

LYSSA ADKINS

#future-fit leaders

DANCE BETWEEN LEFT AND RIGHT BRAIN THINKING

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Brain coral by David Clode on Unsplash

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The Path to FUTURE-FIT LEADERSHIP

Future-fit leaders increase their cognitive, emotional and energetic complexity to be more of a match for the complexity of the world and the business situations it serves up. In this series, we are exploring several pathways along which that inner development occurs.

The pathway we are exploring now is about transcending the tendency in business to over-rely on left brain thinking, especially when making decisions that have far-reaching impact.



SIMPLICITY BEYOND COMPLEXITY

Here's an oldie but a goodie by Oliver Wendell Holmes. He said:

“I WOULD NOT GIVE A FIG FOR THE SIMPLICITY ON THIS SIDE OF COMPLEXITY. BUT I WOULD GIVE MY LIFE FOR THE SIMPLICITY ON THE OTHER SIDE OF COMPLEXITY.”

That's what this particular aspect of being a future fit leader is about. It's about being complexity fit: being able to work with the complexity and through the complexity to the clarity and the simplicity on the other side. Not the kind that belies complexity by narrowing it down into a manageable channel of concern, but the kind that can also look at the interconnected, constantly evolving whole.



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The Dominance of

LEFT BRAIN THINKING IN BUSINESS

Left brain over right brain. That's our current business culture. Analytics, logic, straight-line thinking and a focus on creating controls and measures. That's what we privilege in business today. It's a way to dumb down complexity to something more manageable, which is completely understandable, but has obvious drawbacks. Take the scientific method, for example. To use the scientific method the first thing you do is to narrow your focus. You must exclude things and not just a few. You must exclude a whole lot of things to apply this kind of structured, linear, cause and effect exploration. There's nothing wrong with this, as long as it's not the only kind of thinking we count as valid when we make business decisions. When we do, we can somehow convince ourselves that putting a nuclear power plant on the beach on an earthquake fault line is a good decision, as we did with the Fukushima nuclear power plant in Japan. That decision produced a devastating planetary impact that is still being felt more than a dozen years later.

Integrating Left and Right Brain Thinking for Holistic Decisions

Without considering the whole, a specialty of the right brain, we make devastating business decisions. The domination of left brain over right brain thinking is one aspect of the story of separation that has led us to the brink of collapse, as told in [Regenerative Leadership](#).

In most businesses we let right brain thinking in, but usually only for innovation initiatives, marketing, and other “creative” endeavors. For our whole-world-connected context, for our day and age, we need to “and” it. Left brain and right brain. Both are needed, especially among leaders whose business decisions often impact the wider world.

Much of our thinking about the left brain functions being located physically in the neural tissue of the left hemisphere of the brain and the opposite for the right turns out not to be so. The features, functions, capabilities, and limitations of each are physically scattered throughout the brain. Left and right brain are participants in both analytical and imaginative thinking. Where they differ greatly is the data set they can work on.

The left brain works by reducing complexity down to a narrow data set to analyze something we already know is important. It can create great precision and even strive toward perfection, but only in the realm of the known knowns. The right brain works with an unbounded data set by sensing, tasting, feeling, looking at everything about the topic and everything in the interconnections around the topic. It is able to detect the slightest wobble in working relationships. It can work with metaphor, imagery and envisioning a never-before-seen future. It is vigilant to detect anything that is not expected or consistent with the context. The left brain narrows, the right brain connects. The best thinker I know of on this subject is [Iain McGilchrist](#). He has a [short animated video](#) on exactly this.

ULTRADIAN RHYTHMS AND THE LEFT-RIGHT BRAIN CYCLE

Once upon a time, I wrote a book. At the outset of that endeavor, an author friend of mine gave me some advice. He said, “Never let your writer and your editor be in the room at the same time.” He was, of course, referring to the writer and the editor inside me. At the same time, I got introduced to the idea of ultradian rhythms. Blood circulation, hormones for digestion and your pulse are examples of ultradian rhythms. So is mental performance. The rhythm of performance is about 90 minutes “on” and 20 minutes “off.” If you start tracking this, you may find this is true for you. It was for me. When I sat down to write, I tracked how long I could write before my eyes started to glaze over or before I started to lose my train of thought. It was about 90 minutes. I could power through the 20 minute recovery period but I quickly found this was foolish. I was just not sharp enough to write well during the recovery time, so I learned to rest. The rest was often a nap. During the nap, I learned how to use breath and body work to help my brain switch to the kind of thinking I would need for the next 90 minutes – was it the narrow focus left-brain editor or the free thinking right-brain writer? It turns out that the brain also has an ultradian rhythm. There is a natural alternation between the left and right hemispheres of the brain that occurs in cycles of 90 - 200 minutes during the day. One takes the lead. I was able to use the 20 minute ultradian healing period not only to rest and restore, but also to set my brain up for the type of mental acuity I needed next. Breath and body work to activate different parts of the brain is [ancient wisdom](#) being supported by [modern science](#).

Consciously Engaging

THE LEFT-RIGHT BRAIN DANCE

This example shows that it is possible to be in a conscious dance with left and right brain thinking. It is possible to set your brain into the mode that will best benefit the upcoming task. At the very least, it is beneficial to take note of the 20 minute troughs of performance and rest rather than power through. It doesn't have to be a nap. It can be stepping outside for a moment, listening to music, or letting your body move. Doing so honors natural healing moments that we often do not allow ourselves. If nothing else, perhaps the rest expands your ability to become more conscious of the left and right brain dance that is already occurring throughout your day.

USING RIGHT BRAIN THINKING TO GUIDE EXECUTIVE DECISIONS

Let's take an everyday business example from [Kat Connor](#) based on her vast lived experience helping executive teams make portfolio investment decisions. When an executive team comes to a meeting to make portfolio investment decisions, each executive is typically coming from their own treasure trove of left brain analysis driven by their KPIs, their departmental budgets, their key initiatives and their particular challenges such as talent pool restrictions or a new competitor. Each person comes to that meeting knowing what they want to fund. They may even come prepared to fight for what they want to fund. At the same time, there's always some sort of internal or external challenge that fuels the need for these executives to make joint investment decisions for the company as a whole. If Kat operates purely from the same left brain thinking these executives are coming from she's in for a slugfest. It probably will not go very well.

What she does, instead, is operate from both left and right brain thinking herself. To open her right brain thinking, she keeps in her mind imagery of interconnectedness and wholeness. One of images she uses to do this is the mycelium network beneath a forest of trees that keeps the whole forest healthy and would never pour all of its resources into the health of one tree at the expense of the whole. As she's working with executives, still primarily using the left brain analytical words they are familiar with, her questions shift. Coming from the imagery of interconnectedness, she asks questions that move their minds toward interconnectedness. She asks questions like: What matters most? How does the challenge of the day require each of us to consider the whole? When she is coming from the depth, meaning and wholeness of right brain thinking, she can subtly move their thinking in the same direction. This meeting goes really well when the executives start to consider a much bigger picture beyond their own department and their own challenges and needs. In rare cases, Kat has been able to take an executive team directly into right brain thinking through the use of metaphors that they imagine when they contemplate how the organization thrives. Using the richness of these metaphors, the executives can pinpoint key aspects of how the organization will thrive best considering the challenge and the various needs. These key aspects are then pulled into the mix of criteria and used as guides in making investment decisions. Through the use of right brain thinking, it is possible to find a precision that cuts a clean path through the many competing forces to make healthier decisions for the whole.

Navigating the Complexity OF THE MODERN WORLD

We are wading chest-deep in complexity. Left to its own, the natural world is already complex. With the information boom and exponentiality of technology, our human-made world is becoming more complex every day. We have created an enormously complex world for ourselves to live in and operate businesses in. Add to this the pace of change, which is also on an exponential curve. I have heard it said that the pace of change will never be slower than it is today. Buckle up. We are in for quite a ride. It seems that we leaders need to step up our right brain game pretty quick.

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The Creative Power of RIGHT BRAIN THINKING

Picking up the beauty of a confoundingly complex world,
seeing it through the eyes of wholeness,
expressing it in art, music, poetry,
allowing it to penetrate us
as it informs us
and then moves us to something new from some unexpected
connection.

That's the power of right brain thinking.

If that poetic moment is a little too esoteric we can back off a bit. Let's just look at the benefits of right brain thinking to bring that “out of the box” breakthrough, the one that bursts forth from the box we put ourselves in via left brain thinking. It's the power of right brain thinking to see the interconnections between related and seemingly unrelated items to inform a brand new option. The right brain witnesses the smallness of our own thinking and expands our minds to take in more, as much as we possibly can. We benefit because we then work with WHAT IS rather than narrowing it to what we think we can handle. These are the hallmarks of right brain thinking.

Left brain *and* right brain thinking.

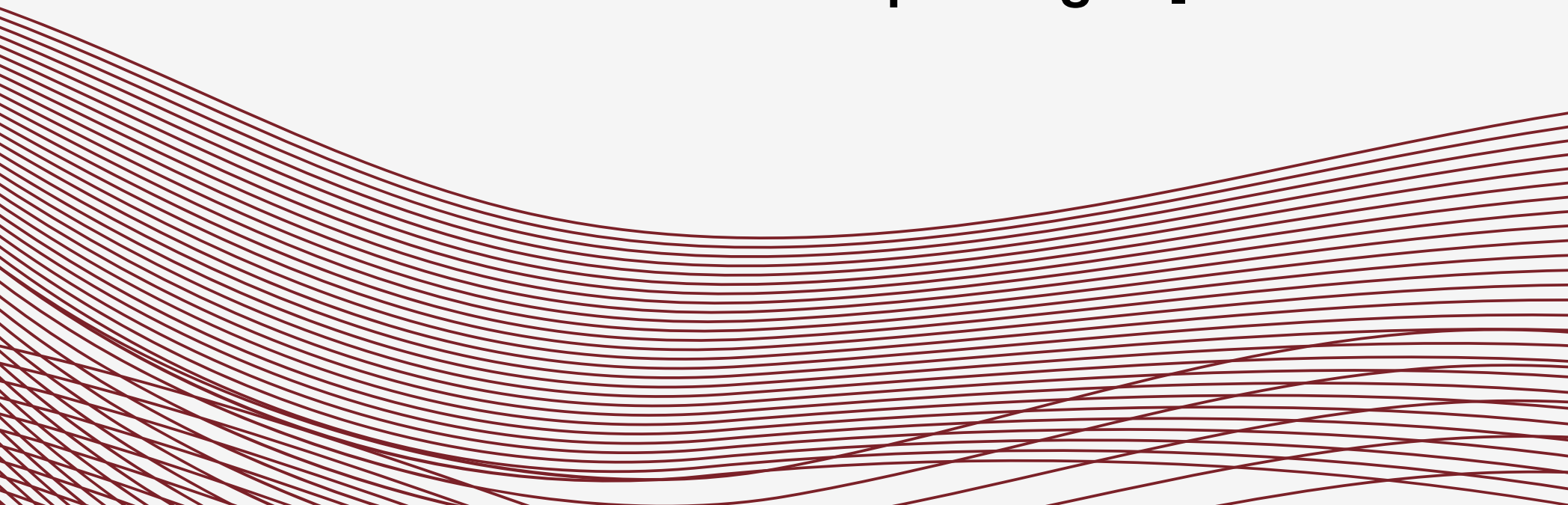
The two together may deliver us to the simplicity on the other side of complexity.

A Preview of FUTURE-FIT INSIGHTS

To give you a sense of where we are going, let me whet your appetite with the next headline:

#Future-fit leaders consciously choose from the full array of masculine and feminine leadership energies.

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LYSSA IS A LEADERSHIP COACH & AN EXPERT IN THE FUTURE OF WORK

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