

Right-Brain Thinking and Organizational Adaptation

By Jim Walters

In the March-April issue of *Public Power*, David Saxby wrote about the challenge utilities face as Gen Xers and Nexters replace us baby boomers. (See *Public Power*, March-April 2007, page 60.) He noted that constructive feedback, development, mirror and match (high level listening), dialogue, and showing empathy were more important needs of Gen Xers and Nexters. Most interesting to me is that all of these needs are dependent on our non-analytical right-brain capability and the implication for how we lead our utilities to adapt.

Horizontal management—Thomas Friedman, the author

of *The World is Flat*, and other writers contend that our world will soon undergo unprecedented change due to forces that move governments and organizations away from vertical top-down to horizontal bottom-up orientations. Can utilities adapt to a horizontal world using traditional vertical command-and-control tactics?

Outsourcing, supply chain management, unique collaborations (insourcing), community software development, and the ability for any of us to access the world's knowledge are just some of the forces that are changing the playing field for all organizations. As a result, workers and

consumers have unmatched power to demand change in how government and business operate. For example, cell phones enable anyone to instantly capture and deliver real-time pictures of a crime, workers loafing, or bad roads. Self-forming online communities provide consumers free access to software that rivals Microsoft. They also provide the means for anyone to take part in discussions of community and world issues, such as how an organization is managing its affairs.

For utilities, which have historically been top-down organizations, adapting to a horizontal world may be especially challenging. Utilities have always worked to keep consumer and employee concerns at arms length.

Instituting change—Research has shown that a left-brain ap-

proach to change characterized by conformity and one-way communication during crisis situations is most often successful because employees are well aware of the threat. In crisis situations, the focus is to communicate *what* the change is in as little time as possible. However, it's during non-crisis times that change efforts fail because time is not taken to tell employees about the change.

In a horizontal world, information is available to everyone at anytime; therefore, it is no longer synonymous with organizational power. Thus, using information to drive change downward in non-crisis times is not as effective as right-brained approaches that focus on *how* the change is communicated.

Resistance to change—How many of us have engaged in two-way communication only to see employees' differing ideas as resistance to change? In a horizontal world, it is crucial for management to see resistance as a natural process that individuals go through before accepting the change. Resistance to change provides the necessary counter balance for good decision-making.

We left the Industrial Age after we learned that machines could take the place of human muscle-power. We are leaving the Information Age, which has shown us how technology can take the place of our left brain. Today we are entering the Conceptual Age, which requires us to reconnect employees and consumers by engaging right-brain leadership. ♣

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