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Was Steve Jobs Using His Right Brain?

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"Think Different" was the (grammatically incorrect) mantra and slogan that Steve Jobs brought to Apple. It proved to be more than a slogan; it actually worked. How did he do it?

If Jobs' creativity could be reproduced, every board of directors in the world eventually would want to claim the magic elixir for their own company. Amazingly, in 14 years he created the most valuable company in the world. How was Jobs able to succeed where so many others have failed?



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It appears that, though obviously a genius, Jobs learned how to think differently. He attended college, but quit before graduating. He took only classes that interested him (e.g., calligraphy), with seemingly little regard as to how they would affect his employability. (How many college students and their parents would embrace that approach today?)

Jobs next took an extended soul-searching trip to India. What exactly did he discover there that led to his realization of the importance of intuition? What possibly could have propelled someone with a prior rather lackluster background into becoming the revered god of creative geniuses and iconic business leaders?

In the recently released biography of Jobs by Walter Isaacson, he is quoted as having claimed that "Intuition is a very powerful thing, more powerful than intellect in my opinion." Jobs continued to speak of the importance of learning how to quiet the mind, see things more clearly, and live in the present.

Reading the above passages proved to be my own "aha" moment. Jobs figured out how to tap into his right brain! Neuroscientists have known for years that this hemisphere is where creativity and intuition, among other skills, are located. Split-brain research has yielded insights about hemispheric lateralization in injured brains where the corpus callosum is cut. There has not been as much research, however, demonstrating how healthy people can specifically activate one hemisphere over the other.

In drawing upon his intuition — a right-hemisphere trait — Jobs was able to visualize products that consumers did not even realize they needed as yet. I have sincere admiration for what Jobs was able to create. While serving as a public company CEO myself, I became aware of how difficult it is to achieve growth, differentiate products and foster creativity in problem-solving.

I learned how to tap into my right brain a dozen years ago by reading one of many books on the subject written by Lucia Capacchione, Ph.D. Her insights proved to be both a transformation in my personal life and very helpful in my business career. I headed a classic left-brain company. Banks are typically not considered very creative entities, although some might argue that point today as a result of the problems caused by some of the bad apples.

My challenge as CEO was figuring out what we could do to make the company grow faster while keeping our shareholders happy, creating opportunities for our employees, and continuing to take care of our customers. Juggling these three balls was clearly no easy task.

I became able to think more creatively and intuitively as a result of learning how to "think different" on demand. And, became able to fight the urge to conform by taking the familiar path in the decision-making process and staying within my comfort zone. Instead, I chose to learn a new path for thinking and decision making. By learning to quiet my mind and then use my non-dominant hand to activate the right brain, I was able to write down answers that proved to be different from what I had received in using a traditional thought process.

Sound crazy? I personally would have been highly skeptical of this process absent 50 years of neuroscientific research attesting to why it works, beginning with Roger Sperry's Nobel Prize-winning work in discovering the independence in consciousness between left and right hemispheres of the brain.

Applying this non-dominant hand technique gave me a creative edge in thinking about my company's challenges in the following decade. The company grew profitably and rapidly and achieved some major milestones along the way, including being voted as a "Best Place to Work" and as a "Top Performing Bank Based on Return on Equity to Shareholders." Often, executives would ask in amazement, "Where did you come up with that idea?" I wasn't ready as yet, however, to let the cat out of the bag.

Upon leaving the corporate world at age 50, I became increasingly intrigued by what makes some people succeed and others fail in the face of adversity, and whether or not those who succeeded had been able to tap into their own creativity to help them along the way. I conducted hundreds of personal interviews, discovering precious few who knew anything about any methods for unlocking their own creativity. A typical response was, "I wait and hope for that occasional flash of insight in the shower, listening to a song, or sleeping on it."

If the pundits are right and we are dependent on innovation and creativity to grow our economy and make our products relevant in a global market, we can't sit around waiting for flashes of creativity to occur. We need to start unlocking the creativity embedded in each of us.

I present myself as the classic left-brainer who learned how to meet and harness the power of his right brain. My creativity has not matched that of Steve Jobs, but I do know that I am way ahead of where I would have been had I stayed on the ingrained, familiar path. The good news for those seeking creativity is that you do not have to go to India or use hallucinogenic drugs. Instead, form an acquaintance with your right brain. It's ready and waiting with a brave new world of insights.

William Alan Donius is the author of the forthcoming, The Thought Evolution: Unlocking Right Brain Creativity (Release date: March 2012, Changing Lives Press).

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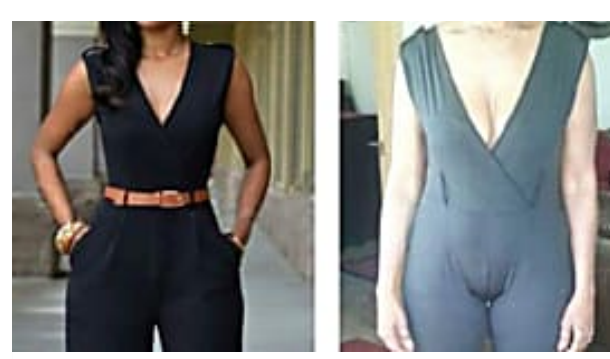
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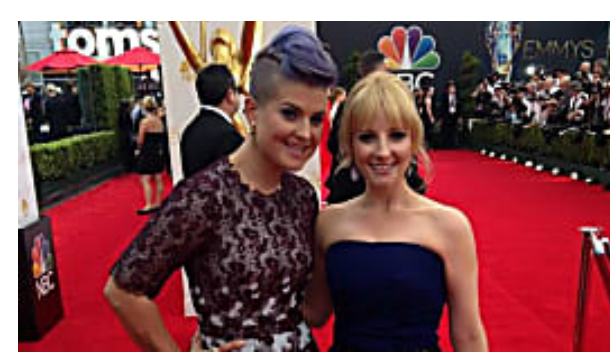
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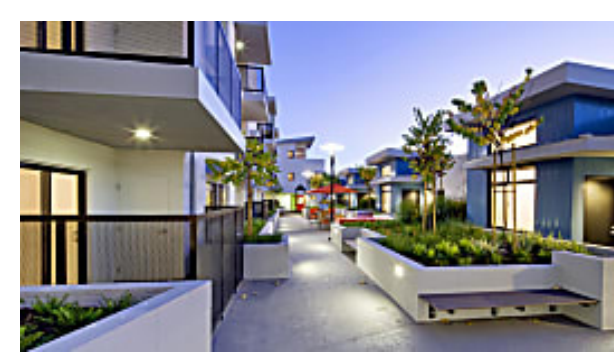
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