

Both/And Thinking: Embracing Creative Tensions to Solve Your Toughest Problems

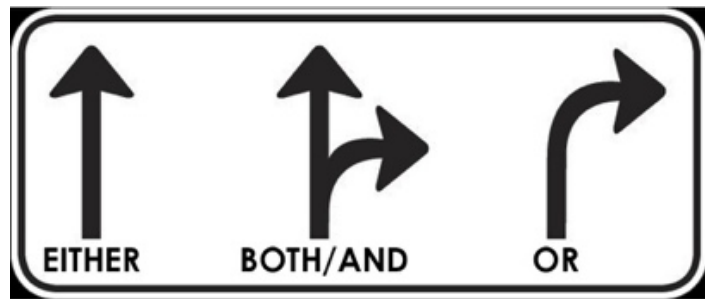
How many times have you found yourself in a situation where you didn't want to make a decision by picking



one option over another and wondered if there was a better way? In today's environment, VUCA — volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity — has become the de facto standard. We are constantly confronted with complex problems that need considering many perspectives and striving for integration rather than choosing an either/or

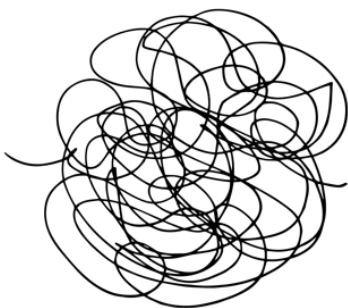
alternative. There is a growing desire to shift from a zero—sum to a both/and paradigm.

Smith and Lewis, discuss the importance of shifting our way of thinking about complex problems in their book, [Both/And Thinking: Embracing Creative Tensions to Solve Your Toughest Problems](#), and provide approaches to cope with and navigate paradoxical problems in order to find more creatively viable solutions in a world filled with competing demands. They define paradoxes as contradictory, yet interdependent elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time.



The three overarching central ideas that the authors present in the book, serve as the framework for working through paradoxes and is in line with what is essential to creativity.

The Necessity of Tolerating Ambiguity: We frequently seek to revert to solid ground in the face of uncertainty by employing a binary method of thinking, overemphasizing one side of a paradox to the point of danger. These reactions are analogous to the resistance that occurs when individuals are faced with a novel idea. Smith and Lewis, feel that the key to dealing with paradoxes is to tolerate ambiguity and be at ease with discomfort. Inability to deal with it will confine us to familiar territory, stifling progress. The foundations of navigating the creative problem-solving process are congruent with this.

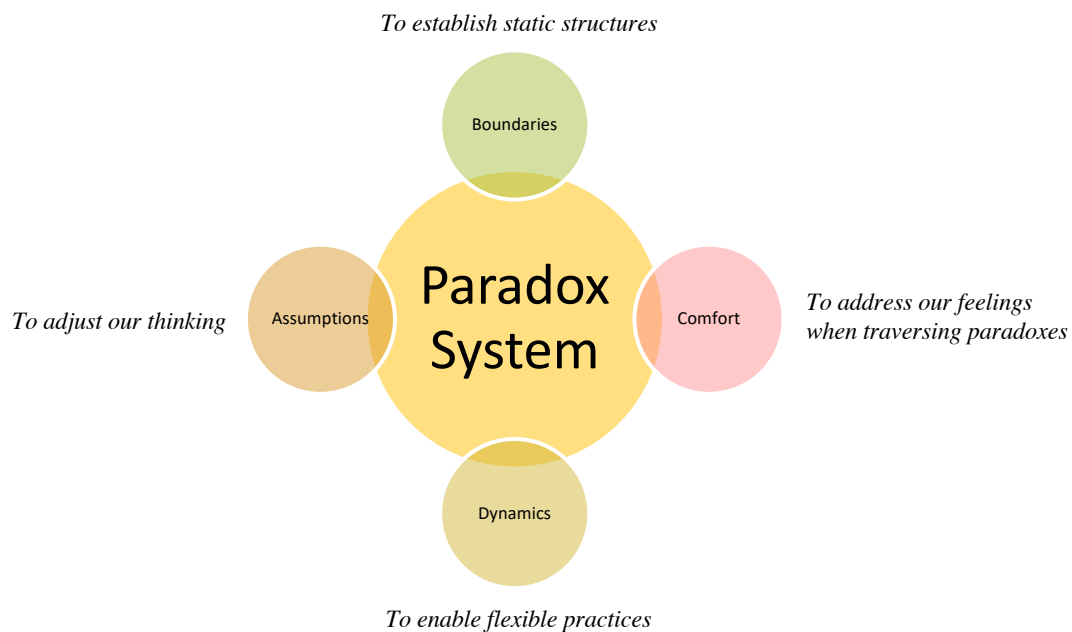


The Relevance of Working Through the Right Question: The authors emphasis on identifying the nature of the challenge and framing/reframing the question to address it, stands out as another important concept in the book. The most fundamental and effective strategy to begin navigating paradoxes, according to the them, is to change the question. The way the question is phrased has the ability to encourage both/and thinking and invite new perspectives. This is similar to what is significant in the process of addressing creative problems. The framing of the problem is, in Einstein's words, "much more important than its solution."

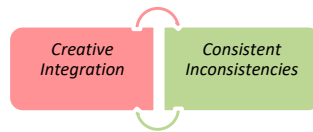


The Benefit of Discovering New Perspectives: The concept that drives solutions to paradoxical thinking is changing the lens and looking at things differently. Changing our mindset in how we approach the problem, letting go of even beneficial old ways, and viewing the problem through a fresh pair eye invites both/and thinking. Perspective shifting is a key principle in creative problem solving, and it helps get our mind out of the box, viewing even the old in a new way, generating paradigm breaking solutions.

In many ways, navigating paradoxes is like navigating the creative problem-solving process. The authors' years of study on how to deal with paradoxes have been compiled into a paradox system that outlines how to approach both/and thinking. The paradox system, contains tools to adjust our thinking (assumptions), to handle circumstances by establishing static structures (boundaries), to address how we feel while traversing paradoxes (comfort), and to enable flexible practices (dynamics), which is the main focus of the book. Much of the book is dedicated to the different approaches in navigating the paradox system. Navigating the system requires skills to engage with multiple tools as they reinforce one another, and build synergies between the head and the heart, which the book aims to nurture for the reader.



Furthermore, the authors highlight two patterns that serve as the foundation for navigating paradoxes, which ties together the paradox system with the central ideas discussed: *creative integration and enabling consistent inconsistencies*. While allowing consistent inconsistencies encourages us to make minor alterations as a method of moving ahead, creative integration drives one to explore for more innovative ways of solving a difficulty. The creative problem-solving process, which entails identifying connections and shifting between divergent and convergent thinking as a strategy to advance towards originality, is very comparable.



To ensure flow, the book is structured into three sections that help us comprehend:

- the foundations of paradoxes including the problems that may be holding us back,
- the paradox system and approaches to enable both/and thinking,
- a step-by-step approach to understanding the paradox system's application in individual decisions, interpersonal relationships and organizational leadership.



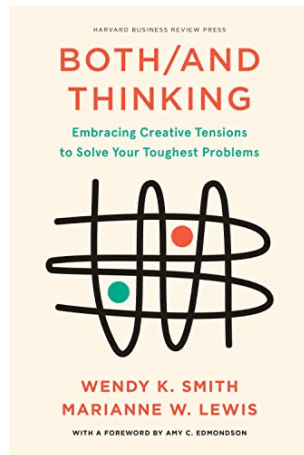
Navigating paradoxes requires creativity skills. We are frequently caught in the turbulence of opposing choices in life, without knowing how to steer it and the book offers a potential approach to collaborate on a creative win/win integration. Smith and Lewis's book, *Both/And Thinking*, in my opinion, would be an excellent add-on to the creative thinking knowledge portfolio. It emphasizes the significance of formulating a question and pursuing innovative alternatives. In addition, it reinforces the importance of many of the skills, that drive creativity. It helps us zoom out, and see opposing challenges as interdependent, rather than oppositional and shift out mindset.



When navigating paradoxes, mindset matters. This highlights a critical ability that the writers have not explicitly addressed - Metacognition. Metacognition is the awareness of one's own cognitive processes. It has been known to be a key skill in the creative problem-solving process. Metacognitive abilities may help in navigating paradoxes. Being aware of how we think about a situation, the capacity to recognize paradoxes, realize our underlying beliefs, and engage in flexibility generating connections might be essential metacognitive processes that would enable navigating paradoxes as well as the creative problem-solving.

This book could be a great companion for those who struggle with everyday anxieties of navigating conflicting choices in the personal and professional space. As Smith and Lewis, have illustrated, there is a better way – *Both/And Thinking*. I am sure that picking up the book and reading it will open you up to a new way of thinking, or add to your existing way of managing polarities. It will immediately showcase the interwoven similarities between navigating paradoxes and creativity. *The question is how are you going to use it embrace the tensions and move towards creative solutions to the problems in your life?*

Reference:



Smith, W., Lewis, M., & Edmondson, A. C. (2022). Both/And thinking: Embracing creative tensions to solve your toughest Problems. Harvard Business Review Press.