



DISCUSSION GUIDE

“It doesn’t matter whether you’re the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, an entrepreneur, a manager, a parent, a student, or someone else: we all face tough problems, sometimes daily—from personal issues to collective organizational challenges to the greatest and most intractable global crises. These vexing problems take up a large amount of our emotional and mental energy.” (p. 2-3)

The issue is not whether we face tensions, but how. *Both/And Thinking* invites us to transition from experiencing tension as obstacles and challenges to instead seeing them as opportunities for connection and creativity. This discussion guide identifies questions to deepen your engagement with these ideas.

Chapter 1: Experiencing Tensions

Embracing paradox starts with noticing the tensions and competing demands in the world. Tensions show up 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?



Chapter 2: Getting Caught in Vicious Cycles

Either/or thinking can lead to vicious cycles. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

In the book, 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*
- trench warfare - *polarization and us/them approaches*

Can you think of a moment when you experienced one of these vicious cycles?

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. (p. 72)

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



Chapter 3: Enabling Virtuous Cycles with the Paradox System

Two patterns can break from vicious cycles and enable virtuous cycles.

- Mules - creative integration - developing a solution that addresses both sides
- Tightrope Walking - consistent inconsistency - making decisions that oscillate between both sides.

What is an example of when you have created a mule? When you practiced tightrope walking?

Chapter 4: Shifting to Both/And Assumptions

Navigating paradox starts with shifting from either/or questions to both/and questions. Consider an experience when you were asking yourself (or another) an either/or question. How might you reframe this as a both/and question instead? What new ideas emerge by changing this question?

Shifting assumptions is not easy. Engaging with paradox often brings us to the limits of our rational thought. We can feel queasy peering over the edge toward the absurd or the illogical. Such uncertainty and irrationality drive our anxiety. We pull back toward more clarity. But learning to value and accept tensions helps us avoid oversimplifying our presenting dilemmas and instead to explore more creative alternatives. (p. 91)



BOTH/AND THINKING

Boundaries are the structures that sustain our mindsets, emotions, and behaviors. These structures include a broad array of features, including goals, routines, formal organizational structures, and roles. They can also include the allocation of time and arrangements of the physical environment. (p. 131)

Chapter 5: Creating Boundaries to Contain Tensions

A higher purpose – a long-term inspirational vision – can inspire ongoing engagement with paradoxes. What is your higher purpose? How might you accommodate competing demands within that higher purpose?

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?



Chapter 6: Finding Comfort in the Discomfort

People often find themselves emotionally defensive, rejecting paradox because they feel anxious with the uncertainty and complexity. What does it feel like for you 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?

Chapter 7: Enabling Dynamics that Unleash Tensions

Navigating paradoxes involves being dynamic and enabling 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?

Chapter 8: Individual Decisions

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?



BOTH/AND THINKING

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. (p. 214)

Chapter 9: Interpersonal Relationships

Both/and thinking offers 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?

Chapter 10: Organizational Leadership

Both/and thinking can be applied to our personal dilemmas, our professional challenges, and our leadership tensions. If you are leading a team or organization, how can you introduce these ideas into the culture and structures to enable people to embrace both/and thinking?
