

# Both/And Thinking

Tags: [#creativity](#) [#decision-making](#)

Creator: [wendy-smith](#), Marianne Lewis

## Dialogue

Title: How to Solve Your Toughest Problems

Robert Frost in The Road Not Taken:

I took the road less travelled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

Stressing only one side of a paradox oversimplifies and narrows our options.

A common challenge.

Faced with uncertainty, we often want to run and reclaim more certain, stable ground. We narrow our approach and focus in on the question, applying more binary either/or thinking, evaluating alternative options, and choosing between them. Making a clear choice removes the uncertainty and therefore can minimize anxiety in the short term, but it can also limit creativity and diminish more sustainable possibilities.

A key question: Should I stay or should I go?

### Step 1: Define the dilemma

What does that sound like?

### Step 2: Surface the underlying paradox

What's the distinction between dilemma and paradox?

### Step 3: Reframe to a Both/And Question

The most basic and powerful tool to start navigating paradoxes is to change the question.

What about changing the question?

### Step 4: Analyze the Data: Separating and Connecting

Traditionally we pull apart the options and analyze pros and cons.

Instead, do separating and connecting.

Tactics: Moving up a level and moving down a level.

## Step 5: Consider the Outcome: Choosing

Making a choice vs. choosing.

Mules

Tightrope walkers

Key point --> we can see other folks both/ands easier than our own.

## What have you changed your mind on?

### Quotes

The challenges that all of us currently face both personally and globally call for paradox insights so that we can apply both/and thinking to address our toughest problems. In our own research, we identified three conditions that make underlying paradoxes more salient—change, scarcity, and plurality.<sup>2</sup> The greater the rate of change, the quicker the future becomes the present, and the more we must grapple with tensions between today and tomorrow. The scarcer the resources, the more we fight for our slice of the pie, revealing tensions between self and other, between competition and cooperation. The more voices, ideas, and insights, the more that conflicting approaches are raised to address a common issue and the more that we experience tensions between a unified global view and distinct local views. Given accelerating technological change, waning natural resources, and expansive globalization, the world we are living in today feels like the perfect paradox storm.

Lao Tzu expands on this idea: “If you want to shrink something, you must first allow it to expand. If you want to get rid of something, you must first allow it to flourish. If you want to take something, you must first allow it to be given. This is called the subtle perception of the way things are.”

Stressing only one side of a paradox oversimplifies and narrows our options. The tricky thing is that picking one side usually offers us short-term success—comfort, respect, rewards, efficiency, joy. Success motivates us to stick with that option, until we get stuck in a rut. The greater the success of those either/or choices, the deeper the ruts.

The first pattern of both/and thinking involves finding a mule—a creative integration. Mules are the offspring of female horses and male donkeys. Horses are strong and hardworking but can be impatient and bored. Donkeys are patient but can be stubborn and not particularly intelligent. When you put these two species together,

you create a biological hybrid that is more patient, hardier, and longer-living than a horse and less stubborn and more intelligent than a donkey.

We can navigate paradoxes by tightrope walking, making microshifts between alternative options to continue to move forward. We are not making big either/or choices that lead us to get stuck in the ruts described in chapter 2. Instead, these are small either/or choices that constantly move us back and forth between alternative poles, creating a pattern in the big picture that accommodates both options over time.

Both/and thinking begins with assumptions, mindsets and underlying beliefs that enable us to cognitively hold two opposing forces at the same time. The first step in shifting our approach is changing how we frame the problem. Rather than asking, "Should I choose A or B?" both/and thinkers ask, "How can I accommodate A and B?"

Many of us believe that truth is ubiquitous—that if something is true, its opposite must be false. But as Nobel Prize-winning physicist Niels Bohr purportedly reflected, "There are trivial truths and there are great truths. The opposite of a trivial truth is plainly false. The opposite of a great truth is also true." Great truths involve complex webs of understanding, refracted through opposing lenses. We may only perceive contradictory fragments rather than grasp the totality of these intricate truths. Yet if we are so committed to a single truth that we reject its contradictions, we may miss deeper, more holistic insights. We may also trigger intractable conflicts with others committed to their single truth.

One way to start looking for connections is what Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer described as "moving up a level" and "moving down a level."<sup>1</sup> Moving up a level means connecting the options to a larger, overarching vision. For Franke's "should I stay or should I go?" dilemma, moving up a level would involve defining her more universal values and higher purpose. What are her overarching goals in life, and how could this decision help progress those goals? Long-term aspirations widen our lens and can prove vital in helping us explore links between competing options. For instance, if Franke's vision was to have an impactful career and to make a positive and meaningful difference, she could find ways to see how both her current role and the new opportunity would inform that goal.

Moving down a level involves finding what is really at stake for each option. For example, Franke might ask, "How could completing my current campaign impact the new campaign?" Working with prospective donors is tricky. The same donors might contribute to more than one place. But out of loyalty, integrity, and professionalism, she could not go back to a donor whom she had approached for the current campaign while they were still in conversations with that hospital. Once they had solidified a gift, however, she might be able to approach them either for an additional gift to the new hospital or to put her in touch with others who might be

potential donors. So finishing out the current campaign might be a benefit to the new organization.

Making a choice feels final. Choosing feels like identifying a workable solution that moves us forward even as we might reevaluate and reconsider the options in the future. Choosing leaves us open to recognize that we are never solving the underlying paradoxes, but always ready to reengage with them. Choosing invites us to recognize the dynamic nature of paradoxes and draw on approaches that value this dynamism.

As you do so, we offer a caution: most of us usually see other people's both/and opportunities more clearly than we see our own. When it comes to personal paradoxes, the defensive emotions described earlier kick in, and we can become paralyzed by the tensions. We have far less emotional investment when it comes to someone else's dilemmas.

## References