Orthodontics in the "Conceptual Age" from left to the right: A future that promises to be bright!

Orthodontics is interestingly juxtaposed globally! Practices are yearning for growth and orthodontic education is looking at reinventing itself to face the times. Professional bodies are also desirous of their leadership to address issues facing the specialty. We've been doing things the way they ought to be done, incorporating technological advancements in our protocols, but what is that "thing" that we need to understand, to provide a new direction to 21st century orthodontics? Are we as professionals immune to global concepts that govern success in the work sphere? Does our education and continuing education really imbibe from global trends in arenas other than orthodontics? This editorial attempts to look at one such phenomenon.

In 2005 Daniel Pink wrote his book "A Whole New Mind," where he introduces the term "The Conceptual Age" to readers. The conceptual age is the new era of work where current economic demand calls for workers who are skilled in areas guided by the right hemisphere of the brain. The 18th century has been described as the agricultural age; the 19th century, the industrial age; the 20th century, the information age and the 21st century, "The Conceptual Age". The knowledge worker has given way to this age. The conceptual age has high concepts and high touch as their primary elements. High concept includes the capability to detect patterns and opportunities, create artistic and emotional beauty, craft a satisfying narrative and combine seemingly unrelated ideas into something new.

High touch involves the ability to empathize with others, understand the subtleties of human interaction and find joy in oneself and to elicit it in others and stretch beyond the quotidian in pursuit of purpose and meaning.

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There are six fundamental human abilities that everyone can master to assist them with professional success and personal fulfillment and are described as design, story, symphony, empathy, play and meaning.

Those who have studied brain functions know that the left side of the brain is in control of the sequential, logical/rational and analytical. The right side of the brain is in control of the nonlinear, intuitive and holistic. These and other right-brain activities (inventiveness, empathy, joyfulness and meaning) are needed in the conceptual age. Though the right side of the brain is in prominence in the conceptual age, the left side of the brain is not forgotten. They work together (whole brain concept) with the left side of the brain providing the details while the right side of the brain synthesizes the details into a big picture. Putting both the left and right side of the brain together with the six fundamental abilities listed above gets you the following:

- Function (left)/design (right) — beautiful, whimsical and emotionally engaging.
- Argument (left)/story (right) — fashion a compelling narrative to get your point, argument, idea, across; stories amuse while facts illuminate stories divert while facts reveal, stories exist where high concept and high touch intersects.
- Focus (left)/symphony (right) — synthesis, seeing the big picture, crossing boundaries to uncover hidden connections, combining disparate details into a new whole; recognizing patterns and making bold leaps of imagination.
- Logic (left)/empathy (right) — to forge relationships and care for others; it has been proven impossible for computers to reproduce empathy.
- Seriousness (left)/play (right) — we all need to play; people rarely succeed at anything unless they are having fun doing it.
- Accumulation (left)/meaning (right) — purpose, transcendence and spiritual fulfillment; the search for meaning exits in all of us.

Hence, those who say "I am right-brain" or "I am left-brain," should stop and begin thinking of oneself as a

whole-brain individual with a tendency toward one side of the brain. Realigning thought processes is critical for success in the conceptual age.

When we train specialists for success as educators, to administer practices, or lead professional organizations, are we really looking at "The Whole Brain Concept"? The orthodontic world is at a critical inflection point and to compete in tomorrow's global arena, today's orthodontists must demonstrate more than knowledge or technical expertise: They must cultivate new skill sets. This is partly because the amount of new information about any given subject is constantly increasing. Tomorrow's professionals will need to take a creative thinking approach to the sea of knowledge, bridging the gap between analytical left-brain functions and creative right-brain capabilities. Simple ways to integrate these are described below:

1. Strategic imagination refers to "dreaming with purpose." We're so mired in busywork, i.e., finishing bends, bracket positions or submission of dissertation projects on time that our ability to think long-term has waned. The successful orthodontist of tomorrow will have to imagine "Orthodontics in 2025" and then work toward attaining skill sets for the scenario then!
2. The ability to ask smart and often unsettling questions is known as "provocative inquiry." Transformative power lies in asking questions that make us rethink the obvious. In the healthcare industry, for example, it can be seen in the shift from curing illness to preventing it through wellness services. All evidence based practices that question timing and initiation of treatment and its long-term effects in orthodontics are a step in that direction.
3. The quick and obvious strategy will not survive the fierce competition of the conceptual age. Employees will need to continually exercise their creative problem solving skills, the application of best practices from unexpected sources to create fresh solutions. For orthodontics specifically, all research that is looking at "out of the box" solutions to day-to-day clinical issues. i.e., robotic wire bending, computer-aided design computer-aided manufacturing appliances or genetic and molecular research are reflective of this mindset.
4. Keeping pace with change is a challenge, yet meeting unexpected situations with quick thinking and resourcefulness is the very definition of agility. In a world where change is the only constant, a plan B — and C, D and E — is truly critical. Cultivating the mindset of preparedness by creating "Wild Card" scenarios is critical. Planning for success under constraint helps you learn agility and prepare for change before it is forced upon you unexpectedly. The best orthodontic example is the current accent and efforts toward "accelerated orthodontics" or a "demographic analysis" of new practice locations.
5. Building on agility, orthodontists will also need to demonstrate resilience, which translates to the tenacity and courage in the face of obstacles. People who are undaunted will give their professional endeavors a competitive edge in the conceptual age.

The valued leaders and successful professionals of the conceptual age will be firing on all cylinders — and many will involve right-brain functions. To avoid extinction, orthodontists must embody the kind of daily future thinking that will enable their teams and efforts to conceptualize — and handle — the blessings and burdens of a new era!

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