

# Head-Heart-Gut Approach to Coaching

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## Why would I take a Head-Heart-Gut approach to coaching?

Since the late 1990s I have used a holistic approach – coaching the entirety of my client with the entirety of my being, a “Head-Heart-Gut approach.” I had no name or supporting evidence for this method, I just knew that it was effective and my clients achieved success according to their own definitions of success. Recently scientific research has provided evidence and a structure to support this holistic approach. Research by Michael Gershon began on the gut brain in the late 1940s and became mainstream with the publication of his 1998 book *Second Brain*. Research on the heart brain was published in the late 1970s and popularized by Paul Pearsall’s 1998 book *Heart Code*. Much as the current evidence-based approach to coaching, the holistic approach I used for many years now has an evidence-based framework that I share with my clients and other coaches.

A brain is defined as a complex and adaptive neural network that has memory, intelligence, and control over the decisions we make. Composed of interneurons, neurotransmitters and glial cells, we thus have three brains: the brain in our head (central nervous system), the one in our heart (cardiac nervous system) and the one in our gut (enteric nervous system).

The importance of this to coaching is:

1. All three brains (a.k.a. intelligences) need to be accessed and incorporated into the decision-making process. Without the head intelligence, the decision will not have been properly thought through and analyzed. Without the heart intelligence, there will not be sufficient values-driven emotional energy to care enough to act on or prioritize the decision against competing pressures. Without the gut intelligence, there will not be enough attention to managing risks nor enough willpower to mobilize and execute the decision once challenges arise.<sup>1</sup>
2. Ensuring that one brain is not being used to do the function of another. Each brain has its own domain of competence and, by definition, is not the most competent in the other prime functions.

“Since the time of the Enlightenment, Western culture has increasingly valued the wisdom of the head-brain – conscious thought and control of thought – over alternative perceptual and integrative systems in the body. The Cartesian formula ‘I think, therefore I am’ is the sort of logical formulation that epitomizes Western thought, which gives the head-brain

primacy over other neural systems – brains – that exist in our bodies. Our educational systems reinforce this prejudice...”<sup>2</sup>

### What is the relationship of the brains?

In the Western world we have revered the head-brain as the most influential followed by the heart and to a lesser extent the gut (figure on the left). According to Mark Chandlee Taylor, “if we were to illustrate the relative value given to the brains of the head, heart, and gut according to the traditional Western point of view, we would have an inverted pyramid.”<sup>2</sup>



Taylor suggests a “realigned model (figure on the right) – one that draws on both anatomic and experiential analysis – proposes that a better foundation for our humanity is to right the pyramid, acknowledging our gut-brain as our strong and stable foundation, our heart-brain at ease, resting on the wisdom of the gut, and our head-brain at the top, in a smaller, less dominant role than in the old model.”<sup>2</sup>

### What are the core competencies of each brain?

Each of our three brains is best suited to a specific role:

- **Gut Brain:** “Is your core identity and contains the deepest levels of the self. You rely on your gut often for quick decision-making; that fight or flight response (safety or risk). You may find courage, fear, action, and grit down there.”<sup>4</sup>
- **Heart Brain:** “Is used mostly for processing emotions (joy, jealousy, anger, hate, love, lust, compassion, empathy). It helps you to discover what is most important to you in life, priorities, and values. It helps you to connect or disconnect with others based on similarities or differences in those values.”<sup>3</sup> The heart brain also has an electromagnetic field that envelops every cell of the body and extends out several feet in all directions into space. This field operates just below the level of consciousness and has the capacity to affect individuals around us. What this means to coaching is that by accessing the heart brain we can subtly influence our client.
- **Head Brain:** “Is primarily used for cognitive perception and pattern recognition. You

use your head to reason, to analyze and to synthesize information that comes in. One way your head makes meaning of things is through language (verbal, written, body), telling stories and using metaphors.<sup>3</sup> The head brain uses 80% of the energy of the body – by giving the brain a rest we can increase the energy available for the other two brains and the rest of the body.

Bottom line: head brain is creativity and making meaning; heart brain is compassion and processing emotions; and gut brain is courage and core identity. You may even have used the following phrases “use your head”, “listen to your heart”, and “have some guts” at one time or another, demonstrating that you are sub-consciously aware of each brain and its core competency.

### **What does this mean to me as a coach?**

Alignment of these three brains, or coherence, is the optimal state in which heart, head, and gut are in synch. The heart and gut signal the head brain more than the head brain signals either of them. What does this mean to coaches? A ‘flow’ state is created through the alignment/coherence where each brain is functioning at its efficient best. Gregory Stebbins proposes that this flow state is wisdom, defined as “an integration of head, heart and hunch [gut] tempered through the experience of the individual ... a state of being that emerges from within the leader from the experience of integrating head, heart and hunch [gut].”<sup>3</sup>

“Coaching is customized to the coach, the person being coached, the context, and the specific conditions that led to its initiation.”<sup>5</sup> Given that the coach and the person being coached each have three brains, and that alignment of these brains creates a ‘flow’ state, a holistic coaching approach is recommended. This calls for the coach and coachee to use all three brains or at least consider the input from each.

Begin with deep listening from your gut, heart, and head. For example, your coachee is sharing with you a work situation that involves a challenging assignment with a short deadline that may not be value-added. As coach you have a hunch that there is more to this situation (gut), you feel compassion for the exhaustion in her voice (heart), and note the elements of short dead- line for non-value-added task (head). You now have a choice to respond to one, two, or all three brains. An integrated response might be “I hear exhaustion in your voice (heart) at the challenge of this assignment (head) and yet I sense there is more going on here (gut).” Next, pause for the client to take this in each of her brains.

As you saw in our example, here’s summary of three brain, a.k.a. human connection, model: **head** works on logic such as facts, figures, data and other objective factors; **heart** is addressed through emotions such as feelings, touch, relationships and subjective factors; **gut** responds to instinct, intuition and other subtle and often unconscious clues and signals. As a coach, it is important to listen to messages or information all three sources are

providing in order to best support your client.

Here is another way this Head-Heart-Gut may add value to your coaching: What if your coachee makes decisions or responds to situations from only one brain and ignores the others? This can occur when under pressure or from habit, and may be likened to “over reliance” or “overdrive” when one brain is overused or used inappropriately in exclusion of the other brains.

- **Gut Brain Overdrive:** Reactive, impulsive, and action oriented. However, this is useful in an emergency, or when safety or survival is threatened.
- **Heart Brain Overdrive:** Concern about self-image, impact on others, and lives of others. May end up waiting, hoping, and dreaming – or show emotions too obviously and readily.
- **Head Brain Overdrive:** Plan and prepare, focus on what could go wrong, too much visioning or try to do it all. May be viewed by others as cold, impersonal, and calculating.

As a coach, when faced with a possible overdrive situation in one of your clients, consider asking one of the following questions:

- What does your gut tell you?
- How does your heart feel?
- What does your head say?

### **What does this mean to me a leader?**

Given that you as a coach are also a leader, your assignment is to look inside and determine if you have an overreliance on one of your brains. Remember, the “functions of the brain have been categorized in three levels. The gut level governs a lot of your instinctual reactions, the heart level is involved in the processing of emotions and memory, and the head level adds thinking, reasoning, and the ability to project into the future a plan.”<sup>6</sup> Add to this the fact that the heart brain has an electromagnetic field that has the capacity to influence people around us, and you may be unknowingly influencing others for benefit or not. Bottom-line: if you have an over reliance on one or two of your brains, practice and integrate trusting your gut, listening to your heart, and using your head. Remember the pyramid – from a solid foundation in your gut brain, you connect with others emotionally from the heart brain, and give your logical head brain a much needed rest.

## Head Leadership

Rethinking the way things are done  
Reframing boundaries when necessary  
Understanding the complexities of a global world  
Thinking strategically without losing sight of short-term goals  
Looking for ideas inside and outside a company, wherever they can be found  
Developing a point of view<sup>1</sup>

## Heart Leadership

Balancing people and business needs  
Creating trust  
Developing true compassion in a diverse workplace  
Creating environments in which people can be truly committed  
Knowing what's important  
Understanding and overcoming potential derailers<sup>1</sup>

## Gut Leadership

Taking risks with incomplete data  
Balancing risk and reward  
Acting with unyielding integrity in spite of difficulty  
Tenaciously pursuing what's required for success  
Persevering in the face of adversity  
Not being afraid to make tough decisions<sup>1</sup>

In today's society we are encouraged to focus mainly on providing our head brain with facts and figures which can lead to information overload. We also need to use our two other brains to process our feelings (heart) and listen our intuition (gut) to help keep us in balance. Consider trying this exercise for yourself or with your client:

1. Take a problem/opportunity you are experiencing right now in your life or a decision you need to make. To help you see more options and come to right answer for you, take a few moments, focus on problem/opportunity and then begin breathing exercise into each of your three brains.
  - As you breathe into your head ask yourself: What do I think about this situation?
  - As you breathe into your chest ask yourself: How do I feel about this situation?
  - As you breathe into your belly ask yourself: What are my gut instincts or inner voice telling me to do?
2. Write down, draw or talk out loud to yourself answers or insights you come up with. Then follow through with what feels right for you. For example; take no action just yet and take your time; take action; ask for help; or get more information before moving forward.
  - Head – thinking brain (think) - Use your thinking brain and words to express your feelings and inner voice (intuition) in a respectful and honest way with people in your life.
  - Heart – feeling brain (feel) - Listen to your heart and how you really feel. Then honor your feelings by expressing or saying what feels right for you.
  - Gut- intuitive brain (know) - Listen to your gut instincts and learn to trust your inner

voice then act on what are good choices for you to make in life.

I regularly share this model with my clients so they can use it in their daily lives. Coaching can create an environment where a different type of conversation can occur—one in which the head, heart, and guts can be valued. In an environment in which the head/heart/gut are aligned, people can feel comfortable sharing ideas that challenge traditions and norms of organization – heart and gut issues. However, this is not to say that there is only one combination of head, heart, and guts needed for all situations. Depending on environment, leader, context (company's competitive landscape, strategy, and customers), and situation – different ratios of head, heart and guts may be required. But that is another article altogether...

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