Design Thinking

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A number of us attended the Emerging Issues Forum last month in Raleigh. It was organized by our friend and former colleague, Anita Brown-Graham. The topic this year was creativity, and it focused on making North Carolina more competitive by bringing greater innovation to bear across many different dimensions. There were some excellent presentations and I was glad that a number of our folks attended.

A recurring theme was the need to use our whole brain in trying to resolve challenging problems. Not just the analytical left side of our brain, but also the more intuitive right side of our brain. Roger Martin, Dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, worried that we exalt analytic thinking over more creative and intuitive thinking. I'm sure he would readily acknowledge that creativity occurs within analytic thinking, and none of the speakers argued against the importance of rational, analytic thinking. Just the opposite. Their point simply was that it is not enough.

Martin and David Kelley (general manager for IDEO) advocated a move toward design thinking, which is a methodology developed by Kelley that applies principles used in designing objects to solving other kinds of problems—including the improvement of organizations. It involves understanding problems from different perspectives, breaking them apart, and then putting them back together in new ways. The intuitive side of design thinking tends to produce creative leaps that otherwise don't happen with other approaches to problem-solving. It requires more than

drilling down to understand the elements of a problem—it also involves a breadth of knowledge and experience that allows you to see old problems in new ways. This is something Kelley called "veja du," as opposed to "déjà vu." Daniel Pink was another speaker who talked about thinking with your whole brain. He provided some wonderful illustrations of how thinking like an artist can offer important perspectives that help people to see and understand their work in new ways.

David Kelley

I'm not doing justice to the concept of design thinking, and I plan to return to this topic in future posts. In the meantime, here is a short article from *Inside Higher Ed* about design thinking in higher education if you are interested in learning more about it. The article does a nice job of outlining some of the leading trends in the field. A short article about David Kelley in *Fast Company* gives you a nice feel for the evolution of design thinking through his work at IDEO. I'm convinced that we can do better as an organization if we apply the principles of design thinking to some of our work. I will keep you posted and solicit your feedback as I learn more about it.