

By:

Gary Burnison, CEO, Korn Ferry
1900 Avenue of the Stars, Suite 2600
Los Angeles, CA 90067 U.S.A. © 2019 Korn Ferry

The One Trap People Fall In

It's a common assumption that mastering a function or developing deep expertise is all that's needed to be elevated to the top. Do the job well, get promoted, earn more money. That works for a while, then there's usually a brick wall. Advancing takes more.

When it comes to careers, the "left brain" is what gets people here. The "right brain" is what takes them there. Most people, though, don't look at their careers through the **left brain vs. right brain** lens—and why should they? Let's face it, nobody describes themselves and their careers in these terms.

The reality is getting ahead is all about connecting with, motivating, and inspiring people—and having a career that's focused as much on others as on yourself. To put this in perspective, let's take a look at the differences between the two "brains."

Left-brained people are logical, analytical, and objective. They're detail- and fact-oriented. While left-brain skills and traits may distinguish individual contributors, they are only table stakes—literally—as they'll probably only get someone a seat at the table, at most. In contrast, right-brained people are relationship-builders and can interact with and relate to diverse groups of people. They're good at connecting and collaborating. Plus, they're intuitive, creative, and free-thinking.

To be clear, I'm not suggesting that left-brain skills don't matter—they do. Left-brain skills are a great foundation, particularly in the earlier stages of a career. Over time, as roles and responsibilities expand, it's crucial to hone right-brain people skills.

Our research into **best-in-class CEOs** among sitting CEOs in the global Forbes 2000 spotlighted four strengths and desirable attributes that coincide with a strong right-brain orientation:

- Social leadership – the ability to inspire, influence, and motivate others
- Outside-in thinking (a strong megatrend and customer focus)
- Courage, particularly during adversity and crisis

- Optimism that encourages and empowers others

Are You Right Brained?

So how do you know if you're right brained? For one thing, you're probably **learning agile**. Instead of defaulting to the "tried and true," you're open to trying varied approaches and new ideas. Also, you don't get lost in ambiguity—you actually enjoy it. You're good at dealing with uncertainty and can make decisions without having all the information beforehand.

Plus, you're got plenty of social leadership skills. No matter your job title or rank in the organization, you know how to motivate and influence others. Fortunately, you don't have to be a born right-brain thinker. You can develop these habits.

Exercising Your Right Brain

A good way to approach this is to think about how you improve your health and wellness by adopting better nutrition and exercise habits. That same approach applies to right-brain skill development—with things you can do on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis.

Your Daily Dose

Each day, reflect on questions that can put your work life into perspective, while building the self-awareness, adaptability, and empathy that comprise right-brain skills. For example, ask yourself:

- Did I contribute positivity or negativity to my team and others around me?
- What could I do differently to make someone feel better after an interaction with me than they did before?
- How did I maintain composure under stress?
- Did I listen more—or talk more?
- What did I learn today?

Your Weekly Workout

Just as you might devote one day a week to cross training as part of your fitness routine, pick from the following list of questions to help you exercise your right-brain skills.

- What was the best conversation (at work or outside of work) I had this week?
- Whom can I ask for perspective about a challenge or problem I'm facing?
- What efforts of others have I overlooked?
- Am I more often sharing criticism or praise?

- What situations could I have handled differently—not just through my words, but also my nonverbal cues (facial expression, tone, and body language)?

Monthly Milestones

Since habits develop over time, monthly check-ins will show you how you're progressing.

- How am I “trending”—what feedback am I receiving?
- What motivated me the most this month and what will keep me motivated next month?
- What is the one achievement I can point to for the month?
- What new experience did I try—a new activity, unfamiliar cuisine, different music style, etc.?
- What examples from life, literature, sports, or entertainment inspire me or can help me through any challenges I'm facing?

Don't get caught in the trap of relying too much on your left-brain technical skills. As you rise, the right brain rules.