

# The Triune Intelligence Model

*An Optimistic View  
of Human Capability*

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*“Who can say which is more important in the long run:  
landing on the moon, or understanding the human mind?”*

*Tenzin Gyatso (Dalai Lama)*

The concept of *multiple intelligences* – the idea that we human beings are equipped with a whole range of mental competencies, not just the “IQ” kind – is now widely accepted in business as well as in education.

The radical rethinking associated with the “MI” concept is the proposition that “intelligences” are learned and learnable capabilities, not hard-wired characteristics that never change. Pioneered largely by Harvard professor Howard Gardner and advanced by other scholars, the MI concept opens up a vast realm of research, speculation, and application for these ideas. With this new perspective, theory may have caught up with common sense.

While Gardner and others use rather scientific sounding labels for the various categories of intelligence – *verbal-logical*, *mathematical-symbolic*, *spatial*, *kinesthetic*, *interpersonal*, *intrapersonal* and *musical* – we probably do little harm by re-coding them into street language and simplifying them conceptually. With appropriate respect for Professor Gardner and his theory, I’ve found it helpful to arrange these “multiple smarts” into six primary categories:

1. Abstract Intelligence: symbolic reasoning, mathematics, and formal logic.
2. Social Intelligence: understanding social contexts and dealing with people.
3. Practical Intelligence: common sense.
4. Emotional Intelligence: awareness and management of one’s inner experience.
5. Aesthetic Intelligence: the sense of form, design, music, art and literature.
6. Kinesthetic Intelligence: whole-body skills like sports, dance, music, or flying a jet fighter.

Others might argue for a somewhat different set of subdivisions, but these six categories work fairly well, and they have the modest extra advantage of spelling out a memorable acronym: ASPEAK.

Presumably the “Renaissance human,” the success model most of us admire, would have a strong and well-integrated combination of all six of these key intelligences.

## The “Big Three” Focus

But this potentially powerful concept will remain just an abstruse theory unless we learn how to apply it in every day life, work, and relationships. In the business world, for better or worse, the full range of six primary intelligences is probably too wide a selection for executives, managers, coaches, consultants, trainers, and employees to embrace. Trying to promote interest in all of them is probably too ambitious at this stage, and likely to confuse the prospective learners rather than enlighten and inspire them.

Clearly, some of the six key intelligences tend to fit more comfortably with the customs and cultures of business organizations, and others much less so. Aesthetic intelligence, for example, while appealing and valuable to many people, seems to offer less “return on investment” value to business leaders than, say, practical intelligence or emotional intelligence. Kinesthetic intelligence, while valuable in some few specialized occupations, is less encompassing in its reach than, say, social intelligence.

Accepting this somewhat prosaic reality of the business world and the business organization, I propose that we focus on *three particular intelligences* – three components selected from the whole academic inventory of a dozen or more – as a core set of competencies that combine synergistically and powerfully to serve as a basis for most of our successes in life. All three of them tend to offer an immediate and obvious appeal to executives who might be inclined to invest their organizations’ resources in them.

I refer to this combination of three key “smarts” as the *Triune Intelligence Model*, abbreviated symbolically as “3IM.” The three key intelligences that seem to emerge most strongly as relevant to business are:

1. *Emotional Intelligence (“EI”)*: awareness and management of inner experience.
2. *Social Intelligence (“SI”)*: the ability to get along well with others and to get them to cooperate with you.
3. *Practical Intelligence (“PI”)*: the ability to solve problems and cope effectively with the challenges of everyday life.

Abbreviate them as “E.S.P.” if you like.

Viewed as a combination of overlapping capabilities, as illustrated in Figure 1, these three core competencies are shaping our actions, reactions, and ruminations virtually all of the time.

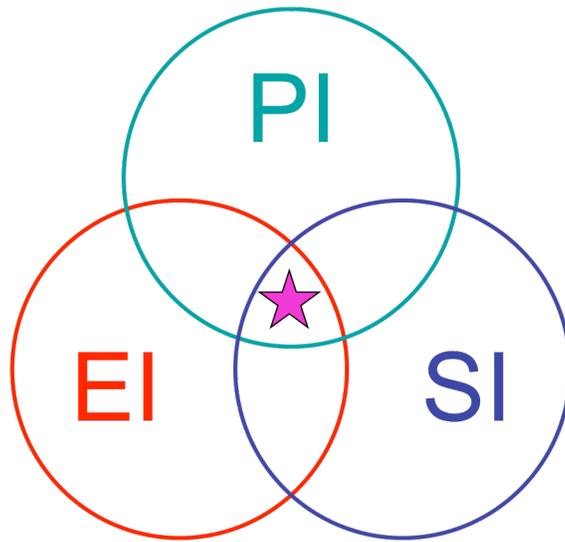


Figure 1. The Triune Intelligence Model.

This new way of thinking about thinking is based on a simple but little appreciated fact: *you think with your whole body*, not just with some individual brain circuit. What we call a “thought” is actually a whole-body information event that flashes through all levels of the human biocomputer, down to the very level of the cells and to the life processes that express their functions.

The traditional verbal distinction between “thinking” and “feeling” is little more than a semantic convenience, even though we’re pretty well stuck with it.

## Thinking is a Bodily Function

Your *cerebral cortex* – the part of your brain that believes it’s the mind – is only one participant in this never-ending cascade of thought waves. Your immune system, your endocrine system with its “messenger molecules,” your autonomic nervous system, and all of the target organs and cells that are hooked up to them are constantly expressing this exquisitely complex, interwoven multi-level mental activity.

How else could we explain the many remarkable phenomena of psychosomatic illness; spontaneous remission of disorders such as cancer; mind-body healing effects; and the physiological phenomena demonstrated by advanced practitioners of Zen and the other transcendent arts? Psychotherapists are steadily evolving toward a new concept of the human “biocomputer” as a constellation of interacting information systems.

If we think of each of these three primary intelligences as a particular *way of knowing*, a way of processing experience and transforming that knowing into behavior, then the triune intelligence concept suggests that we’re always “thinking” socially, emotionally, or practically. Much of the time we’re doing all three.

## The Fading of Freud and the Rise of Popular Psychology

The psychological theories of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Alfred Adler, and their descendants had little to offer the “person on the street,” and even less to practically minded business leaders, in terms of how to live and behave more sanely and effectively. The concepts and methods of psychiatry and psychoanalysis remained the closely guarded trade secrets of their practitioners for over a century.

In practical terms, not until the period of the 1960s, with its fascination with individualism and “personal growth,” did we see significant efforts to translate psychology into street language. Notwithstanding the rampant narcissism and emotional incontinence of that remarkable age, most experts would acknowledge that “popular psychology” was born then.

### *Jung’s Legacy to the Business World*

One notable attempt at a pop-psych classification system for human personalities, which pre-dated the sixties revolution by a decade or so, was an adaptation of Carl Jung’s theory of “psychological types.” Two marriage counselors, Isabel Briggs Myers and Katherine Cook Briggs, in the late 1940s decided to use Jung’s theory of types to help people understand themselves and their relationships better.

Myers and Briggs created an assessment scheme – rare for those times – that assigned people to one of two opposing orientations, on each of four key dimensions. Their tool became known as the “Myers-Briggs Type Indicator,” or “MBTI.” A person’s personality category, or psychological type, is described by a four-letter alphabetic code, such as “I-N-T-J” or “E-S-F-P,” which signals one of the sixteen possible combinations of traits.

The MBTI has survived to this day as a remarkably popular assessment tool in business, education, government, and the helping professions. It has become a highly profitable commercial product, distributed by a noted publisher of educational and psychological materials. Only recently, an increasing number of human development professionals have begun to view the MBTI as somewhat dated, and likely to be superseded by the MI model.

### *The Multi-Mind Model*

Another significant development from the sixties era was a radically new explanation of how the brain actually processes information. This new understanding arose from the now-famous “split-brain” surgical experiments by Dr. Joseph Bogen and others at Cal Tech, and follow-up research with the split-brain patients conducted by psychologist Dr. Roger Sperry.

The “hemispheric lateralization” theory – the now-familiar “left brain, right brain” dichotomy – that grew out of those remarkable findings created a whole new platform for understanding human mental process, including the interplay of emotion and cognition. It began to influence medical research, psychotherapy, education, and even training courses in business.

A third major development, already mentioned, was the rise of the multiple intelligence model, largely through the leadership of Harvard’s Professor Howard Gardner.

The multi-mind anatomical theory, the multiple intelligence model of competence, and the surviving canons of the pop-psych era have all reinforced the progressive marginalization of the ancient “gospel according to Freud,” and have brought us to the point of a new and exciting conceptualization of the human biocomputer and how we can learn to make better use of it.

Other advances in brain research, hypnotherapy, bio-information systems, and the emerging body of knowledge referred to as *psychobiology*, could lead to unprecedented advances in a wide range of social, cultural, and organizational dimensions of individual and collective performance.

## The Road to the Triune Model

The triune intelligence model has much to recommend it, not least in that it provides a unifying framework for understanding the three key components – emotional intelligence, social intelligence, and practical intelligence – both individually and as part of a synergistic combination. It can offer us a new lens through which we can view human competence in new ways.

One of its side-effects, however, is that it is forcing more and more fans of the various unintegrated pieces of the psychology puzzle to acknowledge that their favorite models are now being subsumed into a new conceptualization.

### *“MBTI Fatigue”*

Today, for example, a growing number of educators, consultants, and company trainers consider the MBTI increasingly obsolescent, especially in the context of the multiple intelligence framework. While it has no shortage of loyal fans, the MBTI has always been handicapped by a somewhat fuzzy underlying measurement model. Its design seems to represent an attempt to mix personality theory, cognitive preference, and social intelligence – and perhaps elements of other dimensions – into a single assessment.

Participants in workshops frequently report that the MBTI provides them with important and interesting self-insights, *when administered by a trained and skillful session leader*. Many of them, however, have difficulty remembering the theory and the model later on, and many can only recall their four-letter category code – “Let’s see, I know I’m an E-S-T-J, but I don’t remember what she said that means.”

The MBTI has been such a fixture in training programs run by U.S. Federal Government agencies, for so many years, that long-term employees find themselves sitting through the experience for the third, fourth, or fifth time, with little new insight. Trainers and training managers increasingly face the question: Considering that half or more of the people attending this session may have already “had” the Myers-Briggs assessment, does it make sense for them to sit and twiddle their thumbs while the others experience it? Many of them feel the need for something new, more contemporary, and insight-producing in new ways. Some experts have dubbed this the “MBTI fatigue” effect.

With the emergence of the multiple intelligence concept, and particularly the triune intelligence model, more and more educators, consultants, and managers are looking beyond the MBTI and other older models, and hoping for a more modern tool or set of

tools. Many do not argue that the underlying ideas of the MBTI and other tools are necessarily invalid or inappropriate – rather, they tend to see the older models as subsumed more appropriately into the multiple intelligence framework.

### *How “Emotional Intelligence” Came Unglued*

Conceptual theories often evolve in fits and starts. So it is in the case of popular psychology and the multiple intelligence framework.

The first popularized application of a single piece of the MI theory of human competence came with Daniel Goleman’s landmark book *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. “EI” – or “EQ” – quickly became popular in the business world and developed into a whole line of seminars, conferences, and educational products.

Most early developers and promoters of EI made the same kind of mistake the developers of the MBTI system had made – putting too much into one bag. They tried to compress the two separate dimensions of *emotional intelligence* and *social intelligence* into a single model. As the “parent” MI model became more widely understood and accepted, dyed-in-the-wool EI promoters initially resisted the calls to cleave their model into separate dimensions. “Emotional Intelligence explains it all,” they declared.

However, a series of publishing events – the arrival of the book *Social Intelligence: the New Science of Success* in 2005 (written by me), followed a year later by Daniel Goleman’s book *Social Intelligence: the New Science of Human Relationships*, and the recent release of the book *Practical Intelligence: the Art and Science of Common Sense* (also written by me) – brought the inventory of intelligences currently of interest to business people to three. Even Goleman finally acknowledged that Gardner’s original framework still makes sense, and has now conceded that EI and SI are separable dimensions.

Associated with my work, the *Mindex Profile* serves as a companion assessment tool for *Practical Intelligence*. The *Social Intelligence Profile* serves as a companion assessment tool for *Social Intelligence*. And a new book, *Cleaning Out the Attic: A New Understanding of Emotional Intelligence*, is in development, to be supported by the *Emotional Intelligence Profile* instrument.

### *The Promise of Triune Thinking*

This systematic build-out of the “big three” MI components has given us a new doctrine: We need to assess and teach the various individual intelligences as individual but closely related dimensions. Much can be gained by exploring the overlaps and connections between them, but little seems to be gained by trying to squash them together into one amorphous package.

So how can we consciously apply this triune intelligence model in everyday experience? Where do we start to exploit its potential for understanding ourselves, people, and situations, and for coping with them all more effectively?

A useful first step is to begin thinking of the three competencies as coming into play in all situations, to greater and lesser degrees. Consider, for example, that any individual

might possess a particular mix of the EI, SI, and PI competencies, and the relative proportions of the three can have a strong formative effect on the way he or she interacts with the world.

Leadership offers one important illustration of the 3IM dynamics. It's reasonable to presume that a person who scores high in emotional intelligence, high in social intelligence, and high in practical intelligence is more likely to lead or manage more effectively in most situations than a person who scores low in one or more of those scales. But what do we see in the "flawed" leader – the one who may be very strong in one dimension and significantly impaired in another? This is where we see the uniqueness of the leader come into play.

For example, many political observers have admired Ronald Reagan for his remarkable presence, personal charm, ability to engage and inspire people, and his articulate use of motivational language. Many would characterize him as high on the SI dimension.

At the same time, Reagan's biographers and closest acquaintances actually experienced him as emotionally flat, disconnected, and largely unable to empathize with others on a deep personal level. With the single exception of his wife, Nancy, he seemed to have little feeling for, or close rapport with any member of his family. Many would characterize him as low on the EI scale, with his legendary warmth and avuncular demeanor more likely an expression of the actor's craft rather than genuine emotional engagement.

On the third dimension, practical intelligence, even Reagan's most admiring fans typically do not attempt to characterize him as a man of significant intellect. His command of information, his ability to think analytically and systematically, and his grasp of complex issues were decidedly ordinary.

Contrast Ronald Reagan with the man he displaced from the White House – Jimmy Carter. Carter was a highly educated intellectual, a scientist by education. His grasp of complex issues could be both broad and deep. Yet he was one of the least competent of modern U.S. presidents in mobilizing people, selling his ideas to them, and building the political coalitions needed to get the big things done – the SI dimension of the 3IM complex. On the EI scale, without veering into gratuitous psychoanalysis, we could describe Carter as a man of emotional depth, genuine feeling, humility, and self-awareness. However, he tended to be somewhat timid, risk averse, and often unable to act aggressively and decisively when circumstances required it.

The question of which of the two men was the "better" president – for those who don't reflexively decide such matters on the basis of political party affiliation – requires careful consideration of the context – the circumstances each one encountered. The British figure of speech "horses for courses" applies here. Each of the two men reacted to his unique set of circumstances with his unique constellation of EI, SI, and PI competencies. The point of this discussion is not to debate the relative merits of the two particular presidents chosen as examples, but simply to illustrate the way in which the three key dimensions of the triune complex come into play, and the ways in which they modulate one another.

## Polyintelligence: How do We Know it when we See it?

Each of the three intelligences that form the triune model can be described, assessed, and developed. Each involves a rich constellation of interesting capacities, and I have chosen to try to summarize them in the form of a fairly memorable acronym – “S.P.A.C.E.” At some risk of appearing to force-fit complex concepts into a simple container, I believe we can use the same S.P.A.C.E. mnemonic as an efficient shorthand for all three intelligences. Please note that the S.P.A.C.E. acronym is only intended to round up and relate the key concepts for thought and discussion; it cannot be presumed to capture all of the sub-dimensions of all of the triune dimensions.

Figure 2 shows the five key S.P.A.C.E. components for each of the triune intelligences, appropriately labeled for each dimension.

Factor:	Emotional Intelligence: “The Inner S.P.A.C.E.”	Social Intelligence: “The Social S.P.A.C.E.”	Practical Intelligence: “The Action S.P.A.C.E.”
S =	Self-Esteem	Situational Awareness	Systematic Thinking
P =	Present Mindedness	Presence	Possibility Thinking
A =	Autonomy	Authenticity	Abstract Fluency
C =	Control	Clarity	Change Tolerance
E =	Engagement	Empathy	Emotional Neutrality

Figure 2. The “S.P.A.C.E.” Model of Multiple Intelligences.

We can consider each of the five S.P.A.C.E. components, under each of the three intelligences, in terms of its unique contribution to the individual’s effectiveness in various challenging situations.

These various components are explained further in other sources. For the present discussion, I hope they are sufficiently descriptive to lend perspective to the conversation and to stimulate interest in further investigation.

### *The Triune Prescription: Assessment, Learning, and Action*

A full treatment of assessment, development, and application of the wide range of competencies associated with the 3IM triad is beyond the scope of this discussion. Here we can only sketch out the general features of an approach – particularly one that makes sense in the pragmatic environment of business.

Obviously, one important step on the journey to mastery of the triune intelligence dimensions is home base: how do we assess our own triad of intelligences? How do we consciously set goals for self-improvement? And how do we diligently build the various competencies we consider important?

The three customary sources of self-understanding for competencies such as these are 1) careful self-reflection; 2) considering feedback from others – either intended or unintended; and 3) using scientifically designed self-assessment instruments, typically questionnaires or other print-based media.

In the business sector, a number of commercial firms offer various assessment tools as well as training sessions that incorporate various forms of assessment. A critical factor in the success of these kinds of assessment experiences is the *learning context and social climate* in which they are experienced.

People who participate in developmental experiences in business organizations have a reasonable expectation of emotional “privacy,” so to speak, in an environment that supports constructive, non-defensive self-reflection. Trainers and consultants must find a working balance between realistic learning experiences that go beyond mere lecture and discussion, and a psychologically safe and supportive situation that respects the personal boundaries of the participants. This is especially important with the emotional intelligence dimension, although it is also a consideration in SI and PI development.

Similarly, worthwhile learning experiences also require a carefully considered balance between the need to create – or simulate – authentic learning experiences that represent the real world to a reasonable degree; and the psychological “contract” the trainer and the organization have with the participants as autonomous self-entitled learners.

Supporting the development and application of the triune competencies throughout a business organization is a rather challenging proposition. We can expect to improve our methods and practices for this purpose steadily over time, as the triune model becomes more widely recognized and accepted, and as experience continues to inform our understanding of it.

Certainly the extent to which the leaders of the organization – executives, managers, supervisors, and group leaders at all levels – practice and model the triune competencies will shape and influence their acceptance as a valued part of the culture.



### The Author:

Dr. Karl Albrecht is an executive management consultant, futurist, lecturer, and author of more than 20 books on professional achievement, organizational performance, and business strategy. He is also a leading authority on cognitive styles and the development of advanced thinking skills. His books *Social Intelligence: the New Science of Success*, *Practical Intelligence: the Art and Science of Common Sense*, and his *Mindex Thinking Style Profile* are widely used in business and education. The Mensa society honored him with its lifetime achievement award, for significant contributions by a member to the understanding of intelligence. Originally a physicist, and having served as a military intelligence officer and business executive, he now consults, lectures, and writes about whatever he thinks would be fun.