

Resolving Dilemmas

From 'either/or' to 'both/and' thinking

Organisations of every kind and at every level contain dilemmas that devour resources in their solution only for the same dilemma to reappear months later in another guise. The problem is solved in the short term but that solution may not be sustainable in the longer term.

An individual dilemma is often hard enough to reconcile but it is multiplied when other people's perspectives are involved. Choices between global consideration and local interest; individual needs and group aims; planned methodologies and emergent approaches; all represent dilemmas that have the ability to derail the best efforts of the best companies.

Whilst each dilemma is unique to the group concerned, the dynamic that prevents its sustainable solution is often the same. We tend to frame dilemmas in a way that force us to choose between one option or another. 'Either/or thinking' comes from a competitive mindset which analyses each option in isolation from the other. One wins the other loses, one is right and *therefore* the other is wrong.

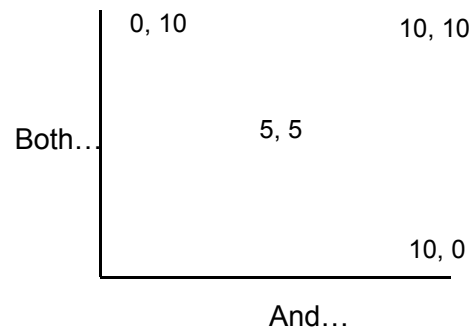
Of course decisions made in this way have the advantage of being quick and many of the decisions we have to make each day are perfectly suited to a choice between familiar options. Where problems are more complex however this way of thinking polarises attitudes, stalls thinking and isolates parties who hold a different views.

Either ←————→ Or

'Both/and thinking' in contrast comes from a mindset that is collaborative, that acknowledges the validity of other perspectives and synthesises individual views into a collective view. It leads to solutions that last.

When represented graphically the both/and thinking approach demonstrates that far from being mutually exclusive, two different factors can combine to create solutions that allow each to be accommodated and transcend the familiar impasse.

Where one factor, lets say, planning, is dominant over another factor, spontaneity, the position is polarised at $(0,10)$. Conversely where spontaneity is dominant the position would exist at $(10, 0)$. Both positions are exclusive and common ground is negligible.



Where both planning and spontaneity give some ground an uncomfortable compromise is reached at $(5, 5)$. The move from $(5, 5)$ to $(10, 10)$ requires us to suspend our individual positions and appreciatively explore other perspectives. Sometimes called 'the groan zone' for obvious reasons this can be an uncomfortable position to hold as it involves maintaining a tension between different perspectives. Maintaining this tension however allows synergistic solutions to emerge that are sustainable.

Looking at a problem with each perspective taking turns to be the dominant partner allows one to give value to the other: An organisation operating at $(10, 10)$ is nimble, able to accommodate changes in the environment, or multiple perspectives, whilst maintaining progress in a strategic direction.

We plan 'space' into our projects. We only take one step at a time being careful to spot opportunities as they arise. We plan quickly to make maximum benefit from them. We anticipate different possibilities and plan for each scenario in readiness for its' eventuality etc. etc.

In resolving dilemmas we encounter a predictable series of stages which can be negotiated with care. The **divergent zone** actively seeks out different points of view. Brainstorming is one familiar example of activity at this point. The **groan zone** builds shared or meta contexts which encompass seemingly incompatible ideas. Once a possible accommodation is identified it is built upon and refined in the **convergent zone**. There is still room for misunderstanding at this stage and it is important that what is implicit gets made explicit. This is the work of the **closure zone** so when everybody says 'I agree' we all know what we mean and we all mean the same thing!

In thinking about your own organisation, what dilemmas, when resolved, could deliver real and sustainable improvement to performance and what type of thinking is dominant...?