

“BOTH / AND” AND “EITHER / OR” CHOICES: KNOW WHEN TO USE EACH APPROACH TO SUCCEED

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You've got a tough choice. The performance feedback is in and the message is clear: you've been micro-managing your people. They complain about feeling suffocated and work slowing down because of the systems and processes you've put in place to ensure consistent, quality work. It's the one blemish on your otherwise positive annual review. You're told it's the only thing standing between you and your much-coveted promotion to area manager. But this is one of your biggest strengths. You've always been proud to say, “Predictable processes lead to predictable results.” You're told however that too much of a good thing has the same result as too little of it: ineffective leadership. You need to become more flexible.

After careful consideration, you decide if this is the path to that promotion you'll sign on to becoming what you once called with mild disdain, one of those “Type B” managers. You loosen the reins, take your foot off the gas pedal. Your people now have the freedom needed to do their best work. This experiment starts paying dividends right away – your R&D folks innovatively come up with a solution to that long-standing manufacturing quality issue. The production team re-tools machines quickly and you still get that critical new product to market on time.

However over the next two months, the country club atmosphere of an organization lacking discipline begins to show up. People come in a little late to work; others leave a bit early. Missed deadlines become common. People stop following the processes and systems you created that worked so well in the past.

So what's the right answer you wonder?

You got dinged for micromanaging with too much structure and have just paid the price for too much flexibility. How are you supposed to win at this game? Your promotion has never seemed so far away.

What you need to start doing is called “both / and” thinking. Often people in organizations get trapped in “either / or” debates when they are really in “both / and” situations. These unproductive (though often seductively energizing) arguments show up in individual, team and organization-wide situations. You're not alone in your frustration of swinging from structure to flexibility in the name of improving your individual leadership. Bump this same dynamic to the team or organizational levels. Same story.

Do we centralize operations for the company to gain efficiencies or give more local control to get closer to the customer? Should our unit be going after short-term profits or long term, sustained success? What's the answer to these questions? “Yes.” You need to apply both of these points of views to succeed.

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We call this “both / and” way of seeing the world Polarity Thinking©. Polarities are interdependent pairs that can support one another in pursuit of a common purpose – in your case, effective leadership. They can also undermine each

other if seen as an either/or problem to solve. Find ways to get the best of each working together and you create a virtuous cycle of energy working for you in your leadership. Let yourself get into an “either / or” debate about which is right and you're certain to spiral down into a vicious cycle and wave that promotion goodbye.

Polarities are very predictable. They behave the same way, every time, all the time. Get the best of what Structure has to offer and you'll get consistent, quality work and predictable processes leading to predictable results (see Figure 1, A). *Over-focus* on it though and you'll end up with people feeling suffocated and work slowing down (B). When you're in this “downside” of Structure a more flexibility seems like a good idea so your teams can create innovative solutions and you can move quickly to re-tool needed machines (C). Again though, too much of a supposed solution in a polarity leads to the “downside” of

that new preferred pole of flexibility – a lack of discipline and missed deadlines (D).

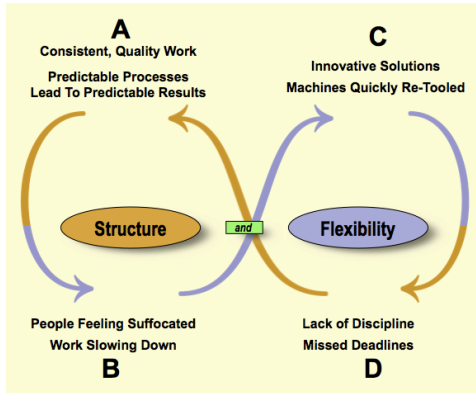


Figure 1

Your next move? Create more Structure because things have gotten too loose looks like a winner until over time you begin to experience issues that come from too much structure. And so it goes. Look closely at Figure 1 and you'll see an infinity loop. That's because trying to "solve" polarities takes you down a never-ending path of frustration and wasted energy.

Let's return to you getting that promotion but from this polarity-based "both / and" view. What if you saw structure and flexibility as opposites that you need over time to be successful? Sure, too much of either didn't work. Too little of each is no better answer. Even you can agree that neither micro managing nor country club cultures get the job done well.

But not all choices need this type of "both / and" Polarity Thinking. "Either / Or" thinking has served you well so many times in the past – and will need to serve you well in the future if you are to become a more effective leader. For example after the R&D tolerance breakthrough, you're going to have to make another important decision. This time it's not about you and your leadership style. You need to invest in technology that will move this new product to market faster. Seems like a no brainer. The new product is supposed to be a game changer.

Ah, but the life of a manager is not so simple. With the current corporate-wide budget freeze, any funds you put into the new technology you take away from the annual bonus pool. You can explain to your team the long term payoff of investing today, but they've told you many times that they count on those bonuses to pay down debt incurred during the time off without pay during the

recession. No "Both / And" answer here. It's the new technology or the bonuses. You are facing an "Either / Or" decision. You decide to postpone the technology purchase until the first quarter of the next fiscal year. You decide that losing your people's commitment and teamwork isn't worth the tradeoff of getting the product to market three months earlier.

What if you knew the times and places when structure would help your people deliver consistent, quality products and there was enough flexibility for teams like your R&D group to discover innovations that would give the whole company a leg up in the marketplace? The most effective leaders, and your path to that promotion, can be found in getting better at when to use this "both / and" way of approaching situations and when to apply an "either / or" problem solving method.

There are three keys in knowing when to focus on "Both / And" Polarity thinking and when to follow the good guidance given by an "Either / Or" Problem Solving approach. Here's a short list of differences between Polarity Thinking and Problem Solving.

| Polarity Thinking | Problem Solving |
|--|--|
| Polarities are ongoing. You can focus on only one point of view for some period of time before you need to focus on the other "pole" to be successful. | Problems are not ongoing. They are like 4+4 = 8. You decide the answer and move on. |
| Both points of view or "poles" are needed over time for you to succeed. Like structure and flexibility, you cannot solve polarities by making a choice. Both are needed to succeed over the longer haul. | Though you may disagree with the answer to a problem, both points of view are not needed to succeed over time. |
| Try and problem solve a polarity and you'll end up with a chronic problem. Whether you're pendulum swing from pole to pole takes a week, month, year or more, you're certain to end up trying to solve the same set of problems over and over. | Try and apply Polarity Thinking to a problem that needs solving and you'll end up with people complaining about your wishy wishy wishy washy decision making and of talking out of both sides of your mouth. |

What is the best way to make sure you're smart about when to use Polarity Thinking and when to use Problem Solving? Engage in authentic conversations with your people. They'll have insights into when each approach will enable them to serve their customers well. Experiment. Try each approach in different settings and pay attention to the results. Keep a journal. Track your progress. Look for patterns of success – and failure. If you or your people are feeling frustrated or performance falls short of the mark, it may be time to revisit why, how, when and where you're bringing "Both / And" thinking and when you're applying an "Either / Or" lens to your work.

There are no hard and fast rules to follow. What works is what's right and each situation calls for a different approach. Sometimes you'll get further, faster by ensuring people follow proven practices. At other times creating space for new possibilities by being more flexible is the key to success. Follow this guidance and you'll be well on your way to that long-desired, and now deserving, promotion!

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