

This is the second of a five-part series on the how the business adviser of the future can best support client growth.

Cognitive flexibility

Why now is the time to start thinking differently

Cognitive flexibility is a key attribute of distinction for the adviser of the future. While these are heady words, it's really a pretty simple concept. It's adapting your thinking and possessing the willingness to change your mind. It is the ability to resist thinking in the same pattern, given a different set of circumstances or context.



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Professional development programs frequently advise professionals about the benefits of adjusting their approach, their vantage point, their process and their communication style as it relates to business development, client service, relationship capital and leadership competencies.

Workshops and strategic retreats tend to validate research about the most valuable characteristics of successful attorneys, accountants and other professional service providers. It is always encouraging to watch these highly technical, intelligent and accomplished professionals clearly recognize the need to adjust their thinking when it comes to building relationships. But changing your thinking and your perspective is rarely an easy thing to do.

Being a critical thinker who is technically competent, an excellent problem solver and an individual contributor has made most professionals quite successful. However, the market disruptors that are converging in the professional services space are now complicating a professional's ability to deliver an excellent client experience.

The ability to build trust, inspire clients, offer greater transparency, collaborate with colleagues, formulate creative solutions and demonstrate a values-based/socially responsible approach to business will become a professional's new competitive advantage. This is a new way of thinking about the characteristics that clients are demanding of their advisers.

So, what does this all mean?

How can you gain more cognitive flexibility? First, acknowledge your style of thinking. Determine if you are left brain dominant (analytical, logical, technical and objective) or right brain dominant (creative, intuitive, subjective and collaborative). Next, identify the strengths and limitations that your brain dominance has created in your practice. Then, continue to play to your strengths while now recognizing the value of adjusting your thinking and approach when it comes to the needs of your clients and other audiences.

A few ideas to challenge your thinking:

1. Take a workshop, seminar or online course not related to your profession — just something you would find interesting or inspiring.
2. Invest in a behavioral assessment or industry-recognized instrument that will provide you with insights on your communication and behavioral style.
3. One morning each week, change up your work routine. This may create opportunities to think differently about your workflow and processes.
4. Ask for ideas from clients and peers about ways to demonstrate creative thought leadership in your practice and in your industry.
5. Read a book/article each month about culture, creativity and innovation. Share those insights and concepts with colleagues.

As a professional, you will continually refine your technical skills. As a successful adviser of the future, you will also learn to challenge your thinking by building the mental muscle necessary to demonstrate cognitive flexibility. ●