

THINKING INTERDEPENDENTLY

By

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Getting along well with other people is still the world's most needed skill.

With it...there is no limit to what a person can do.

We need people, we need the cooperation of others.

There is very little we can do alone

Earl Nightingale

Did you know that you have a social brain? In human evolution, successful hunters and gatherers had a better chance of survival if they worked together with others. Humans are relatively weak, with no fur or natural armor with which to protect themselves. Being a weak lone individual competing for scarce resources would certainly be a disadvantage. Establishing cooperative agreements with others would make survival more likely when resources were limited. Eventually our ancestors' brains began to change from purely survival brains into social brains. Our social brains have been shaped by natural selection because being social enhances survival. Further evidence to support the concept of the social brain comes from studies of very young children. It makes a strong case for an innate capacity that children have for empathy and cooperation. At an

astonishingly early age, children begin to help one another and to share information. It appears that we are born ready to cooperate.

So how does your social brain work on your behalf? As you are developing, you are becoming one with the larger system and community of which you are a part. As you join groups, do you find that it helps you to talk with others about issues? Do you notice how you become more energetic when you are solving problems together? In groups we contribute our time and energy to tasks that we would quickly tire of when working alone. In fact, one of the cruelest forms of punishment that can be inflicted on an individual is solitary confinement.

Problem solving has become so complex that we need access to all the points of view that we can collect in order to make critical decisions. Practicing ways to think interdependently, to join others in the consideration of important ideas, is one of the most important habits that you can develop. The world is faced with such diverse needs and problems to solve. Global interdependence is made possible through key players who are able to use their social brains to protect and foster the survival needs we now face.

Some of your fellow students may not want to work in groups. They assert themselves as individuals seeking status, identity, power, and autonomy. They may prefer their solitude. "Leave me alone—I would rather do it myself" or "It is too much trouble working in a group. My ideas are always the best ones so why waste my time?" "The others don't really get who I am". "I want to be alone." Some students seem unable to contribute to group work either by being a "job hog" or conversely, letting others do all the work. Working in groups is more than cooperation. It requires your ability to justify your ideas and to allow yourself to be open to the ideas of others. You need to test the

feasibility of solutions you pose by hearing what others think. You need to be willing and open to feedback from a critical friend. Through this interaction the group and the individual continue to grow. Listening, consensus seeking, giving up an idea to work with someone else's, empathy, compassion, group leadership, knowing how to support group efforts, altruism--all are behaviors indicative of those who profit from thinking interdependently.

Interdependent thinkers have a sense of community: “we-ness” as much as “me-ness” . They contribute to a common goal, seek collegiality, and draw on the resources of others. They regard conflict as valuable, trusting their ability to manage differences in a group in productive ways. They are willing to protect the group’s interactions by calling attention to times when the group is not behaving thoughtfully. They are willing to be a time keeper or facilitator so that all members of the group have the opportunity to participate. They see conflict of ideas as opportunities to learn and modify their thinking. They continue to learn from feedback from others and from their consciousness of their own actions and effect on others.

Thinking interdependently means knowing that we will benefit from participating in and contributing to ideas, inventions, problem solving. Learning unfolds within social contexts, and hence interdependence increases intelligence. Interdependent people envision the expanding capacities of the group and its members, and they value and draw on the resources of others to enhance their own personal competencies. As Margaret Mead is quoted as saying, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has”.