Whole brain leadership development for hospitality managers

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Abstract

This article posits a model to describe a learning process that may be applied to the development of leadership practices of hospitality managers who are current practitioners in hotels, resorts and other hospitality establishments. The premise of the model is found in the academic disciplines of science and philosophy as they relate to leadership and learning theories. The article concludes with a suggested seven-step method that may be used to enhance leadership development among workers in hospitality enterprises.

Medical and scientific people tell us that the right hemisphere of the brain is a source for creativity, intuition, emotion and long-term memory. Some would note that left-handed people tend to be creative, while those who are right-hand-dominant lean toward analytical abilities. There are also suggestions that young children possess a tendency to use both sides of the brain to process information until they enter school systems in western cultures, where left-brain (analytical) thinking becomes the mandate for learning. Later in adult life, we attempt to re-kindle creative thinking and innovation (right-brain processing) through training workshops for professionals in an effort to revive what was once a natural tendency for most individuals during pre-school years.

Some executive leaders believe there are two important factors for enhancing worker performance in organizations with the first being the development of leadership skills among managers. The second factor, according to some executives, involves the creation of "learning organizations", a systems concept that was popularized during the 1980s (Mintzberg, 2002). Since the concept of learning organizations seems to be the continuous buzz phrase in most workplaces, it might be expected that the literature would contain a number of studies in the area of leadership learning methods. There appears to be numerous volumes of literature that address the issue of workplace learning, however most of it fails to make a useable connection between theory and practice, which seems to be particularly true for leadership development (Lohman, 2002).

In this article, the author suggests a model to describe a learning process that may be applied to the development of leadership practices of hospitality managers who are current practitioners in hotels, resorts and other hospitality service enterprises. The premise of the model is found in the academic disciplines of science and philosophy as they relate to leadership and learning theories. This theoretical construct will become the foundation of future empirical studies concerning leadership-learning practices. However, current hospitality practitioners need not wait for such evidence to begin leadership habituation practices in organizations.

Much of the pop leadership development literature presents convincing learning theory arguments that naturally resonate with most experienced managers (Mintzberg and Gossling, 2002). The foundations of these contentions are often borrowed from the academic literature, however most are not based on altogether newly developed evidence. Scholars in the areas of learning loops (Argyris and Schon, 1974, 1978), learning organizations (Senge, 1990), systems

theory (Wheatley, 1999), industrial ecology (Kiuchi *et al.*, 2002), multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2000), innovative "futuring" (Hamel, 2002) and others, present findings to support the model described in this article.

One researcher suggests that the notions developed by these scholars are absent in the awareness of most trainers and educators (Irving, 2000). Yet, another suggests these concepts are naturally seeping into the mainstream consciousness of those who are engaged in learning activities (Leon and Plata, 1999). This could be the case with Mintzberg (1990, 2002) who after years of anecdotal observations in university settings may have drawn conclusions concerning the efficacy of management training in the classroom, despite the possibility that such research may not be within his specific area of scholarly focus. Regardless, there are foundations from the systems thinkers that warrant the development of a model to demonstrate learning processes that may be applied to developing the leadership abilities of managers within hospitality organizations on a global level.

Learning theories applied to organizations

The education literature is replete with process learning theories that have been adopted by workplace trainers (Armentrout, 1995; Bandura, 1986; Calderhead, 1987; Clark and Peterson, 1987; Cohen and Tichy, 1998; Ellinger and Bostrom, 1999, and others). The power of reflective thinking extends to theoretical pioneers in education such as Dewey (1934), which proliferates in more current application through adapted constructs like the "critical reflection" approach to learning reinforcement (Ellinger, 2002). A few scholars have recently documented the application of this approach within the realm of leadership training (Dougal and Caren, 1999; Kur, 2002). While these notations may be of interest to certain academics, real value lies within the development of applications for use in hospitality organizations.

## The whole brain leadership learning model

From a systems thinking perspective, learning may be considered to be the enactment of permanent change within an individual (George, 1999). Thus, it is a transformational process in that new learning imposed on a person changes her from a

pre-learning state into a post learning state. That change must take her to a higher level of self-awareness, which results in personal evolution through development. Hence, learning facilitates self-development. And reflection upon that development transforms us from who we were before the learning process to who we are after the learning process. The relationship of these factors is depicted in Figure 1.

When it comes to learning an applied practice in a formal organizational setting, the two reception points for the individual's learning system seem to be knowledge and experience. Knowledge may be defined as information that is cognitively assimilated by an individual (Theodore, 1998). On the other hand, experience may be considered to be a person's visceral representation of an event or collection of related events (Dougal and Caren, 1999). Hence, a single learning loop consists of both knowledge and experience that is interpreted through reflection (contemplation), which enhances self-awareness on the part of the learner (Tesone, 2003).

The triangle represents two types of learning by the arrows that originate at the top, and then loop through the bottom and return to the upper point for infusion into self-reflection concerning what was learned. An experiential learning loop moves in a clockwise direction from the right-to-left sides of the triangle, in which an individual practices a function then assimilates information about the function and returns to a state of reflection. For instance, a front office manager for a resort is working with the staff on a particularly hectic day. The nature of the situation causes the manager to personally handle guest check-ins along with the front desk agents; a unique situation, as most of the agents had never seen the manager actually perform desk functions. When the operation returns to normal, the front office manager might return to her office and reflect upon the experience to draw a number of conclusions as a result of that

Figure 1 Learning process model
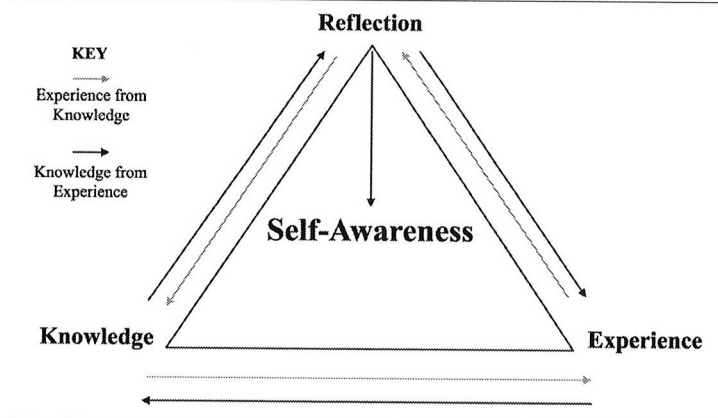
thought process. These thoughts might include the fact that the agents were impressed with her desk skills, a sense of bonding with the agents, a sense of recalling the feelings of working on the line, and other random thoughts. If the manager chooses to take this reflection into her self-awareness as a leader, she might pledge to herself to work the desk one day per month as a staff rapport-building practice. In this case an experiential circumstance has enhanced the self-awareness of a leader, who decides to add a new practice to her existing inventory of leadership practices as an outcome of the new awareness. Hence, the manager has become a better leader through the experiential (e-loop) processing of a single experience. In essence, this is an example of the process performed by a person to gain "knowledge from experience".

Conversely, a knowledge loop (k-loop) reverses this order by functioning in a counter-clockwise fashion (left-to-right) around the triangle (knowledge, then experience) to return to the reflective state. In this scenario, a recent graduate from a hospitality school may be working as a newly appointed front desk supervisor. When the check-in volume exceeds limits of the operation, the supervisor will search his memory of knowledge training for a solution to this situation. He may handle it well, or he may not. In any event, his actions will create an experience for comparison to whatever abstract knowledge of supervision he used to respond to the situation. During that reflective state he will generate a visceral feeling for the application of some aspect of his knowledge-base; giving that new supervisor a snapshot of experience to add to his own leadership self-awareness. In this case, new knowledge is being applied experientially for the first time. The comparison will cause the individual to possibly validate the knowledge, determine it to be useless, or draw some conclusion in between. This is where a mentoring relationship becomes a powerful force. In this scenario, the discussion of an incident with a mentor assists the neophyte with a "big picture" comparison of experiences to knowledge. This serves to expedite the benefit of the reflective process resulting in efficient leadership development. The absence of a mentor could cause an individual to have the same experience multiple times before useful conclusions are drawn on the part of the learner.

A systems approach to learning

The tripartite approach to understanding systems extends back to the days of Socrates, when he introduced the three-parts of personality to describe human nature. Certain systems scholars present models suggesting a triple-loop learning approach to describing learning processes. For instance, Argyris and Schon (1978) differentiated among single, double, and triple loop learning, although they are commonly credited with the double-loop approach. They suggest that the first loop provides information (knowledge), the second results in altered "values-in-use" (experience) and the third involves reflection on the whole learning process (reflection or meta-learning). Perhaps one reason the third loop is not widely reported in the literature is that the reflective process is considered to be a natural contemplative response to experiential stimuli, or that common perception is to blend knowledge and experience. In any case, triple-loop learning seems to go mostly unreported, while double-loop learning is a common reference when addressing organizational issues. Senge (1990) takes a five-fold approach to organizational learning, but provides a single attribute to individual learning within the noted discipline of "adapting mental models" that include multiple loops (Mohr, 2002). There is an inherent problem with these theories as applied to the practice of leadership development in that nobody teaches meta-learning or adaptive mental model processing to individuals. The few individuals who discover this process on their own are considered to be "natural leaders", while the majority are deemed to lack leadership potential. This is an injustice, since most individuals will embrace leadership development once they are taught the proper "brain-technique" for doing so.

A number of additional multiple-loop learning process theories exist to support reflective learning techniques (King, 2002; Gunasekara, 2003). Each provides a variation on the core themes that have already been mentioned. While discussion of these is best reserved for the academic literature, it is important to note that the key contribution of these theories correctly supposes that the relationship of knowledge and experience exist "interdependently" within the mental processing of individuals (Senge, 1990).

This interdependency among knowledge, experience, and reflection provides the rationale for the triangular impression of the model presented in Figure 1. This is a departure from mainstream education and training paradigms that work under the assumption that knowledge and experience are two independent states of mind among learners. This is a common deficiency associated with the leadership training provided in hospitality management schools. Formal academic programs focus on the teaching of knowledge to individuals who often lack practical experience as

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supervisors and managers in the industry (single loop learning). These individuals often come away with abstract theoretical concepts that possess no direct application to the "real world" of working in the industry. Conversely, industry practitioners who return to school in their adult years seem to readily assimilate the knowledge-based concepts into their daily work activities. The difference between the two cohorts exists not in the delivery of the content, but in the processing by the learners.

In both cases the educators are delivering single loops of knowledge to the students, with the expectation that the knowledge will be transferable to working in the industry. There is no experiential base of comparison for traditional learners; hence, the knowledge is not connected to anything concrete in the right hemisphere of the brain, which renders the information as meaningless in the minds of those learners. This is not the case with industry practitioners who return to school. In their case, a single bit of knowledge information that is processed by the left hemisphere of the brain will trigger a visceral representation stored from experience in the brain's right hemisphere. This is an example of the actual application of double-loop (whole brain) learning within a training process (Argyris and Schon, 1974, 1978).

Single and double loop processes

It is apparent that the e-loop process contains more power in terms of learning than that possessed by the k-loop, which indicates that the simplest learning process exists when experience precedes knowledge. However, there are cases in which the intent is to develop leadership skills among individuals who possess very little actual experience, such as newly hired graduates from hospitality schools. In these cases, the trainer may wish to add the second e-loop as reinforcement for the original k-loop. An example could be to present a foundational concept, then apply it to a "live" situation. Pause for reflection, then present another "live" situation and have learners choose and apply the appropriate foundational concepts. An astute trainer might recognize this example is the "case study" method of learning, which is true; except in this scenario, the "cases" are actual situations that a manager would deal within the organization. This is in contrast to what might be presented in a Harvard Business School case study for analysis from an executive viewpoint, which is utterly abstract in reference to the base of experience possessed by the inexperienced manager. Table I provides a suggested sequence of learning activities for trainers who use the whole

brain-learning model of leadership development for newly appointed practicing hospitality supervisors.

What practicing managers already know

Recalling the example of the front office situation mentioned earlier in the article, note that the front office manager intuitively (or so it would seem) knew exactly how to respond to the busy check-in scenario, while the supervisor needed to consciously evaluate the appropriate response before taking action. The difference between the two is that the front office manager is in possession of both experience and knowledge bases, while the supervisor relies only on an abstract knowledge base to make decisions. A trainer working on leadership development as described in Table I with the front office manager would only employ steps 1, 6, and 7. In order to achieve a similar outcome with the supervisor, the trainer would work through each of the seven steps listed in the table. The reason for this difference may be found in the competency levels of experienced management practitioners.

A trainer's perspective

Training professionals subscribe to a long-standing model consisting of four stages of progressive competency levels (Stockport, 2000). The first stage consists of people who don't know what skills are required to do the job, a knowledge-level that could apply to traditional hospitality school students. The second stage could include newly hired graduates from those schools, who know what they need to do, but don't know how to do it. Experienced workers who find themselves in newly promoted higher-level positions comprise a third stage in which they need to develop new skills in order to be successful. The fourth stage consists of veterans who possess years of experience that result in habituated skills. These are people who seem to naturally know what to do in every situation.

The leadership development process would vary based on the competency stage of each individual. Seasoned veterans, for example, need only to be exposed to a knowledge concept, reflect on relevant experience and draw conclusions to alter self-awareness concerning that concept (steps 1, 6 and 7 in Table I). A similar approach would work for those individuals in the third stage of learning competence with the only additional step being to assign a mentor to help with the reflective process.

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Table I Suggested sequence of learning activities for trainers

	Activity	Example	Process	Model Loop
1	Presentation	Leadership style preference	Interactive discussion	K-loop
2	Practice	Style preference surveys	Survey completion	E-loop
3	Awareness	Identification of style preference	Review	Reflection
4	Practice	Practice from style preference	Application within the work unit	E-loop
5	Awareness	Record observations	Mentor's discussion/journaling	K-loop
6	Contemplate	Identify style preference strengths and limitations	Mentor's discussion/journaling	Reflection
7	Self-awareness	Who was I before? Who am I now?	Journaling, self-talk	Change in self-awareness

Those workers who fall within the first two stages of competence would work through each of the steps outlined in Table I, with a mentor participating in activities for steps 5-7.

While anecdotal observation suggests positive outcomes associated with the implementation of the whole brain leadership development model, empirical research is required to validate its effectiveness in practice. The intended approach is to provide for action research in actual hospitality settings using an experimental model to analyze the effectiveness of the model as a tool for leadership development training with management practitioners at various levels of the organizational hierarchy.

Implications for executive managers

Hospitality executives need not wait for empirical investigation of the whole brain learning technique as it is applied to leadership development programs. The model is easily applicable to management development, as well as formal and informal mentoring programs that already exist in many hospitality organizations. In fact, executive committees could easily use the model to begin to generate "leadership cultures" within organizations by simply habituating the reflection process in small groups on a periodic basis. While the concept of establishing a leadership culture within an organization sounds to be a desirable outcome, it should be noted that such an endeavor requires a top-down commitment by all members of the hospitality enterprise, beginning with the executive leadership of that enterprise. Hence, the first step would be for senior managers to practice the reflective process as part of their own professional development activities.

For instance, the final segment of the weekly executive committee meeting could be allocated to group discussion of leadership experiences by sharing stories of "leadership moments" that occurred during the week. As the discussion ensues, each member would naturally contemplate the content of the topic through the lens of personal experiences. After the meeting adjourns, there would be a natural tendency for the participants to reflect on the conversations as they make their way back to the office, enhancing self-awareness while in transit. If each executive were to replicate this method at the department-head meetings and if each department manager were to replicate this process at departmental meetings, there would be weekly leadership contemplation and self-awareness thinking in the minds of every manager within the organization. This thinking would naturally become part of social discussions among managers during meal breaks and such. The trainers could formalize the process using all seven steps (Table I) for key associates within the organization seeking management promotional opportunities. Over time leadership awareness would become a normal behavior for all managers in the organization, and hence, a leadership organizational culture would emerge. Perhaps the best part is that this outcome may be achieved without spending money on consultants to bring knowledge that is already possessed by the organization's managers to the forefront.

Conclusion

The whole brain leadership development model has been presented to hospitality managers as a means to create and enhance the leadership abilities of all staff members within a given organization. The model is a means for mental processing of leadership concepts as they relate to specific supervisory and managerial job functions. It requires the fusion of knowledge (cognition) with experience (visceral representation) through a reflective (contemplation) process intended to enhance leadership self-awareness (evolution). The model is based on a whole brain learning approach in that analytical processing (left-brain hemisphere) and visceral experiences (right-brain hemisphere) are joined through the contemplation

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process to yield a change in personal/professional awareness.

The application of this model presents broad implications for hospitality human resource practitioners, trainers, and executive managers, as well as educators and scholars. The theoretical construct calls for future empirical studies from the academic perspective. However, anecdotal evidence concerning the effectiveness of model application through the seven-step process that has been suggested in this article provides sufficient incentive for its immediate use by practitioners in hospitality enterprises.

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