



Both/And Thinking:

Embracing Creative Tensions to Solve Your Toughest Problems

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DISCUSSION GUIDE

Regardless of context, messy problems are difficult because they present us with dilemmas — choices between alternatives... We feel tension — the experience of opposition. That inner tug-of-war begs us for a response.

Embracing paradox starts with noticing the tensions and competing demands that we face in the world. Tensions show up to us as dilemmas – opposing options that push us to make a choice. What is a dilemma that you are confronting?

People often adopt either/or thinking in response to dilemmas. What would an either/or response be to your own dilemma?

In Chapter 2, we argued that either/or thinking can lead to vicious cycles. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

In Chapter 2, we identify three patterns of vicious cycles: rabbit holes (*intensifying a commitment to develop strengths until they become weaknesses*); wrecking balls (*overcorrecting to move from one extreme to the other*); and trench warfare (*polarization and us/them approaches*). When have you experienced rabbit holes, wrecking balls or trench warfare?

If paradoxes underlie our most vexing problems, then we need to more effectively navigate these contradictory and interdependent demands. We need tools that will rouse us from the allure of either/or thinking and inspire us to dance with the complexity of the absurd. We need tools that move us from being reductionist to exploring holistic options. We need tools that allow us to move beyond the label of both/and to engage deeply with the mysteries of paradox.

Paradoxes are interdependent, persistent contradictions that lurk within our presenting dilemmas. Naming the paradoxes that lurk within your dilemmas can help us learn to manage these tensions. Examples of paradoxes include self and other, today and tomorrow, short-term and long-term, individual and collective, stability and change. What are some of the paradoxes that you are facing?

In Chapter 4, we suggest that navigating paradox starts with shifting from either/or questions to both/and questions. Consider where you might have been asking an either/or question. What might a both/and question be instead? What new ideas emerge by changing this question?

In Chapter 5, we point out how a higher purpose – a long-term inspirational vision – can inspire us to continue to navigate paradox and work through our dilemmas. What is your higher purpose? How might you accommodate competing demands within that higher purpose?

In Chapter 5, we suggest that navigating paradoxes involves separating – surfacing differences – and connecting – finding synergies. Consider the tensions that you initially identified. What are the differences between the alternative options? What are some points of connection?

In Chapter 6, we note how people often find themselves emotionally defensive, rejecting paradox because they feel anxious with the uncertainty and complexity. What does it feel like to embrace paradoxes? How can you ‘find comfort in the discomfort’, such that you accept the difficult emotions but do not let them drive your actions and decisions?

In Chapter 7, we point to the need to be dynamic and enable change. To be able to stay the same, we must change. We need to experiment and be open to serendipity. How have you been open to new things? How has doing so allowed you to embrace competing ideas?

In Chapter 8, we argue that people often see both/and possibilities for someone else’s tensions better than seeing both/and possibilities to their own tensions. How can you tap into the wisdom of others to gain better insight into your own tensions?

Individual experiences and group dynamics can easily turn up the volume on defensive emotions, exacerbating our fears, amplifying our anxieties, and catapulting us even faster into vicious cycles. The challenge is to surface and then navigate the underlying paradoxes, working together amid opposing views and heightened emotions.

Both/and thinking offers us an important lens to navigate interpersonal conflict. Consider a conflict that you have had with someone else – a co-worker, a boss, a partner, a parent, a child. Both/and thinking invites us to work from the assumption that both parties have a valid perspective, and that listening to one another offers the first step toward finding a more productive path forward. How could you transform an interpersonal conflict into a productive solution?

Both/and thinking can be applied to our personal dilemmas, our professional challenges, and our leadership tensions. Where else could you apply both/and thinking in your own life?
