

The Whole Person Practitioner

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Key Points

- Project success relies on more than technical rigour.
- Neuroscience and Behavioural Modelling have come together to identify we have a head, heart and gut brain which when used in alignment creates a whole person practitioner.
- A whole person practitioner is able to generate and sustain calm and wise decision making, people-centred presence, a resilient mindset and helpful habits, routines and rituals to set themselves and their projects up for success.

Abstract

For over 20 years I worked in various Local Government Water and Catchment management roles. I came to realise that unless practitioners truly understood, valued and cared for key aspects of their Water/ Catchment/ Natural Resource Management work, then projects were either not delivered or were delivered without valuable aspects, rendering them unsuccessful. So my career moved into Facilitation and Personal Development roles to assist practitioners to develop or have access to this knowledge.

When you're better connected to what truly matters for you, your team, your organisation and your stakeholders, you're going to care more for the Natural Resources and Catchments in which you reside and that you manage.

My presentation will be on the key elements that help practitioners gain clarity regarding the purpose, the values and success factors for a project to be successful. I will outline how you can get better connected and make wiser decisions.

Keywords

Success, Leadership, Engagement, Emotional Intelligence, Self Awareness, Waterway Health

Introduction

New science and engineering techniques, tools and processes are significant for a project to be successful in gaining better outcomes in our waterways. And as our waterways face greater and greater pressures and challenges from urbanization, agriculture and resource utilization, and more uncertainty with weather predictions, these new challenges require new approaches.

Organisations responsible for managing our waterways are facing more and more challenging scenarios that require innovation and new approaches. The easy problems have been solved, now we're dealing with the 'wicked problems'.

Let's appreciate for a minute who is developing these innovative and new approaches and who is applying these techniques, tools and processes to improve our catchments. And ultimately who is benefitting, or being affected by, these techniques, tools and processes?

It's not the computers whirring away on the data. It's not the buildings in which you sit or the cars you drive. It's not the pipes holding the run-off or the bridges that cross them.

It's the people like you. It's the people like your peers, your colleagues and your stakeholders.

The Whole Person Practitioner

Belinda Chapman

What happens if the person entering that Waterway Health data doesn't care though? What if they're not aware of the impact of their flood modelling work? What if they're not clear on the purpose of their design work? How does the Project Leadership impact the outcomes? What happens if no one stopped to check in on the person being affected by the decision you made upstream and what they truly value?

We've all seen it haven't we? We've all seen how this plays out and it's not pretty.

So, what are the precedents for successful project outcomes in our waterways?

In my experience, it's understanding that a Whole Person Practitioner brings their 'head' brain to the office for the technical skills, expertise and experience AND they bring their 'Heart' and 'Gut' brains too. When a practitioner taps into their Whole Person they are better able to clarify the purpose of the work they're undertaking, they connect to what they and their stakeholders value. They're setting themselves, and their projects, up for success.

Multiple Brains...?

Advances in Neuroscience over the past 20 years have discovered that we have multiple intelligences that we can (and do) tap into (Soosalu and Oka, 2012; Sneijders, 2019). Science has discovered the Enteric (gut), Cardiac (heart) and Cephalic (head) brain that are each made up of their own neural networks forming these complex and functional brains. Each one can learn and communicate – just in their own unique way.

When you think of the terms:

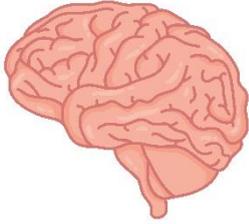
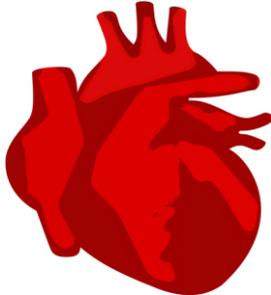
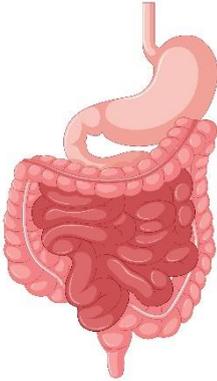
- listen to your gut,
- use your head,
- get to the heart of the matter,
- this smells fishy,
- follow your heart,
- go with your gut,
- be true to your heart

you start to realise that you are already acknowledging that you use more than your head to make decisions...

Reflect for a moment how you make decisions at work. Do you purely draw on the knowledge, data and information that is stored in your head, in reports or in books? Or do you call someone you know who has great experience in this field? Or do you gauge risk by experience and follow your instinct too? Maybe you use a combination of all of these.

If we rely solely on the data and information stored in our head, we miss out on the rich source of wisdom that guides us from our heart and gut. Neuroscience insights and behavioural modelling (Soosalu and Oka, 2012) have come together to identify key functions each brain performs (see Table 1).

Table 1. Function and application of each Brain.

Brain	Function	Application
<p>Head</p> 	<p>Thinking Making meaning Cognitive Perception</p>	<p>The cognitive, logical and rational aspect of our day – thinking about, interpreting and bringing together the information, knowledge and data we’ve gathered and creating the products needed for the project.</p>
<p>Heart</p> 	<p>Relating to others Values Emoting</p>	<p>The part of you that helps you connect with your colleagues with whom you’ve formed a relationship or to form a new relationship with a stakeholder.</p> <p>This is also the part that you tap into when you wake in the morning and know whether you’re following your passion or not, whether your work aligns with your Values or not. Do you bounce out of bed excited, or dread facing your day?</p> <p>And your heart is here to communicate how something makes you feel. Are you happy with yourself for the work you’ve done? Are you sad/ hurt/ frustrated that you didn’t get the result you were hoping for? Completely natural to feel these, but are you acknowledging and allowing them?</p>
<p>Gut</p> 	<p>Self-Preservation Core Identity Mobilisation</p>	<p>The gut will soon let you know if something doesn’t feel right too. Self-preservation is a strong instinct that kicks into gear when you are threatened or feel fearful.</p> <p>The core identity relates to how you identify, deep down, with your role at work, on the project, in life etc.</p> <p>And mobilisation is there to help you get moving (or keep you stuck).</p>

What does it look and feel like when these brains are working in isolation? Or when one is dominating?

The Whole Person Practitioner

Belinda Chapman

It looks like decisions made without consideration of other people's perspective or with no compassion regarding how your project affects someone/ something else.

It looks like decisions acted upon, rashly, without logic and without rational considerations.

It feels like decisions that make you feel angry/ frustrated/ sad because they grate against your Values.

It feels like overwhelm because you're uncertain about the purpose of your work.

It feels like lack of trust because it doesn't feel right in your gut.

It looks like moving on to the next project without acknowledging and celebrating your successes.

Setting Yourself up for Success

What does it look like when they're working in alignment and communicating effectively with each other?

- Calm and Wise Decision Making.
- People-Centred Presence.
- A Resilient Mindset.
- Helpful Habits, Routines and Rituals.

It looks like Success.

Calm and Wise Decision Making

We're all familiar with the notion that our Fight and Flight system triggers us to run away if we're ever chased by a Saber Tooth Tiger. But did you know that our mind doesn't know the difference between physical threats and psychological threat (Reddan et al, 2018)?

Imagine this:

You've just had a call from your client, there's been a change of plan. They need you to present your results to their executive *next week*. You've still got another week of number crunching to go, let alone the extra week it'll take you to interpret the results and present it to a non-technical audience! You mumble something back along the lines of "Sure, I'll make that happen"...

What's starting to happen in your body...? Where are you feeling it? What's your breathing doing when you think about that stressful scenario?!

All you've done is read a few sentences and your fight or flight response (the Sympathetic arm of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) has been triggered. It's that easy to do. Which means it's that easy to calm yourself down again and bring yourself into balance and alignment.

The key players in your ability to feel calm and balanced in the face of stress your Vagus Nerve and Parasympathetic arm of the ANS (the Rest and Digest arm), your heart and your diaphragm. And the simplest way to bring your nervous system into balance is to do some balanced breaths (Hansen R., 2010) deep into your belly, for a couple of minutes.

Breathe in for 5, breathe out for 5 – simple as that!

Figure 1 shows the resulting state of being that you will achieve when you reach this balanced and coherent state of being.

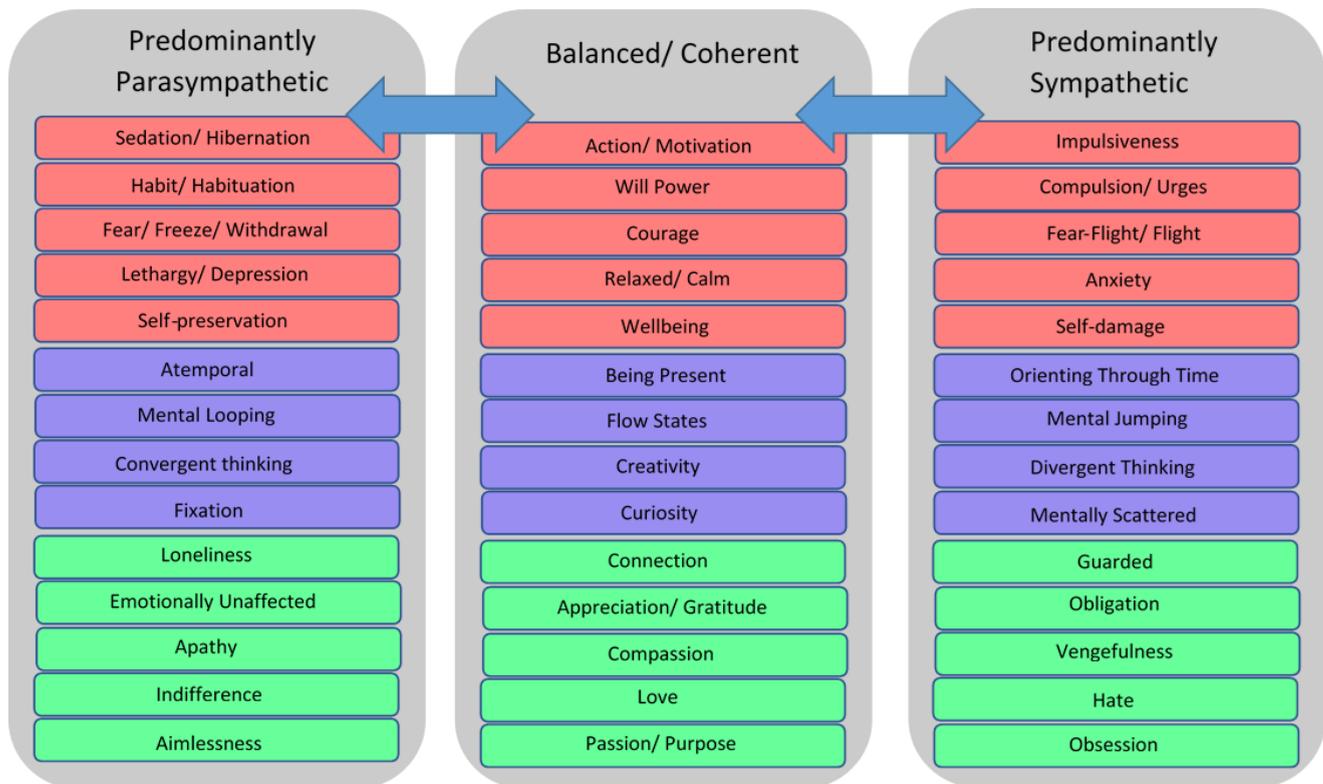


Figure 1. Autonomic Nervous System – States of Being (Soosalu and Oka, 2012)

When we achieve the Balanced/ Coherent states of being we can make wise decisions that benefit us, our project and our stakeholders.

Imagine now that you’ve hung up the phone from your client after committing to the presentation. You take a couple of moments to get yourself into alignment – breathing in and out evenly. Feeling calmer now and ready to make some critical decisions and take action. You’re back in your flow, feeling creative. You reach out to one of your colleagues to help with the number crunching. You’re clear on your purpose. You work together to prepare a structure for the presentation and you’re ready to go.

Obviously, this is very simplified, but it’s not impossible.

People-Centred Presence

Where attention goes, energy flows and results show.

T. Harv Eker

Attention is the most glorious of human gifts (Sheehan and Pearce, 2015). We know when someone is truly present with us and giving us their attention or if they’re just in our presence. We know the difference between someone just listening to us and someone really hearing what we have to say.

The Whole Person Practitioner

Belinda Chapman

What does People-Centred Presence mean?

It means being authentically present with someone and their story, finding out what drives them (ie their purpose), meeting them where they are at and becoming aware of what they value.

It's the difference between assuming you know how someone will respond to your idea vs purposefully checking in. It's the difference between only sending your drawings to someone, expecting them to interpret them the same way you do vs meeting with them to talk the drawings through and checking on your assumptions when you send them.

What gets in the way of People-Centred Presence?

Our fears, insecurities, and ultimately, our Ego.

What's the purpose for practicing People-Centred Presence?

We are more likely to earn that person's trust, their respect, their time and/ or their expertise when we practice people-centred presence. Of all the factors that affect whether or not a project is going to be successful (alongside technical excellence), from my experience, this is a critical factor.

A Resilient Mindset

If you asked a Civil Engineer to control the weather so you can have enough water to provide for your city, or to ensure we never have a flood again or to eliminate cyclones, do you think they would comply? Well, if they don't first laugh and walk away, they might try to educate you about adaptability, about resilience, about risk management, about what we've learnt from monitoring the weather for decades so we can better respond to it's challenges.

Our mindset is what determines whether something (e.g weather) is providing an opportunity for us to learn from and adapt to, or whether something is a challenge that must be defeated.

Mindset determines whether or not you're going to be flexible, agile and nimble in the face of challenges or whether you're going to be constantly fighting, exhausted and beaten.

'Wicked problems' present challenges that haven't been defeated. They've either defeated us as a Profession or we've left them alone until we need to interact with them. 'Wicked problems' in our catchments require us to have a mindset that is open to opportunities, open to failing before we succeed, open to making connections and collaborating with other professions and industries and open to innovation.

Helpful Habits, Routines and Rituals

The final factor that a Whole Person Practitioner will mindfully bring to their work day to ensure success on their project will be a set of helpful habits, routines and rituals – just like an organisation uses Processes, Standards and Systems.

Some examples of these include, but certainly are not limited to:

- *Reflective thinking*: this is the critical thinking that helps us to convert and embed our learnings into wisdom, this is our adaptive management step. Reflect and reset to ensure we either retain what worked or change what didn't for next time. This is the step that allows us to reflect whether or not our values have been met or not. And if they haven't been met reflective thinking affords you the time and space to ensure they are met next time.
- *Self-awareness and management*: also known as emotional intelligence, this enables professionals to be empathetic towards themselves and their colleagues, peers and stakeholders. When a practitioner

The Whole Person Practitioner

Belinda Chapman

is aware of their emotions, they can consciously regulate them. They can take the steps needed to process their emotions if they're not aligned with a respectful working environment. Emotions are central to the functions of the brain and to the life of the mind (Davidson and Begley, 2012), therefore we need to be aware of how they are manifesting and affecting our ability to collaborate and contribute to a successful outcome of a project. This self-awareness also prevents the likelihood of overwhelm from stress and anxiety by picking up these cues earlier.

- *Mindfulness*: Mindfulness is the act of being aware of what is going on around you, paying attention on purpose in the present moment, without judgement (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). The practice of mindfulness can dramatically influence your relationship to your thoughts and emotions, with great benefits in terms of anxiety, depression, and other mental afflictions (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). This practice can be either a formal mindfulness meditation practice or it can simply be the act of paying attention throughout the day, in the present moment, without getting distracted. Consistent mindfulness practice also affords a wider attention span as well as the development of a non-judgmental attitude (Gunasekara and Zheng, 2019); both beneficial for the work environment.
- *Schedule of regular communications and engagement with stakeholders and colleagues*: Humans are a tribal species. We innately need to belong to a group that works together with a common goal. It might sound obvious but, communication helps you determine: what that common goal is; what your role is on the project (and if there's one thing that our brains hate it's uncertainty); how you're tracking against your targets; how you can get support when you need it; and who your colleagues are as fellow human being.
- *Acknowledge and celebrate the wins*: positive thinking, finding the 'good' in life and gratitude have all been found to be important for personal resilience and mental health. Celebrating your successes boosts morale, builds momentum, improves self-esteem and increases motivation to keep going. But remember, it needs to be genuine and authentic, not just ticking the box!

Conclusions

From my 20 years of experience in the Waterway Health, Natural Resource Management, Coaching and Facilitation fields I have concluded that there are many precedents for successful project outcomes in our waterways. Whilst these include excellent technical rigour, I believe the management, understanding and development of the Whole Person behind the computer is an essential element for success. We need to develop ourselves as Whole Person Practitioners to set ourselves and our projects up for success.

Combining the evidence I've gathered as a team leader and project and program manager, my coaching certifications and my readings into neuroscience, I have concluded that a Whole Person Practitioner sets themselves up for success by bringing their logical and rational 'head' brain to the office for the cognitive functions AND they bring their 'Heart' and 'Gut' brains to work in alignment and communicate effectively with each other.

This enables them to generate and sustain:

- Calm and Wise Decision Making
- People-Centred Presence
- A Resilient Mindset
- Helpful Habits, Routines and Rituals

to clarify the purpose of the work they're undertaking and to connect to what they and their stakeholders value.

The Whole Person Practitioner

Belinda Chapman

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the support of my team leaders and mentors over the past 20 years who have believed in me and my potential to be more than a pure Environmental Scientist. They saw in me the capacity to create a collaborative and supportive team environment and a project team culture that enabled open and honest conversations. They also saw that I had more to offer than technical skills and opened the doors for me to expand into coaching and facilitation. I also want to acknowledge my amazing husband who has supported me to take the leap of faith from being a public servant to a small business owner!

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