

Bullet Brain, Liquid Soul: A New Metaphor and a Strategy for Empowering Your Humanity and Improving Your Results

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Strategy of the Dolphin: Scoring a Win in a Chaotic World.

Abstract

New ways of tracking changes in human thinking perceptual, belief-forming and decision-making skills began to emerge in the 1950s. By the arrival of the 21st Century, new paradigms for explaining how the brain processes information were well-advanced, most notably one based on the research and theory development of the late Clare W. Graves, a pioneering American evolutionary psychologist. The Graves model describes a stair-step path to mental, emotional and spiritual maturity that is closely tied to how a person's brain develops. In part, progress in advancing on this path is tied to the available complexity of ambient surroundings and the “openness” of a mind and its world-view to novelty. The author of this article concluded that Dr. Graves' work could benefit far more individuals and organizations than could be reached with conventional academic explanations. Achieving this outcome has been aided by a best-selling “how to” work developed by this author and an academic colleague. According to the authors of *Strategy of the Dolphin: Scoring a Win in a Chaotic World*, a key advance in human cognitive capabilities is understanding how to produce abundance while avoiding major pitfalls it can produce. This article explains the basis for, and provides a general overview of, what has been styled “the dolphin mindset” in both formal OD, HRD and creativity research and training circles and general business media outlets.

Keywords: metaphor, dolphin mindset, strategy, chaotic world

The metaphor of the dolphin first leapt into view in the late 1980s in a rising tide of digitally fed change.

This was the core idea: that you were probably in some peril if you didn't find a way to think more economically, efficiently, effectively, more *elegantly*—think, as I put it, more like the ocean's dynamic, big-brained dolphin (there's the metaphor!), as opposed to its mayhem-minded shark and other less demanding and less impactful all-wet-all-the-time watery creatures.

At that time, the development and spread of information was already showing signs of the unstoppable momentum that has surged over us in the 21st Century.

Even before the Internet became a near-household utility, the world developing beyond our fingertips and retinas was generating mixed feelings. So much newness and complexity arriving simultaneously. So much that was strange and novel to puzzle over and interact with. Sums and sums of new, fast-transmitted data and description that threatened to rout all semblance of order from your sphere of influence, even if you weren't a global political figure, an authority on global warming or a researcher in a science so adolescent that it has barely been named.

Not everyone liked—or understood—my metaphor. A self-styled “world's foremost expert on dolphin behavior” in The Netherlands posted a warning on her web site that I had done a grave disservice to the ocean's dolphins, distorting how they think and behave. Did she really think I was comparing above-air-all-the-time dolphins to under-water-most-of-the-time dolphins? Obviously, she did.

I loved all the cute little stuffed-toy dolphins, dolphin calendars, dolphin storybooks and dolphin key-chain and charm-bracelet figures people sent me. But it did leave me wondering if the object of my metaphor's natural and legendary charms had somehow sabotaged the more serious meanings I'd intended. (After all, the real-McCoy dolphin is the only one of the ocean's creatures, save a bacteria or two, that can actually kill a shark in combat.)

Editorial assistants at *Fast Company*, the business magazine, called several times over several months claiming that their columnists wanted to write about my “dolphin theories.” For the most part, I enjoy reading *Fast Company*, but after asking a question or two of the caller each time, I became skeptical. My suspicion was that columnist was likely the one who frequently ridiculed out-of-the-box-thinking business theorists or consultants who had dared to use unconventional approaches to challenge the thinking of their clients. If you didn't understand how I'd used the dolphin as a metaphor, or if you didn't care for unconventional approaches to thinking about the challenges of a fast-changing marketplace or workplace, you'd be tempted to razz and jeer. And journalists are sometimes prone to snap-decision-based cynicism and razzing anyway (I know because I used to be one). So I never made any effort to assist *Fast Company*, and thus the dolphin metaphor was never sneered at in print by their self-appointed “fad and metaphor” debunkers.

In a damaging way, in my opinion, the editors of *Fast Company* and numerous other business news and opinion outlets often acted like street-corner suppliers to information junkies. In each issue, they offered their readers more of the insidious heroin of “novelty for novelty's sake” and may, as a consequence, end up reinforcing problems more times than they foster solutions. This impassioned pursuit of the froth and bubbles of new white water while ignoring the placement of the boulders in the current just grew and grew in the '90s. Finally, it culminated in the collapse of the so-called New Economy, including the mad, mad dot.com bubble.

In fact, as the Great Last Century ended, the buzz about speed and instant breakthroughs and what you had to do survive in the—ahem—“global marketplace” had grown to the point where it was often just pure hype and spin and unsupported by even good theory, much less good evidence. This twenty-four-and-seven onslaught of talk about “the new, new thing” was served up by consultants and pundits and even business school academicians like so much cattle mulch or catfish restaurant cold slaw. It reflected first one theory and then quickly abandoned that for another. Touted one bias and then sometimes wheeled about to tout almost the opposite. And sent glib sound bites of explanation tumbling into your short-term memory faster than its buffer could process them.

Where was the wisdom?

How could hardworking, intelligent, well-intentioned folks best cope with all the confusion? How about patterns and predictions you could trust? How about good coping, learning and growth strategies you could try? How about some believable storyline to explain how goodness was going to triumph over evil, how order was going to find a rapprochement with chaos, how any of us were going to preserve a little normalcy and establish new senses of balance while “creative destruction” went about ruthlessly swinging its wrecking ball?

It was for such purposes that I created the dolphin metaphor—in a book named after the idea of a dolphin metaphor and strategy for believing, thinking, deciding and acting. The book *Strategy of the Dolphin: Scoring a Win in a Chaotic World* was a collaboration with Dr. Paul L. Kordis. The book grew out of my 15-year acquaintance with the theories and research of the late Dr. Clare W. Graves, pioneering American evolutionary psychologist.

In the 1990s, a host of individuals worldwide (that original dolphin book was eventually printed in nine languages and was a bestseller in two, German and French) found the dolphin metaphor a source of inspiration, guidance and hope. I know because many of them have told me so. To sample the passion with which the dolphin metaphor was greeted by individuals and businesses throughout the world, no matter what the culture or language, all you need do even yet is send any good Internet search engine looking for the words “Strategy of the Dolphin.”

Editors at the CEO Refresher website (www.refresher.com) called the book “indeed more than 'slightly ahead of [its] time'” in its exploration of the need to change ‘the quality and quantity of our awareness of complexity and our skills and comfort level in working with it.’ The authors' psychological insights are brilliant ... going for the elegant outcome; leveraging the wave; breaking set; being on purpose; seeing through the brain's 'time window'; releasing to a higher order; pushing the envelope; shifting in time. It's deep and intelligent....”

Numerous web sites, such as that of The Joy of Learning Consultants and The Sales Doctor, listed the book as one of their favorites, putting it in good company with the works of Peter Senge, Daniel Goleman, Stephen Covey, Anthony Robbins, Marsha Sinetar, Viktor Frankl, Jack Canfield, Margaret Wheatley, Edward de Bono, Larry Wilson, Faith Popcorn, Tony Buzan, Tom Peters and Peter Block, to name a few business theorists and commentators often in the headlines in those days..

The U.K.-based Centre for Management Creativity called *Strategy of the Dolphin* “realistic and acute,” “an outstanding book drawing on psychobiology and many other sources to provide a powerful metaphor for intelligent action in a complex world.”

The Institute of Noetic Sciences judged the dolphin book to be “a prophetic and widely ranging survey of components of the emerging order.”

Multi-media producer Keith Ranney, who enjoys “snorkeling and hanging out with whales and dolphins,” listed *Strategy of the Dolphin* as his favorite business strategy book.

A yoga professor in Hong Kong called it “an elegant approach to life in an ocean of sharks.”

The founders of The Collaborative Leaders Network recommended the work as “a prophetic and widely ranging survey of components of the emerging order.”

At the U.K.’s Inspiration Resources, reviewers deemed that “this is an outstanding book [providing] a powerful metaphor for intelligent action in a complex world....The dolphin appears as a most pragmatic creature.”

We made Skywriter Press’s list of 17 books worth treasuring, finding ourselves in great company like *Atlas Shrugged*, *Gone With the Wind*, *Future Shock*, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, *Cosmos*, *The Artist’s Way* and *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.

A Canadian based group, Reality Marketers, termed the dolphin strategy “smart,” noting it is based “on a win-win concept of business yet without self-sacrifice. The ‘tit-for-tat’ strategy alone is worth the price of the book.”

On Firebrands.com, we were listed as one of the must reads for go-getters, the book being singled out because of its “insightful and powerful examinations of corporate culture and how to navigate cultures different if not antagonistic to your personal autonomy.”

You get the picture.

One small step for a metaphor. One giant leap around the world for a new way of thinking about how to respond to a fast-changing world.

Already, much has happened since the 1990s, including that terrible new day of infamy: September 11, 2001. In a few short months, it seemed like we'd already exhausted half of a new century's shelf life.

Today, nearly a decade and a half later, I believe the dolphin way of thinking has never been more apt or insightful, more needed or potentially enzymatic.

Metaphors are shortcuts, quick ways to get people's imaginations and understandings across bridges that—as a cartoon I saw depicted it—“can only be accessed from the other side.”

I invented my metaphor of the dolphin for just this reason. To help my fellow and sister participants on the planet grasp something important and do it in a hurry. That “something” is the idea that human thinking and consciousness are in play, and evolving—along with their technologies—rapidly. That people and organizations failing to notice this, and act on it—who failed to do something different—could be seriously at risk.

I spoke then of the importance of new ways of valuing and thinking, deciding and acting, that can help to produce abundance for their users and contrasted them to ways that lead to scarcity.

If anything, I underestimated just how much abundance could be produced in such a short time. The scarcity issue remains paramount for much of the world, but for most of the readers of this work, I suspect that the challenge foremost on their minds is a conundrum of another kind: now that I have proved my ability to roll with the punches, grow new skills and fashion new self-estimates almost at will, what role am I to play in this boundlessly ambitious yet aching needful new world?

When such issues are at the top of your personal agenda, you can depend on the dolphin to surface at just the right time for a heart-to-heart chat.

I'm confident that you are about to agree that, rather than showing its age and appearing to have been just another ephemeral artifact of its times, the dolphin metaphor has retained every ounce and every erg of its power to illuminate, reformulate, inspire.

For the importance of the answer you give to this question hasn't diminished an iota since it was first voiced: Is there a dolphin in the house?

Answering the question is deceptively easy for dolphins or the dolphins-in-training. If you find yourself in friendly, approving dialogue with the contents of most of the pages ahead, then you can suspect you are at home here.

Nonresidents might want to answer this way: “Check back in a little while. I’ve got some new things to try out.”

On your behalf, the strategy of the dolphin lofts these provocative claims:

- You are a very fortunate and privileged person in that you are one of a still modest number of people alive today who are capable of becoming routine users of an unprecedented type of thinking. Its emergence is possible because we humans have at long had success in deactivating some really messy processes within us left over from the way that nature causes us to be assembled.
- The systems, sensors and sensibilities you need to complete this latest stage of your development are almost assuredly waiting to be noticed and energized within you. So, ladies and gentlemen, start your engines! Succeed at firing up these latent capabilities and you can expect to experience little discomfort from participating at the leading edges of today’s remarkably diverse global *mise en scène* and its demanding organizational, strategic and creative challenges.
- Well within your grasp, therefore, are the means of making you a far more complex, perceptive, knowledgeable, responsive and competent person than you might ever have imagined you could be. This has nothing to do with improving, say, your IQ or your skills for memorizing. This has everything to do with widening the part of your mind that monitors and makes sense of the surrounding world and what your thinking is capable of doing with the new information, patterns and meanings you discover there.
- As an especially able representative of that still pubertal (as cosmic time counts) process called life, you will have undergone a total rethinking of your own connectivity: how you relate to all things living as well as the more inert ingredients of our planetary home. As a result, everything you know about the world will have been permanently altered because you will have been permanently altered. The biggest change? This will come in how you describe the “ideal” human. Before you thought of the mature person as being *that*; now, because of the opening up of this powerful dimension of new thinking skills for you, you think of mature people as being *this*, and such an alteration in viewpoint serves to introduce you to these new trappings of human nature in yourself.

I am well aware that the above assertions may sound alarmingly like “new, new age,” don’t-you-wish prattle concocted in the rent-a-utopian dreamworks of folks who long since gave up trying to meet a steady payroll.

So let’s see if I can clarify exactly what I have in mind when I refer to “the dolphin mindset.”

At its most basic, it is a consequences of your brain having wired itself in a new way so that it is less, much less, of a Rube Goldberg when it comes to representing the “outside” world to itself and deciding what it means. And that’s a justifiable way of characterizing all our perceptions and interactions with “reality” in the outer world: Rube Goldberg-type outcomes cobbled together by a process that one learned observer, confining himself merely to the process that we call sight, has called “the end product of chopping, coding, long-distance transmission, neural guesswork and editable cut and paste.” He adds, “What we see is not the product of direct perception, but of a reconstruction which borders on fragile artistry.”

Users of the dolphin mindset have either taken a goodly amount of guesswork out of deciding what is happening in the outer world or else have an advantage in being able to ascertain what kind of guessing is going on and how much faith to put in what the brain concludes. What difference does this make? Well, think of attempting to climb a ladder in total, continuous darkness and then having the advantage of at least occasional illumination.

How does your brain manage to find itself rewired so that it is entitled to call itself a dolphin’s brain?

That topic is worthy of several chapters—or books!—in itself. But for now, perhaps the most succinct answer I can give is that the brain of a dolphin-in-training achieves the payoff we are describing because somewhere along the way it succeeded in putting itself squarely in the widest available path of advancing life.

Can a mind *not* housing the mindset of the dolphin deliver outstanding results? performance? Often, it does. But how many times have you read about yet another bright, experienced business person who got greedy and missed the obvious signs of chicanery. (How about the world financial crisis of the late 2000s?) Or got caught up in the hype and excitement of an “opportunity of a lifetime” that didn’t pan out? Or thought he or she was being invited into the inner circle only to discover too late that it was a hole in the floor?

Users of the dolphin mindset are by no means totally shielded from bad consequences, or even poor judgment. But where the dolphin swims, the odds of an outcome that is positive or at least little threat to the user of the dolphin mindset substantially exceed the odds for participants whose dolphin “headware” has not been activated.

The mindset of the dolphin first announced itself to a few astute observers in the 1950s. Over the decades, it began to qualify as a paradigm. The dolphin's openness to new perspectives and the interrelatedness of things has, in a very short time, begun to revamp our understanding of our world and ourselves on a breathtaking scale. But even in the 21st Century, it is still unfamiliar to most individuals, no matter how high their I.Q., how well pedigreed or educated or how savvy and ambitious.

So for the moment you are probably best advised to be cautious with whom you speak about what it is like to be in your very own shiny, efficient, options-filled cockpit of new personal controls, decision-making skills and people-analyzing proficiencies.

But you are well within your rights and the evidence that there is something fresh and exciting afoot in the human experience.

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