

Case Study: The Cirque du Soleil Case

1) Plan: The vision Cirque du Soleil had was unique. In order for Cirque to be what it is today they had to plan for the future. Rather than including animals, loud background music, and relying on well known artists to attract customers Cirque based their performances on human talent. Cirque's shows were always changing requiring extensive planning to coordinate ornate costumes, implement new acts, intricate sets/props, to seamlessly telling a story to its audience.

As the company was expanding across continents and different venues Cirque needed to plan their expenses. The organization made strategic partnerships and obtained sponsorships to fund and to hedge the risks associated with the production. These partnerships helped fund the production and provided resources (facilities, stable revenue, publicity, and new audiences). For planning their expansion into Asia and Fuji Cirque obtained a sponsorship from Fuji Television Network. Cirque du Soleil was also able to obtain a year long agreement with a Las Vegas hotel, Mirage, to perform Nouvelle Experience. The company had to plan for the future to create its success.

Pattern: When you look at Cirque du Soleil creativity is everywhere. From looking at this it is apparent that green hat thinking is always flowing throughout the organization. Everything from the show to advertisements had innovative ways to captivate the audiences' attention. In addition to training the performers Cirque also developed new acrobatic techniques and equipment. This innovation also was followed with the unique sets and costumes. One of the interesting ways that Cirque was different from others was rather to create music based on the acts instead based the acts on the music composed. For the marketing of the shows Cirque was able to send a team of performers to local venues to showcase some of their talent to create a buzz about the production. Nothing about Cirque is generic, even their website and email program had a taste of the Cirque du Soleil experience. Creativity is a pattern that is followed everywhere throughout Cirque du Soleil. According to D'Amico the culture of the company is one that would rather create a new show than to fix it to meet markets needs. This statement is one that

symbolizes the company's beliefs to be artistically driven as they create a new market, Blue Ocean Strategy, than to fulfill an already desired one.

Position: To understand Cirque's position you first must understand the traditional circus. The traditional circus was targeted to children. The traditional circus during the 1980s and 1990s was faced with the fact that television was preferred with their target audience as opposed to visits to the circus. The circus also featured animals performing stunts that also brought the criticism from animal activists. The traditional circus was boisterous possibly serving as a deterrent from adult audiences. There is a black hat notion when looking at a circus as there were many negatives associated with them. Utilizing green hat thinking Cirque du Soleil was able to find a creative solution to solve the problem.

Cirque du Soleil is a company that embodies Blue Ocean Strategy. Blue Ocean Strategy suggests that organizations should create new uncontested markets rather than compete head to head with others in the same industry. Cirque du Soleil is different from the traditional circus. As opposed to the target market of children Cirque targets adult audiences who visit the opera and theater. The culture that Cirque has is one that is rich and elegant much different from the traditional circus of being loud. Cirque focuses their performance with a main storyline blended with original music and performances. As a critic in a newspaper once wrote Cirque du Soleil is a circus for people who think they do not like circuses. The statement is one that exemplifies how different Cirque du Soleil is from their competition. This new experience creates a niche market in the live entertainment industry.

Perspective: Risk taking can be said to be a balance between success and the fear of failure. Risk taking is something that Cirque du Soleil is not afraid of. Many of the successes they had were from taking risks. In 1985 when the company was relatively new they tried to perform outside of Quebec. This was met with a poor audience response leaving them in a financial mess. The company took many risks traveling to

different venues until they achieved mainstream success. Cirque du Soleil also took another risk for passing up on an opportunity in order to remain in control of their production despite the temptation from Columbia Pictures' interest in a movie production. Risk is a concept that defines what Cirque is. They are able to venture into new markets and to create an untraditional way of doing things. Complacency is considered one of the biggest risks to Cirque hence why they are so open to try new things, in spite of consequences. Much of the core philosophy of Cirque is using red hat thinking. The management team of Cirque is one who trusts their intuition and it has proven to be successful. Without taking the risk to expand into new markets the organization could still only be performing in Quebec as opposed to internationally.

The need to take risk is associated with the perspective that Cirque needs to be more creative than the rest. Cirque does not create a show to suit market needs but rather to share their art. Like a painter who paints a canvas the performance they share is like art. Cirque is not about building the experience around the customer instead they experience Cirque.

Ploy: With Blue Ocean Strategy you are tapping into a new market place where no competition exists. For Cirque du Soleil there is no direct competition. Cirque targets a different target market than that of traditional circus, adults vs children respectively. The traditional circus competes with each other avenues to draw kids' attention. Cirque was able to see that the children were no longer a viable market for the over saturation thus making their target market adults. They further identified adults who visited opera and the theater as their viable target segment.

Another opponent for them was the funding for the productions. The company started out as a non for profit with a grant from the Quebec government. After performing in Canada and then the year they went to Los Angeles Arts Festival they became a for profit entity. The organization then was able to work sponsorship deals and partnerships to hedge future productions.

2a. From the start Cirque du Soleil was clear about their values. The company wanted to showcase artistic ability, using no animals, and to tell a story. The performance was about immersing the audience into the show transferring them into a new world. The organization remained a private company for the reason of being in control of the production which is a strategic decision that was consistently followed. From looking at that with a blue hat thinking in the long run the managers knew what they wanted Cirque du Soleil to become so they forwent a potential movie deal in order to remain in control of the company's production. Although Laliberte announced we wanted to build an entertainment complex to include restaurants, hotels, art galleries, spas and movies theaters D'Amico reminded Laliberte of the organization's true inspiration behind their brand extension. The inspiration was that they would control the environment 100 percent not deviating to serve customers but for them to experience a magical world.

b. Cirque du Soleil has responded to a changing business environment. There was a technological force driving the popularity of movies and television resulting in circuses losing popularity. The organization was able to respond to the environment in a positive way. To counteract the technological force of competition the company focused its efforts on a niche target market, adults who frequented the opera and theater. Another way of responding to the competition Cirque du Soleil focused on delivering elegant, high quality, creative, sophisticated, and artistic performances. There was also a political force that helped drive Cirque du Soleil. When the company first started up the political driving force was able to offer a grant of 1.2 million dollars from the Quebec Government during the 450th anniversary of Jack Cartier's discovery of Canada.

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OBJECTIVE:

To develop strong leadership, improve decision making and assemble high-performing teams to meet an ambitious expansion schedule and sustain high-flying standards.

Established in 1984, Canadian entertainment company Cirque du Soleil is the largest theatrical producer in the world, known for its breathtaking shows that combine mind-boggling physicality with signature artistry. Today, the company hires close to 4,000 employees worldwide, including 1,300 artists, representing

more than 50 nationalities and speaking 25 different languages. More than 100 types of occupations can be found at Cirque.

Producing such complex and imaginative shows with ever-expanding teams of diverse people is a true feat of creativity, technical prowess, determination and flow. Acknowledging the importance of leadership as part of the Cirque production has been a gradual process. In fact, just saying “leader” had the connotation of a four-letter word in the culture of Cirque, because it implied a corporate hierarchy that represented everything Cirque is not.

However, to sustain its ambitious expansion schedule and reputation for continuing to outdo itself,

Cirque would have to embrace and cultivate the qualities leaders embody. Cirque would also need to learn how to quickly replicate its high-performing teams.

CHALLENGES:

Building a new leadership mindset that can thrive in a culture that eschews hierarchy.

Cirque du Soleil is a “flat” organization, one that has eschewed the hierarchical approach to management and success. So when the idea of implementing leadership development was introduced, it was met with some resistance.

“Those who were here in the early years of Cirque felt the pain of starting an organization. They said, ‘We were successful and we don’t want corporate models. We have our own way of achieving success,’” says France Dufresne, Director for Organizational Development and Training at Cirque. But after some serious discussion, the value of potentially adopting “leadership” was accepted.

SOLUTION:

Recognizing, valuing and applying the full diversity of thought within the organization.

“People recognized that, wherever they go in the world, this diversity of thinking will exist, and that their understanding will have a big role in how things turn out.” –Danièle Bienvenue

A perspective that emphasized the importance of coaching skills turned out to be the entry point into Cirque’s leadership development approach.

“At Cirque, we have this unique strength of coaching high-caliber athletes and artists, and we wanted our leaders to become good coaches to employees, so the decision was made to teach coaching skills,” Dufresne says.

But the emphasis expanded once the organization discovered Herrmann International’s Whole Brain® Thinking approach. Cirque believed that not only could it serve as a vehicle for developing leaders and coaching skills, it could help the organization understand what makes it “tick” and how to keep that ticking functioning at its highest possible level.

Robert Paris introduced Whole Brain Thinking® and the Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument® (HBDI®) as the self-awareness portion of a Cirque du Soleil leadership program. The HBDI®, which defines and describes a person’s degree of preferences for thinking across the four quadrants of the Whole Brain® Model, enables people to better understand how they think and approach work. By learning how to apply Whole Brain® Thinking, the highly diverse teams would be better able to communicate with others whose thinking preferences differ from their own.

Setting the Stage

Danièle Bienvenue, a consultant who worked with Cirque, developed a creative way to introduce the Whole Brain® Model to this creative audience: She hired a cartoonist to draw four characters illustrating different aspects of thinking preferences.

In the introductory Whole Brain® session, Bienvenue conducted an exercise where attendees could choose four activities in a diversity game. Each activity happened to coincide with a thinking preference and related quadrant of the brain. She then revealed the Whole Brain® concept by unveiling the cartoons and asking the participants to add the appropriate dialogue. This helped people make a quick connection

between thinking preferences and activities. It also showed them that, in a diverse world, a multitude of thinking is best.

The game and the cartoons were successful in piquing the interest of Cirque participants.

“People recognized that, wherever they go in the world, this diversity of thinking styles will exist, and that their understanding will have a big role in how things turn out,” she says.

Next, participants went online to take the HBDI®. Between the preparation exercise and their awareness that they would receive a highly personalized, in-depth package that would reveal their own thinking preferences, the Cirque group shared an air of heightened anticipation.

Bienvenue then delivered a “Getting to Know Myself ” debriefing that helped participants not only understand themselves better but also decide what kind of leader they wanted to be.

Dufresne says that the reaction of the senior managers upon receiving their HBDI® profile debriefing has been consistently positive.

“They say things like, ‘Wow, this model is amazing. It’s helping me understand so much’,” she says. Among the typical reactions she reports hearing:

- 1 Now I understand the differences between my boss and me, and I want to work with him.
- 2 I see another perspective totally. I want to work with this person because they’re different from me
- 3 This is like a gift to us, to understand ourselves, and our team, better.

Dufresne adds that she appreciates the fact that the debriefings and discussions are conducted by HBDI® Certified Practitioners who ensure the information isn’t misinterpreted. The human resources managers at Cirque are also briefed in the Whole Brain® Model so that they understand it at the same level as the organization’s leaders and speak the Whole Brain® “language.”

Team Support

“Whole Brain Thinking® became a pillar, a lighthouse constantly reminding us of this knowledge about members of the team. We focused on how we can use these insights to make better decisions.” – Danièle Bienvenue

As part of her coaching at Cirque, Bienvenue supports leaders as they face challenges with their teams. To address issues, she orders HBDI® Team Profiles for each member of the team. Before presenting the results, Bienvenue asks each team member to write their team’s challenges on a 3-x-5 card, and keep it to themselves. Then she presents the results—showing a PowerPoint slide of the Whole Brain® Model, with each team member’s HBDI® results plotted on it.

“Seeing it that way, it’s easier to understand why they have these challenges, and makes it clear what strategies they are missing for a Whole Brain® approach to address those challenges,” she says.

Solutions soon follow.

“I would ask, ‘What would make your team smarter? Stronger?’ The answers are always in their diversity of thought,” Bienvenue explains. “And so Whole Brain Thinking® became a pillar, a lighthouse constantly reminding us of this knowledge about members of the team. We focused on how we can use these insights to make better decisions.”

RESULTS:

Increased appreciation for and application of diversity of thought, leading to increased team effectiveness and a whole-brained leadership approach that fits the Cirque culture.

“It’s very useful for this organization to understand where our thinking preferences are in order to realign or understand our differences. We will have different thinking preferences in production vs. creative vs. corporate. The Whole Brain® concept is very powerful, and the trends are very important to acknowledge and accept.” – France Dufresne, Director for Organizational Development and Training, Cirque du Soleil

Directors, executives and middle managers at Cirque have now embarked on the process of applying and getting the advantages of Whole Brain® Thinking by taking the HBDI®. Teams benefit from a unique understanding of the thinking preferences each team member brings to the fore and how to use these insights to bring a Whole Brain® approach to their work at Cirque.

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As a result of using Whole Brain® methodology, Cirque has achieved:

- 1 A better understanding of interdependencies
- 2 A greater openness about different thinking preferences in the organization
- 3 Increased team effectiveness

For example, each show has a directorship committee, with members that change every 18 months to two years. Administering the HBDI® and sharing each committee member’s thinking preferences is the foundation of the teambuilding exercise for that show.

When the top team at Cirque re-formed, it discovered that the combined thinking preferences of the team represent a Whole Brain® approach to leading Cirque. While that was not done by design, the creation of this particular team means the organization’s future promises to be well-represented by the full diversity of thought at the leadership level that its teams need.

Additionally, each Cirque du Soleil new show has its own creative director and production director. These two people—drawing from diverse thinking preferences to create a phenomenal show—practically live together for the year-and-a-half the show is being developed. Armed with an understanding of Whole Brain® Thinking, “the managers realized they had put together teams that work so well by covering the full spectrum of thinking” required to get top-notch results, Dufresne says.

That’s the magic of combining Whole Brain® Thinking with Cirque’s inimitable moving masterpieces.

