Will The Right Brain Rule The Future?

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For many decades we have been in an information age dominated by engineers, computer scientists, programmers, and other left brain thinkers. In Daniel Pink's book *A Whole New Mind*, he makes the case that we are in transition from an information age to a conceptual age, and from L-directed thinking to R-directed thinking. Pink defines L-directed (left brain) thinking in terms of logic, sequence, literalness, and analysis. R-directed (right brain) thinking is defined in terms of synthesis, emotional expression, context, creativity, and the big picture. This transition to R-directed thinking and the conceptual age is based on the fact that we are slowly losing many L-directed jobs to foreign workers. The theory here is that any work that can be reduced to rules such as programming, building computers, reading X-rays, or basic engineering is in danger, because technical workers in foreign countries can do the same work at 1/5 of the cost. According to Pink: "American workers need to do what workers abroad cannot do equally well for much less money — using R-directed abilities such as forging relationships rather then executing transactions, tackling novel challenges instead of solving routine problems, and synthesizing the big picture rather then analyzing a single component".

A second factor that is affecting the move to a conceptual age is the relentless use of automation in American factories which eliminates basic low skilled manufacturing jobs. But at the same time automation demands service, maintenance, repair, and troubleshooting that require people who are masters of many aptitudes and skills. These people will rely more on creativity then competence, more on tacit knowledge then technical manuals, and more on seeing the bigger picture and relying on intuition. Pink makes some good points on why right brain thinking is needed to compete.

Design

Pink suggests that the difference between function and design is bringing together disparate things into a solution that is very unique. He makes the case that in a global world where Asian competitors can use the same technology to make a product with the same performance features and at a lower price, the only way to compete is by unique design.

Designing new complex products will still require a lot of engineering, programming, and other technical people, but designing a product that will sell enough units to justify the costs may require thinking about intangible issues like customer needs and wants, anticipating market trends and requirements, and being able to see patterns.

To me, a unique design needs to take into consideration external factors that left-brained people often miss or ignore. Market factors like existing competitor designs, special customer needs, and available market niches where you can gain competitive advantage are important to consider. An ideal new product would include features and advantages that are not easily copied by foreign competitors such as offering special services with the product.

Empathy

Pink also says that leaders in the new century must have empathy. He makes the case that “the era of sharp minded knowledge workers and briskly efficient high tech companies that prized emotional distance and cool reason and who could make a decision unimpeded by emotion” may not be the answer.

American manufacturing is facing a situation where we don’t have the skilled workers we need and the baby boomers are retiring by the thousands. To recruit and retain the bright, brave, and honest future manufacturing workers may take a different approach to managing that requires the ability to understand the emotional makeup of other people. Pink implies that emotional abilities will become more important than intellectual abilities.

For instance, teams are always composed of people who have different agendas, emotions, needs, and views, but they still have to work together and make consensual decisions. It is essential that the leader understand the emotional make-up of these people to make sure they achieve team goals.

Meaning

Pink refers to Viktor Frankl’s book *Man’s Search for Meaning* and makes the point that meaning is very important to motivate workers to be more creative in the new century. He makes a case that the pursuit of meaning is what powers human existence, an assertion that may have application for a big problem faced by American manufacturing – how to attract and recruit young people into a manufacturing career.

I don’t think that it will be possible to attract the bright and educated young people that are needed in manufacturing without making the job (career) more meaningful. One idea that I think would promote meaning and job satisfaction is assisting young employees in planning out their careers. Instead of just hiring them for some specific job profile, companies should identify their interests and help them map out a complete career showing the education and training needed and how they can reach their monetary and promotion goals, as well as satisfy their needs. This is being discussed more and more as manufacturing tries to come to grips with its bad image and the problem of training and retaining the high skill workers of the new century.

Recently, Thomas Friedman said, “If we can make America the best place to dream something, design something, start something, collaborate with others on something – in an age where every link in the chain can now be done in so many

places – our workers and innovators will do just fine." But I would add that to accomplish these lofty goals will require shifting to right brained strategies and leaders who can think with both left and right brain quadrants. In fact, I will go out on a limb and predict that the manufacturing workers and companies that emphasize R-directed thinking will have a better chance of getting ahead in the new economy.

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