successful results. You need the analytical skills—to be good with numbers, critical thinking, prioritizing tasks—to run a successful business. If you don't have those skills, it's hard to imagine that you could move up the ladder. With some notable exceptions like Steve Jobs, whose creativity, imagination and inspiration gave rise to Apple, I think it is rather unusual for right-brain people to reach the top positions.

However, for sustainable, ongoing success, it is equally important to be truly engaged with your employees and your customers. I believe you need what are deemed “right brain” characteristics in order to really please customers, solve their problems, and guarantee they stay your customers. You also need to make sure your employees are motivated to do a good job, and that means developing relationships, displaying empathy and compassion, and encouraging two-way communication.

About 25 years ago, I was a senior executive at a large corporation and an expert came in to do executive assessments of me and my leadership team. After completing an extensive report on each of us, she came into my office to give me my feedback, looking very serious. “I just want to tell you,” she said, “I have never seen someone with a score this low on emotion—on a scale of one to 100, you are a 12.”

I was shocked. “But I'm a nice guy!” I said, “What are you talking about?”

“This is how your people view you,” she replied. “According to them, you are aggressive, a steamroller, all hard edges.”

While I knew I had a strong leadership style, I had absolutely no idea how my people felt about me. It was clear to me that this was a big problem, and I decided I wanted to change right then and there. I made a conscious effort to improve in the areas of sensitivity and connection with people; I asked the assessment expert for advice and coaching. Like any problem, whether it’s losing weight, quitting smoking or grooving your golf swing, you need to make a serious commitment to changing.

Have you thought about what your strengths are? Whether you take a test or you become aware by some other means, if you realize you are extremely left- or right-brained, your goal should be to move toward the center. You don’t have to be exactly in the middle, but if you are on either extreme of the spectrum it is unlikely that you will achieve the level of success you want.

I recently took several online right brain/left brain tests, and I came out exactly in the middle (here is a link to one such test you can take). But I am certain that if I had taken the test years ago, I would have been way over to the left.

Ironically, if you *are* left-brained, you are probably going to ask, “So what number is the correct number on the scale?” (If you are extremely left-brained, you may even think “If I have three employee meetings will I move 10 points to the right?”) But accepting that there is not an exact number is step one in moving away from being left-brained! It’s a direction, not a finite goal. Think less about the numbers and more about the behavior that moves the needle.

You may have to throw yourself over to the other side, just to begin to effect a change. If you are very left-brained, go out to a museum, go listen to some music, do something creative to open up that part of your brain and body. And if you go to a concert, notice how do you communicate with your friends while you are there. Can you visualize yourself in a business meeting, having the same mind-set as you had when you were at the concert? Try to transfer that whole set of behaviors, and be that person at your next meeting. That meeting would probably look very different from your usual meeting—and all of your people will notice the difference.

Here are some simple suggestions for attaining right-brain/left brain balance:

**To be more right-brained (more creative, sensitive):**

- Talk to employees you are not used to talking to.
- Speak to these employees the way you would if they were your golf buddies. Interact rather than dictate.
- Ask questions, be curious. Engage with everyone you can, both in your work life and in your personal life.
- Think about offering people on your team principles (general guidelines) rather than hard and fast rules to follow.
- Break your usual routine of in-office meetings by going out into the field as much as possible—to the retail store, the call center, the warehouse. Talk to as many people as possible.

**To be more left-brained (improve rational thinking, ability with numbers):**

- Get comfortable using Excel spreadsheets.
- Create to-do lists, and follow them.
- Make decisions more quickly and firmly.
- Hold your leaders more accountable.

- Do crossword puzzles.
- Learn a new language.

For business, we should all strive to be a little more center-brained. And if we can work toward the same kind of balance for life in general, all the better.



## Steve Goldstein

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