



## Building a stronger team: overcoming dysfunction to reach peak performance

Case Study

CreateConsulting   
FACILITATION • LEARNING SOLUTIONS • COACHING

## Introduction

A team of specialist physicians, working in one of South Africa's leading healthcare facilities, reached their boiling point in 2021 when the team's toxic behaviour began to inhibit their ability to deliver results. Having heard about CreateConsulting's successful track record in assisting 'fragmented' teams that need 'healing', the Departmental Head reached out to us.

Following an in-depth needs analysis, we set out to design an integrated team solution that would improve their cohesion, and in turn, their performance and effectiveness.

## The Challenge

*Building team cohesion and effectiveness to deliver and sustain outstanding care, training and research in a toxic culture.*

The team had developed habits of interaction that were resulting in poor communication, conflict and mistrust. Poorly defined roles, a lack of clarity around goals and misalignment spurred further tension within the team. Although the team comprised capable individuals with impressive track records, they avoided collaboration and when they did engage, the same issues cropped up.

Underpinning this was the conflict between the two senior leaders in the team. Over the years, their growing tension caused a fracture that resulted in two opposing camps. As more unresolved issues festered, trust collapsed. With a breakdown in communication and no cohesive leadership, assumptions, finger-pointing, and conflict were rife. The team's morale was at an all-time low. As a result, several team members were close to 'giving up' and thinking of resigning, which would have been a tragic loss to their practice and patients.

This left the HOD feeling very cynical about the success of the intervention:



*"We are swimming in the mud with passive-aggressive stances on both sides and mutual poor communication and irritation. Truthfully, I worry that even a deeper understanding of our different thinking preferences and a commitment to better teamwork may not be enough to overcome our problems."*

With the group not thinking or operating as a team their performance was suffering and negatively affecting the facility's standards.



## Our Contribution

Using **Whole Brain® Thinking** and numerous Team Effectiveness tools, we crafted a dynamic and engaging team development journey to deliver a positive and constructive learning experience.

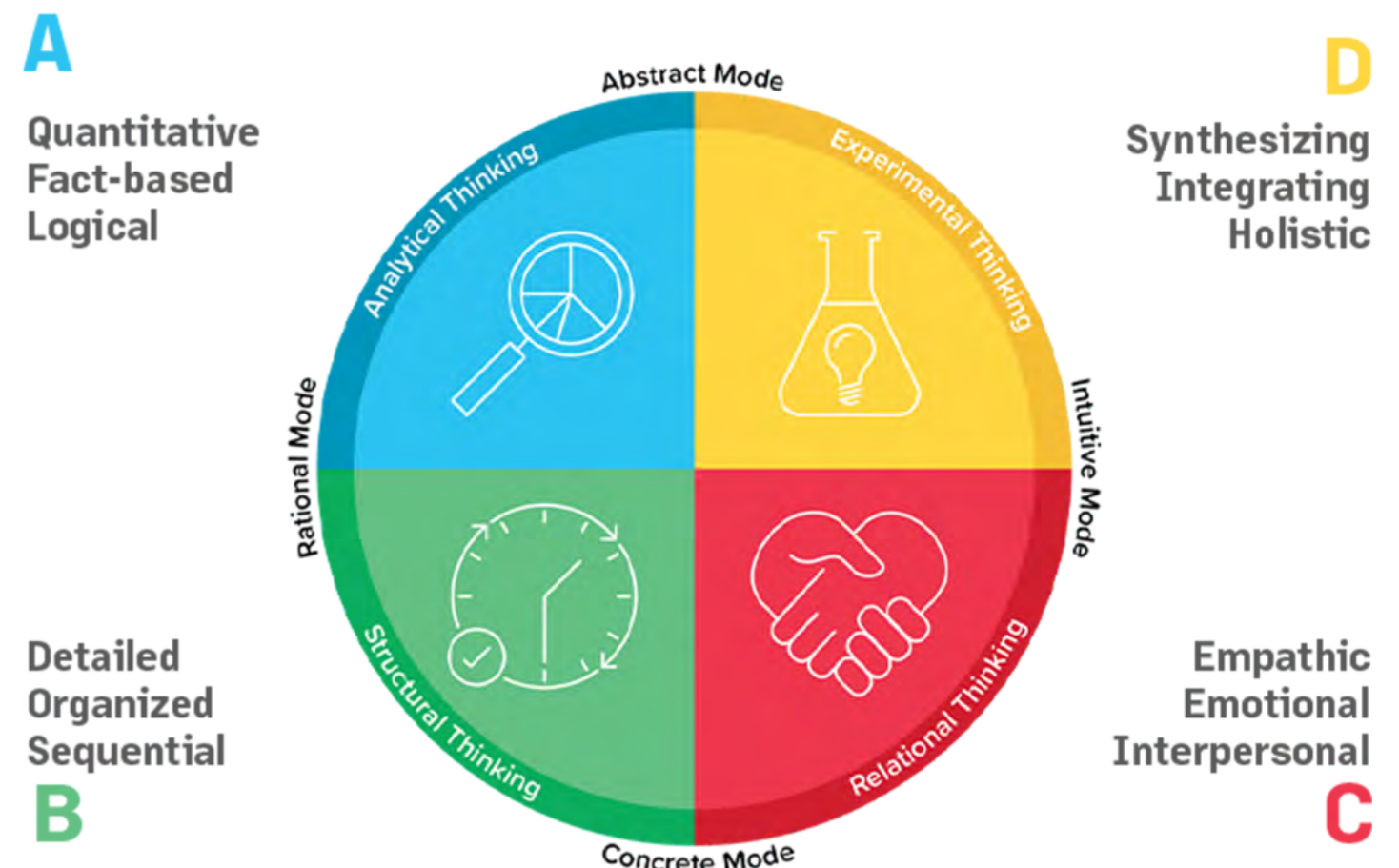
**Whole Brain® Thinking** is a model that enables thinking diversity within a team to build team cohesion, improve communication and manage conflict. Its functional approach to enhancing team thinking made it the ideal framework to meet their needs.

The awareness of one's own thinking preferences and those of others, combined with the ability to act outside of one's preferred thinking preferences is known as **Whole Brain® Thinking**

The **Whole Brain® Model** emerged as a validated metaphor for describing the 4-quadrants representing our thinking selves. The model was developed by Ned Herrmann who discovered that there were four patterns that emerged in terms of how the brain perceives and processes information: (A) Analytical, (B) Practical, (C) Relational, and (D) Experimental.

We each have access to all four quadrants, but we have preferences for some over others. Those preferences, based on the dominance of specialised thinking processes, form the basis of the **Whole Brain® Model**, which in turn serves as the foundation of The Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument (HBDI®).

## Whole Brain Thinking®



## Other elements of the journey included:

- Creating a **Thinking Environment™**. Based on Nancy Kline's work, this philosophy of communication is particularly useful in a team context to enhance relationships. It starts with understanding the conditions that enable our best thinking and provides teams with practical techniques to create and sustain a **Thinking Environment™**
- Understanding what makes teams healthy and what makes them dysfunctional. Drawing on Patrick Lencioni's "The Five Dysfunctions of a Team" to build trust, commitment and accountability
- Using **Clean Talk**, a direct, yet sensitive, communications approach designed for expressing difficult messages by using language to evoke collaboration rather than compliance, pro-action rather than reaction and agility rather than rigidity
- Exploring principles on Vulnerability & Leadership from Brené Brown's work to build core interpersonal skills such as empathy, connection and
- Learning how to be catalysts for sustainable change by actively designing conversations to take us forward.

Together, these frameworks, methodologies and tools allowed us to create a foundation that enabled the team to develop greater levels of psychological safety, trust, understanding and social contracting.

## A Comprehensive Blended Learning Journey

The journey commenced with a virtual Onboarding Session to introduce the team to **Whole Brain® Thinking** and the steps to complete their confidential **HBDI®** Assessments. The **HBDI®** (Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument) evolves from the **Whole Brain® Model** and is backed by over 40 years of brain-based global research and scientific validation.

## Phase 1: Assessments & Debriefing

- **The Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument (HBDI®)**

The **HBDI®** was key to the journey as it effectively defined and described each team member's preferences for thinking across the four quadrants of the **Whole Brain® Model**. Participants completed a series of micro e-learning activities on the **HBDI®** Thinker Portal to 'unlock' their results and gain insight into their thinking preference. In addition, each participant received access to the "Thinking In Hand" Mobile App for IOS and Android Smartphones.

- **Coaching Sessions**

The results were debriefed in one-on-one Coaching Sessions with a CreateConsulting **HBDI®** accredited practitioner. This allowed each team member to understand themselves better and build greater self-awareness. They were also able to explore the application of **Whole Brain® Thinking** and dig deeper into the "so what?" question in each team member's work and life before participating in the team workshops.

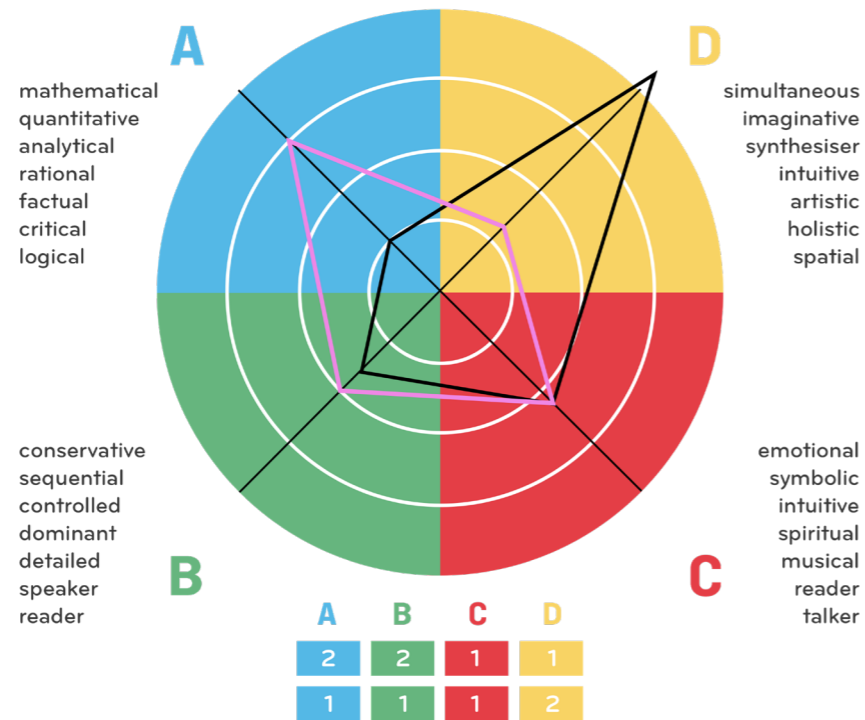
- Leadership Conversation**

Phase one concluded with a Leadership Conversation held with the two Departmental Seniors to ensure alignment, set expectations and create a foundation for understanding and collaboration.

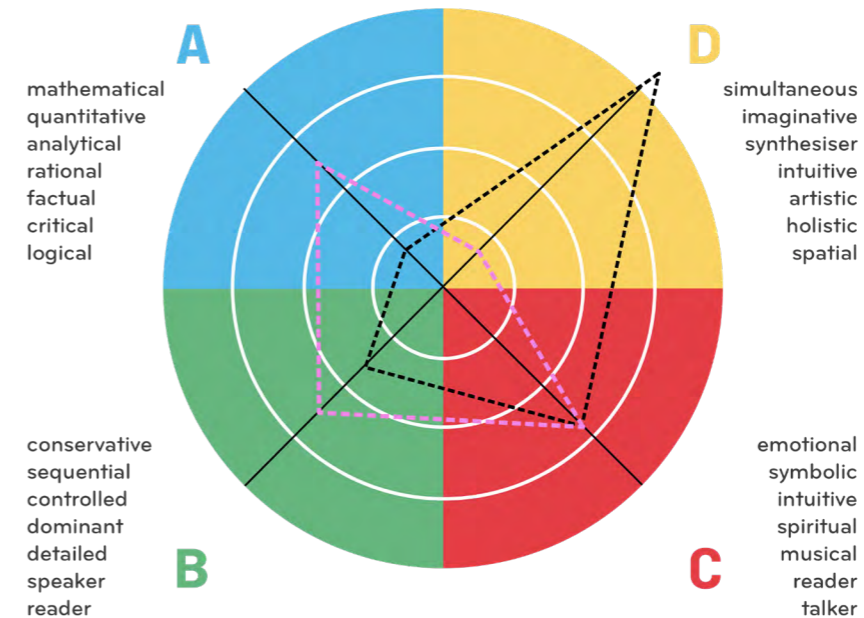
During this meeting, the Leaders were introduced to their **HBDI® Pair Profiles** (see below), which illustrated the significant cognitive diversity between them. The Pair Profiles helped them appreciate how different they are in terms of thinking preferences and provided the opportunity to leverage this cognitive diversity and become more whole brained as a leadership team.

The two senior team member's **HBDI®** profiles overlaid, provided a quick comparison of the similarities and differences in thinking preferences looking at both their normal and under pressure thinking. The Pair Profiles are a supplementary report to the individual **HBDI®** report.

### General Comparison of Our Thinking



### Comparisons of Our Thinking Under Pressure



## Phase 2: Team Effectiveness Workshops

Drawing on the **Whole Brain®** framework, **Thinking Environment™** methodology and **Team Effectiveness** tools outlined above, we tailored a series of workshops to build greater collaboration, cohesion and engagement within the team. This involved a half-day online and a full-day, in person, session followed by two more in person, half-day sessions.

- **The Team Effectiveness Dashboard**

A few months into their development journey, the team completed the **Team Effectiveness Dashboard™** (TED). Used in conjunction with the **HBDI®** Individual and Team Profile, the TED is a 10-minute diagnostic that gives greater team insight. It poses the questions: "What is our purpose as a team? Are we working to the team's full potential? What are our strengths and what are our weaknesses? What are we paying attention to", and "what are we not paying attention to?" This provided the team with immediate, actionable insights to help align their thinking and focus.

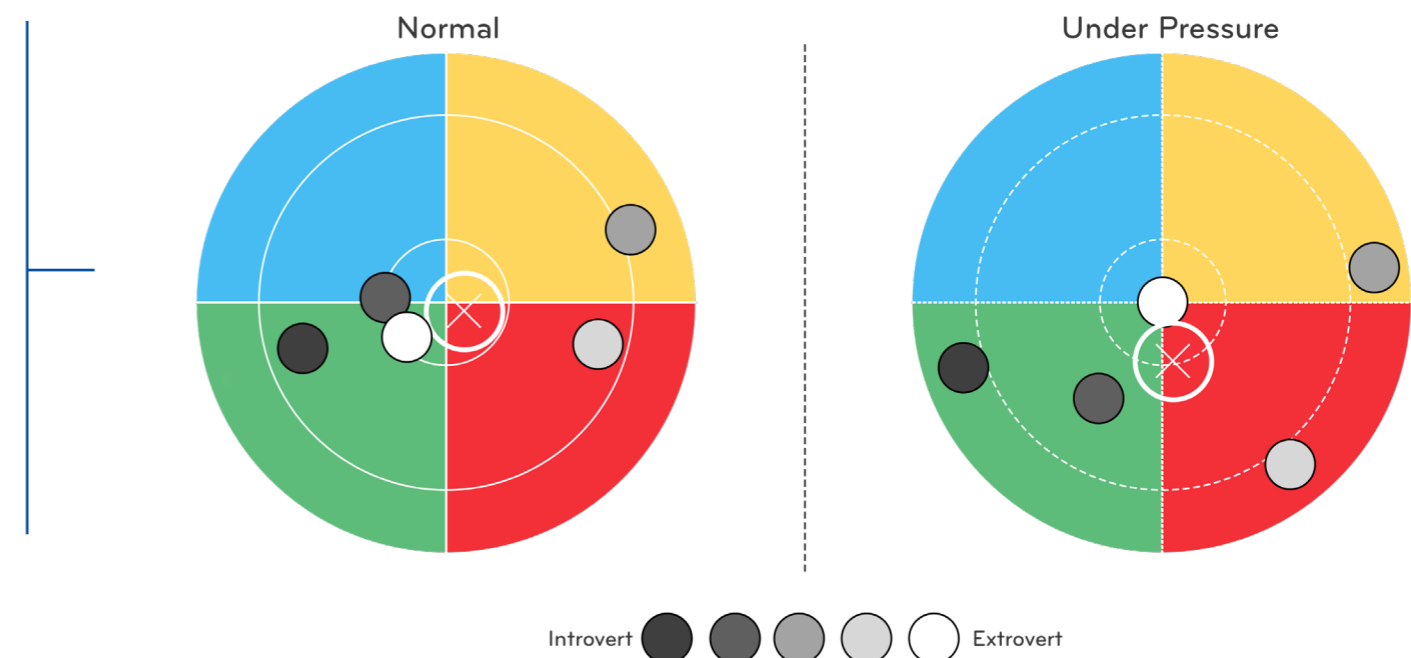
To measure the change in focus as a team and impact of the learning journey, the TED can be repeated over time.

- **Using Whole Brain® Thinking to build a stronger team**

Each team member received access to an **HBDI® Team Profile**. This is a comprehensive analysis that compiles the information from each team member's individual profiles to make a team profile. With 13 reports and a variety of data sets to compare, it helped the team understand how their working styles fit together and how they can leverage their strengths and weaknesses to be more cohesive. It also showed the team the **Whole Brain®** cognition required for the work they do and helped them develop a strategy to stretch into thinking in a **Whole Brain®** way.

As part of the process, lead facilitator Melanie Kiley unpacked the **HBDI® Team Profile**, using a visual map of the team's thinking preferences with specific insights on how these preferences affect their collaboration, communication, trust, decision-making and problem solving.

### Preference Maps



The **Preference Map** indicates the thinking preference tilt of each person relative to the team, placed on the map based on its degree of preference.



Understanding their collective thinking was a big 'A-HA' for the team and an important step in their healing journey. Here's what one member had to say:



*"Given the different ways that each of us think and operate, it's no surprise that miscommunications, incorrect assumptions and fragmented teamwork was our experience prior to the intervention."*

By providing each team member with an understanding of their own thinking preference, the **HBDI**<sup>®</sup> increased self-awareness, insight and created an understanding of the thinking diversity within the team. "This framework provided the team with opportunities to explore mental blind spots and the strengths and shadows of their thinking preferences and how to leverage these areas," explains Melanie.

An opportunity valued by the team, as attested to by one of its members:



*"Melanie demonstrated that combining our profiles into one team profile, we have a remarkably wide and comprehensive set of approaches and styles. The interactive workshops showed us how to value each other's differences and use these as strengths."*

- **Deepening cohesion through purpose**

To strengthen team cohesion and alignment, we guided the team in crafting a purpose statement. Having a team purpose is an important unifier as it provides a reason for WHY they exist and need to work together to achieve common goals. This understanding creates energy, gives clarity and drives action, and importantly, it helps teams to get through difficult times.

To visually depict their vision for the future the team hand-drew an illustration that was digitised with the help of a young artist.

Using the **Whole Brain**<sup>®</sup> **Model** as a 'walkaround' (see right), the team confirmed their priorities and actions for improvement on an individual, team and departmental level. To facilitate this discussion, the team were asked to capture their insights from the **Team Effectiveness Dashboard** and identify potential actions to keep improving their effectiveness:



Whole Brain<sup>®</sup> Walkaround

At the next session, the team gave feedback on their progress and as commitments were met, significant shifts started to take place. Melanie shares her experience of the journey:



*"As the lead consultant, I was deeply invested in helping the team. I saw first-hand the impact they have on the lives of their patients and the important work that they do. I was determined to do everything in my power to help them make the shift that they wanted for themselves, their team, their department, their clinics and their patients. The team consists of such committed experts, dedicated to delivering excellent services to their patients and it was a privilege to have their trust and to partner with them."*

## Results

As the journey progressed, the team found it easier to communicate and work together. They experienced increased cohesion and unity, improved relationships and developed greater trust, respect and support. They also laughed more, talked freely and shared their knowledge and experience. As a result, performance improved and they achieved their goals.

The impact of this could be seen in key business areas such as improved "Patient systems management", "Resource registry", "Patient care" and "Relationships with other units".

When asked for feedback on the process, the Departmental Head shared:



*"Melanie and her team at CreateConsulting have helped shape us into a well-functioning, mutually supportive and driven team. I am optimistic that these changes will be long-lasting and will endure through future minor and major challenges. I would strongly recommend this intervention to any struggling team."*

**"If everyone is moving forward together,  
then success takes care of itself."**

**- Henry Ford**



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