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Fowler on Right Brains in Business

Guest was Timothy Fowler of Business Leadership



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About: Timothy W. Fowler (also known as The Right Brain) is CEO of BusinessLeadership.com. He is a University of Kentucky Certified Lean Master, a Goldratt Institute Theory of Constraint Supply Chain Expert, an ASQ-Certified Six Sigma Black Belt, and a Licensed Social Worker with a SECRET clearance. He is a visual-spatial thinker who designed President Obama's *Air Force One* secure inspection and re-fueling process and he is also the founding Director of Super Bowl Champion Coach Joe Gibbs *Youth For Tomorrow*.

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Joe Dager: Welcome everyone; this is Joe Dager, the host of the Business901 podcast. With me today is Timothy Fowler. He is the CEO of Business Leadership and a visual/spatial thinker. He actually designed President Obama's Air Force One security inspection and refueling process and the founding director of Super Bowl Champion Coach Joe Gibbs' Youth for Tomorrow. I'd like to welcome you, Tim and ask you, how did you ever get into Lean Six Sigma when you're so right-brained?

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Timothy Fowler: Most of my management before I got married and in my early marriage life was not for profit management. That was the Joe Gibbs involvement. Then I had kids, so I had to get some for profit management.

I went to Ford Motor Company as a production supervisor. We were involved, at that time, in what was called FTPM or Ford Total Productive Maintenance, and I got involved with it because I used to be a social worker in the background in that small group activities trying to improve equipment, and I said to myself, "This is my ticket out of production." Ultimately, I ended up being a Ford Production Assistant Sensei, which is Ford's attempt at trying to bring about Lean manufacturing.

That's really how I got into it, and then being in the defense industry for the last few years and got my TOC and Six Sigma certification. So I've done my best as a right-brain to try to learn everything I can about thinking left-brainish, so to speak.

Joe: In all this Lean Six Sigma, isn't it all left-brain-type stuff?

Timothy: Well, sometimes it is, but it doesn't necessarily have to be because... I'll give an example. If everything has to be quantifiable, how do you measure leadership engagement when you know it's really bad? You know it's bad. People aren't involved. How do you quantify that? How do you measure that? You really can't measure that. I mean, you could say, "How many meetings do you attend?" But a leader could just go to a meeting just to check the box, so to speak, and they may not be engaged. So the right brain looks at things more holistically, looks at the environment, looks at the interactions of people, and looks at the ripple effect of things. I found that, if you bring a right brain perspective while knowing the left brain tools, you could be holistic in your problem

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solving. We've been pretty successful in terms of solving some pretty complicated problems.

Joe: When I first think of right-brain, I think of this big-picture guy that looks at things. There's no accountability to those guys. I can always be a big-picture guy. That's pretty cool. But is there accountability in the right-brain world?

Timothy: Well, I think it is. Let me give you a real-life, kind of a silly example. I've got this AirCard in my computer, and I get one bar on the thing. I mean, it just awful. I have really bad reception because I live in the middle of nowhere. So I thought, "You know what? I'm going to go out and get me a 16-foot cord." So I went out and got a 16-foot cord and plugged it in, put a sock around it, put a Ziploc baggie around it and stuck it on the southwest corner of my home. Well, now I get three bars of 3G, so that was kind of a creative way to get a result. A lot of times, right-brain people are perceived to be just big picture, ethereal, think tank kind of guys, and I don't want to be that way, and I've said to the people that I work with, that you can use right-brain skills to bring about results. I mean, some of the results that we got, the government... They have this thing called a CAC card, a Common Access Card. It took the Defense Logistics Agency 30 days to issue these things. They asked us to come in there and figure out why it took so long. We went in there and used a bunch of right-brain skills.

One of the things that Dan Pink talks about is symphony or synthesis, how to get various groups together. So we assessed the situation through right-brain skills. We looked at the Information Technology Department. We looked at the Security Department. We looked at the HR Department. Then we mapped it out just like a typical value stream map, looked at

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the current state and simply asked a question. How many of these things that we do for a new employee after they start that could be done before that new employee started?

Basically a setup reduction which is a manufacturing tool and they said, "Well, you know, Tim, actually, eight of the 10 things we could do before someone starts." I said, "All right. Well, let's move those things back before the employee starts, and then let's map it out, see what it looks like." Well, they got that process down to two days, and that's been that way for four years now. So that's an example of using right-brain thinking, but that also brings about the results.

Joe: You talked about a right-brain thinker, thinking of the system as a whole, and what that reminded me of is that, with Dr. Deming thinking of the system as a whole... Do you think Deming was right-brained?

Timothy: I think he was. For 25 years, I've worked with left-brains. So I've learned how to think like a left-brain person. People that are left-brain dominant, lawyers, doctors, accountants, those folks, can learn right-brain skills as well. Some of the things that I think Deming recognized was that you can... It's kind of like fix a process, eat for a day, fix the system, fish for a lifetime kind of a thing.

Joe: That's a good way to put it because that's very much Dr. Deming's motto. I look at the problem-solving as a key to different things and you need the right-brain influence. But don't you need some structure when you go through that process?

Timothy: That's a great question. Absolutely. We have a five-step process. It's very structured. It's very linear, but it allows for a right-brain influence in each phase, and we

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just happen to use the acronym of RIGHT, R-I-G-H-T. The first thing we need to do is we need to read or observe, read the situation holistically, and that would include the problem, specifically. But it would also include things like the environment, the interactions of people and some of the symptoms that you see around the problem. Secondly, we would want to inquire or question, inquire as to the inputs to that problem, the ripple effect of that problem, some of the intangibles and root causes.

Then "G," we want to get a glimpse or a depiction of what the future would look like if the problem were solved, beginning with the end in mind as a kind of the flavor of the glimpse phase.

Next, we go to "H", we would want to highlight, and that's our examination phase. That's where we test tube the solution and kind of track the process.

Lastly, "T," we want to trend it or the application phase where we apply the change in real life. Subsequently, we read the situation again for continuous improvement. So that's our five-step right-brain problem-solving methodology.

Joe: Could you just go over that acronym, just start with R-I-G-H-T for someone who's just listening?

Timothy: Absolutely. R would be the observe phase, you read the situation holistically. I would be the inquire phase where you question the inputs and the ripple effect. G, you take a glimpse or a depiction of what the future state would look like, beginning with the end in mind. H, you highlight or examine your improvements that you put into place in real life. You basically test tube the solution. And then, T, you trend. You apply the application

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things where you apply that change in real life. And then you read it again, and that's the cycle of continuous process improvements. So it's **Read, Inquire, Glimpse, Highlight and Trend.**

Joe: Are we really in a left-brain world? Have we really kind of pushed out right-brain people?

Timothy: Western culture seems to favor left-brain thinking academically around tests. Dr. Roger Sperry, he was kind of the father of split-brain research. He was an Oberlin graduate, which is just up the road for me. So I got to put a little plug in for Ohio colleges. But he said that society really is prejudiced against the right hemisphere. Now, I have some friends that are from the Eastern culture, and he tells me that it's not that way at all in Eastern culture, that they have much more of a respect for the right-brain and the right hemisphere perspectives. Joe, we put together seven specific skills that I believe are untapped from executives today. Could I roll through those with you?

Joe: Sure. Sure.

Timothy: OK. All right. These are seven skills that can be developed in anyone, but they come easy for those that are right-brain dominant, but anyone can learn it. I think that if we take these seven skills and we pair them with good left-brain problem-solving precision, hyper-focused problem-solving, that we can actually approach this from a holistic perspective. So imagine yourself as an executive, you got a particular issue. It would behoove you to know who in your group is left-brain dominant, laser focused, and who in the group would be a right-brain that would be able to see connects and disconnects, so

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that that executive could place people so that they could utilize people properly in team-works.

So here are the seven skills. One, sensitivity to milieu. Milieu is a psychological term that's often use in psych wards, but it basically... That's why I fit so well at Ford. So milieu is kind of the interconnected relationships between people within the group. It's kind of like the environment on steroids, so to speak. Right-brains are very sensitive to that. Right-brains are very sensitive in the moment. So if you are in a meeting, and an executive would want to know who's engaged, who's not engaged, who's pulling the rope the same way... Well, that's a huge skill that a right-brain person just naturally brings.

Two, I call it out-of-the-box vantage point. Vantage point is critical in business. Take, for example, speed sailing. Those guys, they're... Six or eight guys want a boat, and they're trying to move the sail in the position to catch the wind the greatest. So these guys, they're each working individually, very hyperfocused, very left-brain focused, turning those wheels to make sure that their piece of the sail is in place. But you've got to have a captain up there that says, "Slowdown over here to the left. Speed up here on the right."

So a right brain person is kind of like that captain that can kind of be a third party and kind of step back a little bit and look at all the efforts and make sure that there is coordination 101 between individuals. And, boy, that's applicable in business. You've got guys that are hard work, but maybe they're... Maybe they'll perform in inertia; things in motion tend to stay in motion. Or maybe there's some friction in the office. Well, somebody that is a right-brain kind of step back and be able to assess multiple points of view and that would be good feedback for an executive to know about.

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Number three, I call it recognizing the scale of priority or the big picture. Someone that's right-brain dominant has the ability to look at various stimuli to know which stimuli or which inputs are affecting the outcome.

Fourth, strong pattern awareness. Right-brains see patterns, patterns in behavior, patterns in industry, patterns in the market, patterns in department. They key on what I call fits and transitions, kind of like the value stream, so if you couple recognizing the big picture and strong pattern awareness.

The fifth skill is right-brains recognize optimal value stream design. Things like flow, cycle time reduction, and these things are intuitive to someone that has right-brain skills. So being able to map out your process, you want to have some right-brainers around to help with that.

Next, we visualize the goal very clearly. You show a particular problem to a right-brain person, and five minutes later, they're going to give you 10 or 12 solutions to that problem. And then, lastly, the glass is half-full mentality. Right-brains are generally positive, and it's good to have those types of folks around.

Coming up, I've been privileged to be invited to speak at the American Society for Quality Spring Conference, and I know you are there as well. I'm looking forward to that and sharing some of these concepts.

Joe: Oh, I think it will be a great conference. I think that you got a very good mix of people. And they got a few left-brains and right-brains there, don't they?

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Timothy: Yes, absolutely. My presentation is a lot of slides because I want folks to be able to maybe get a snapshot at the benefits of this. We won't be able to go really deep into each of the concepts and the slides. I don't just talk about the positives. I talk about people that are skeptical of this whole right-brain hemisphere thinking. I lay out both sides of the coin, those that are for it, those who are against it. I'm glad that we're able to give these slides to the participants so that they can chew on them later and really think about them. But I'm really excited about this session coming up, it should be fun.

Joe: What should I be leery of a right-brain thinker? Where do I need to harness them in and/or watch him? I mean, not necessarily the negatives. But if I'm a business guy, I don't want a group of right-brain thinkers run my entire business, do I?

Timothy: No, absolutely not. You definitely want people that are hyper-focused, tunnel vision, laser-like problem solvers because things in business, mechanical fit and things like that; you can't have a guy that's kind of swagging and say, "Ah, they'll kind of fit." You need people that are precise that can meet between voice of customer, upper and lower spec limits. So you definitely have to have left-brain precision, but you also... If you only have left-brain precision, you may be heading in the wrong direction. So the right-brain person kind of provides that directional piece, the coordination between departments. But then, within those departments, you need people that are strong, precision problem solvers that have left-brain-type learning.

Joe: Do you think a right-brain person is more receptive to others' ideas?

Timothy: The research shows that, that right-brains are more data receptive and I've got a few doctors that would back that up in my presentation. Yeah, I would say that they're

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more open. They're also more open in terms of creativity and thinking out of the box. They did a survey. I believe it was Fast Company, did a survey with 1,500 CEOs one-on-one interviews asking them what they felt like was the most important trait in business today, and even more important than integrity, even more important than global thinking... Me, as a right-brainer, I would think that that would be very important. Even more important of those two things, the majority of 1,500 executives said that the number one skill today in business is creativity. Do you have an MP3 player?

Joe: Sure?

Timothy: What type is it?

Joe: I have an iPod.

Timothy: Well, you know what? I do too. But those 99,000 other MP3 players, are they functional? Do they work?

Joe: Yes, but they're not cool.

Timothy: Yes, but they are functional. They were created with good tolerances. The parts worked together. The form, fit and function is all tight. All that left-brain stuff's working. But you have an iPod. I have an iPod, most people have an iPod. Why is that? Because a right-brain that worked at Apple said, "You know what? We need to give this thing the "it" factor. We need to design this thing. We need to take its functionality. But on top of that, we need to design this thing so that people want to use it so that," as the term that you used, "It's cool." Well, there's a great example of the result. I think they made few billion last year.

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Joe: I'm a fairly early adopter. I had a real MP3 player with 32 meg to kind of give you an idea where I started with MP3 players at and I agree. Steve Jobs is the epitome of today's successful CEO. It's because of right-brain creative thinking. But can you give me an example, maybe a successful left-brain guy out there?

Timothy: I would say Jack Nasser was a left-brain guy at Ford Motor Company and he had years of success. I would say that there are a lot of folks that are out there in the automotive industry that are left-brain. You have to build things that fit so, certainly, you need people that are engineering focused. For example, the guy that blends the two together is Bob Lutz. This is an old marine guy. He's 75 years old and been building cars for many, many years, probably for each of the big three during his tenure. He basically, now, says that he's in the design business. He's in the creative business. He went out and hired four automotive quality writers. These are the guys that would write and review a car after it was released, AutoWeek, Motor Trend, those type guys.

He went and hired them as employees to follow the process as engineers were building new models. Now, could you imagine how that would possibly frustrate a left-brain engineer, to have this guy looking over their shoulder? But they were able to, ahead of the curve, get rid of some issues that they felt like the market would want. And thus, I think that they have been one of the main reasons of GM's turnaround here in the last few years. That's a great example of a right-brain approach.

Joe: Now, when we talked... Let me jump back a little bit. We talked about right-brain problem solving. Is it a different methodology than what we would use in a left-brain problem-solving type format? I mean, I look at an A3 and Lean. Would we approach it

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differently if we're predominantly a right brain-thinking company then we would if we were a left-brain?

Timothy: I wouldn't use the word differently. I would probably use the word more holistically, for example, DMAIC, the define phase. We're looking for a quantifiable baseline, looking at a specific measurable or a metric. Where I say that, there is much more things that you should you look at that first phase, like the environment. Who's built that product in the past? Have there been changes between shifts building that product? Has anything gone on in that department in the last few months that would contribute to the quality going down? So that's why I say read. Our first phase is read, observe. Specifically, look at the metric. Get a quantifiable baseline, but also look at the other inputs that may have contributed to that current state. So I wouldn't say it's differently, but I would say that it may be broader.

Joe: OK, so you're saying look at the other metrics. I think it might even have been Einstein that said this. I'm trying to remember right now that... I'll probably butcher it up a little bit, but... "Everything that can be measured doesn't necessarily matter and everything that matters doesn't necessarily need to be measured."

Timothy: And he also said that imagination is far more important than knowledge.

Joe: In this process, then, you're saying that we should jettison DMAIC, or we should jettison PDCA. We just need to step back and kind of look at it more holistically and not just look at the data by itself?

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Timothy: Yes. For example, one of my clients in the government, they were in the process of trying to clear the books on a monthly basis. They called it receipt reconciliation. Their reconciliation process was taking about 19 days. Dan Pink says one of the things that we need to focus on is not just dialog but story, an engaging narrative, using narrative to change people's minds. So I've got this team, their receipt reconciliation is 19 days. They want it to be three days. What am I going to do? So I thought, "What I'm going to use..." Well, Dan Pink says I'm going to use an engaging narrative or story. So we took them to Danaher Corporation in Baltimore, Maryland. And we went through, we took a diagonal line path through this organization. We looked at their policy deployment at a high level. We went to the floor and talked to hourly folks. We were in the shipping department and we were in the packaging department and it was amazing. You ever heard of the term "singing from the same hymnal?"

Joe: Yes.

Timothy: OK? Well, this organization was singing the same song, "Amazing Grace" or "How Great Thou Art." They were all singing in perfect tune in terms of their metrics. Theirs happen to be safety, quality, delivery, and cost. There was a story there and my team when we left there, they had a real live vision, a real live story of how to create an organization where people are pulling the rope the same way. That was a powerful experience that they went through. They went back, they solve the problem and now their receipt reconciliation is down to three days. Another tool that we used, that Dan Pink mentions, is called "play." Work is serious; we're in business to make money so we have to be serious. But Pink makes the point that laughter and play is a good balance to things, to

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kind of lighten things up. If people are more relaxed, they have a greater opportunity to problem solve.

I was given another example at an industry. It was their information technology department and there was a 30-day lag for them to resolve these tier-2 IT complaints. So it would be... Somebody would call and say, "Hey, I've got an issue" and it wasn't like a password reset. It was a little bit more detailed than that. It wasn't really code writing, but it was kind of in that middle ground. And their cycle time was 30 days and they wanted to get it down to five days. So we introduced this concept of play to them and here's an example. Joe, are you a football fan being from Indiana there?

Joe: Sure.

Timothy: All right. Well, who do you follow?

Joe: In college, it would be Notre Dame.

Timothy: So let's take a typical Saturday game for Notre Dame. Let's say it's a 1:00 game. What time are you going to get up on that 1:00 game? If you're going to tailgate and all that, what time are you going to get up?

Joe: I'm an hour away, so probably 8:00 we're going to get up.

Timothy: 8:00? OK, so you're going to pack your stuff, you're going to drive, you're going to get your seat or you're going to tailgate a little bit and you're going to get your seat. You're going to have first half, second half, then you're going to drive back home and you get home about 6:00 at night. So that's about 10 hours of value-added fun, OK? We use

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this game called what's value added in a football game and what's not value added? So let's take that 10 hours and I'm going to submit to you that that 10 hour isn't really value added. So we map it out. We basically say, "All right, let's list in sequential order what you did. It's been determined that the only thing that's really value added in football is when the ball is moving down the field. Everything else is just waste, really."

Now, some people would argue, they like the strategy and they kind of get into it and they like the tailgating and all that. But if I took that 11 minutes away, because that's really all there is in terms of moving the football down the field... If I took that 11 minutes away, would you spend those eight hours going to that football field?

Joe: Probably not.

Timothy: Probably not. So we taught them about what was the value added and then asked them, "OK, let's map out your process. Let's look at all of the activities. Which is value added? Which does the customer get excited about? What are they willing to pay for? What affects the form, fit and function, all the typical left-brain Lean Six Sigma questions, OK? They mapped it out, came up with a new process and now that information technology helped us just processing those things in five days, so just another example of some right-brain skills.

Joe: A whole systems approach, maybe, is a better term analogy on how to accomplish that.

Timothy: Yeah, data is important. There's no doubt about that. You've got to know where you are to where you're going. But take the restaurant owner Peter Fowler. OK? He's the

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co-founder of the SIR Corp. They're an Ontario-based corporation. The guy has got 46 restaurants. No relation to me. And remarkably, Fowler doesn't use market research. This is what he says. He says, "I operate from my right brain. One of the central things is identifying where there's a gap in the marketplace then going after it. I observe the market and I ask a lot of questions so that I could paint a picture of where we want to go."

So some keywords there: Identify, that's kind of looking at your data. Observe, that's really seeing the market. Questions is a picture of where we want to go. Those are all visual-spatial words. And yet, this guy is so successful with 46 restaurants up there in Ontario, but he doesn't do any official market research. There is more than one way to skin a cat, I guess.

Joe: Can you explain to me what Business Leadership does, your company does? I mean, if I was going to engage with you, can you give me that 30-second or that two-minute elevator speech?

Timothy: We partner with business leaders, executives, or folks on the floor and try to help solve problems. We're trained in all the left-brain disciplines. University of Kentucky-certified in Lean, ASQ-certified in Six Sigma, went to the Goldratt Institute, got certified as a supply chain design expert. So I understand the technical tools. We try to just help people get better, OK? Faster, cheaper, smarter. We partner with people. We earn the right to be heard. We get on the floor. I say, "We press flesh and kiss babies."

Joe: What's different about your newsletter?

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Timothy: Yeah. It's called Kaikaku. Typically, in Lean-orientation companies, they talk about Kaizen, and Kaizen is a sort of wonderful concept. Kaizen is really small, unromantic, ongoing improvements, where Kaikaku is a radical change for results. We believe that, for change to occur, the pain of the same must outweigh the pain of the change. We believe that radical change is often needed in a market today where the economy is bad, unemployment is high. If you continue to do what you've always done, you're going to get the results that you always got. And Einstein said that was what? Insanity. So our newsletter emphasizes radical change.

Joe, one of the foundational concepts that we try to teach companies is, we use an illustration. Do you have a coin sitting around somewhere you could just grab? If not, well, I'll just walk you through it.

Joe: Sure, go ahead.

Timothy: Yeah, a coin. How many sides does a coin have? A coin has three sides, OK? We teach that if a company will do these three sides to a coin that they could put their coins in the profit bin as opposed to the cost bin. And here are those three... This is really my elevator speech. People say to me, "What is process improvement? What is Lean Six Sigma? What are you guys trying to do?" Basically, we're trying to do three things. OK? This is the kind of a layman's definition of process improvement. Number one, side number one, honor standards. We need to honor standards. Henry Ford says, "If you think of standards as the foundation of what needs to be improved today, you can then improve it tomorrow. You get somewhere." Taiichi Ohno says, "There is no improvement..." Or it may have been Shingo. One of those guys said, "There is no improvement without standards."

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So standards are kind of the foundation for improvement so that's the first thing we need to do. We need to honor standards.

The other side of the coin is we need to honor people's good ideas. People want to be in on things and people want to contribute. They want to be engaged. They want to be respected. So in an environment that honors standards, people are more likely to give their good ideas because they know if they're right, their idea is backed by data, that the organization is mature enough to implement their recommendations. So, therefore, that's motivation that they want to be involved because they know that their good idea would become the new standard to build upon.

And then, the third side to a coin is the edge. And of course, that's the customer. We should honor the customer. Honor the customer in terms of our standards. Honor the customer in terms of our people's good ideas. Everything revolves around the customer.

So if an organization will do those three things, I mean really honor standards, build that foundation, honor people's good ideas, give them a forum to contribute and really focus on the customer, they'll be able to put those coins in the profit bin. That's just a little object lesson that we teach, but it's pretty powerful.

Joe: I think it's really powerful. I haven't heard that before and I think that is a very good message. I hate to ask you another question after that because that's a great thing to leave for someone to have in their mind. But I'm going to. What else would you like to add to this conversation that maybe I haven't asked?

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Timothy: Well, I think we're moving into what's called the conceptual age where right brain-dominant people are going to be utilized and in greater demand. When I think back upon some of the leaders in the last decade or so, Fiorina, the former chairman of Hewlett-Packard, her degree is in Medieval History and Philosophy. Michael Eisner's degree is in English Literature and Theater. Steven Case, the founder of America Online, his degree is in Political Science. Meg Whitman, eBay, her degree is in Economics. Steve Forbes, his degree is in American History. So I'm all for engineers and I'm all for precise problem-solving but there's a lot of leaders out there that are right brain focused. There are a lot of kids out there that don't maybe do so well on a test but if you put them in a situation, they'd solve the problem better than anybody else. I'm evidence that you can think as a right-brain person and be successful and I want to encourage kids in businesses to consider hiring right brains as well.

Joe: I'd like to thank you very much, Tim. I think it was a great conversation. I look forward to seeing you at ASQ. This podcast will be available in the Business901 iTunes Store and also Business901 blog. So thanks again, Tim.

Timothy: Thank you, sir. Appreciate the time.

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Twitter: [@business901](https://twitter.com/business901)



What others say: *In the past 20 years, Joe and I have collaborated on many difficult issues. Joe's ability to combine his expertise with "out of the box" thinking is unsurpassed. He has always delivered quickly, cost effectively and with ingenuity. A brilliant mind that is always a pleasure to work with." James R.*

Joe Dager is President of Business901, a progressive company providing direction in areas **such as Lean Marketing, Product Marketing, Product Launches and Re-Launches. As a Lean Six Sigma Black Belt**, Business901 provides and implements marketing, project and performance planning methodologies in small businesses. The simplicity of a single flexible model will create clarity for your staff and, as a result, better execution. My goal is to allow you spend your time on the **need versus the plan.**

An example of how we may work: Business901 could start with a consulting style utilizing an individual from your organization or a virtual assistance that is well-versed in our principles. We have **capabilities to plug virtually any marketing function** into your process immediately. As proficiencies develop, Business901 moves into a coach's role supporting the process as needed. The goal of implementing a system is that the processes will become a habit and not an event.

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