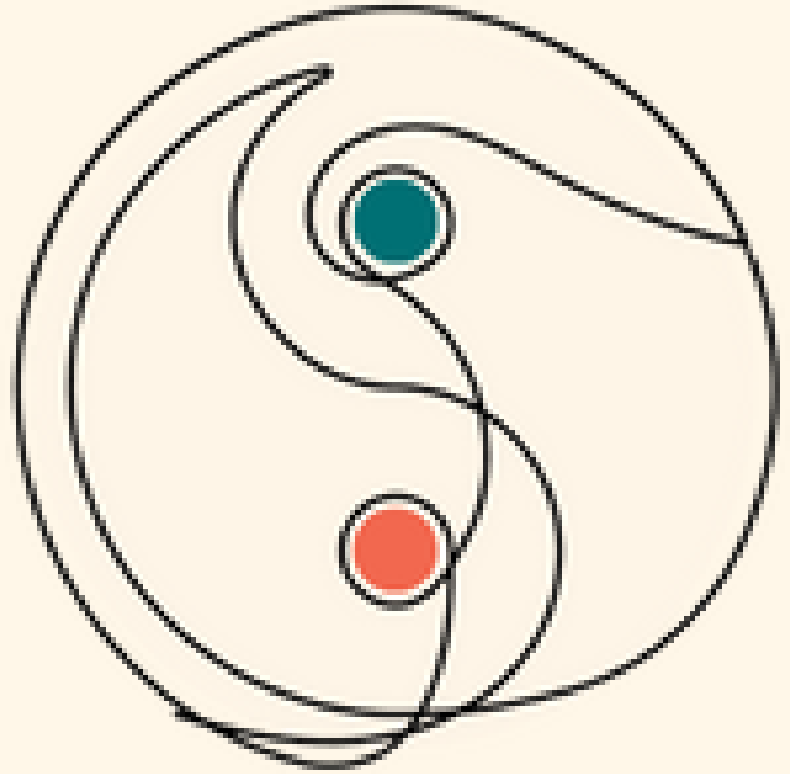


Transcending Polarization

The Power of AND

Wendy Smith, Ph.D.
The Wexner Foundation
2025



Tensions

alternative expectations, demands, priorities
in competition with one another

a tug of war





Conditions that spark increased tensions

- Change
- Plurality
- Scarcity

Smith and Lewis, Academy of Management Review, 2011



The challenge is
not **IF** we face tensions,
but **HOW** we do so.

Traditional Approach (Either/Or)

Framing

A or B?

Analysis

Separate and Analyze

Emotions

Minimize Discomfort

Outcomes

Make a Choice





our typical response

Either/Or

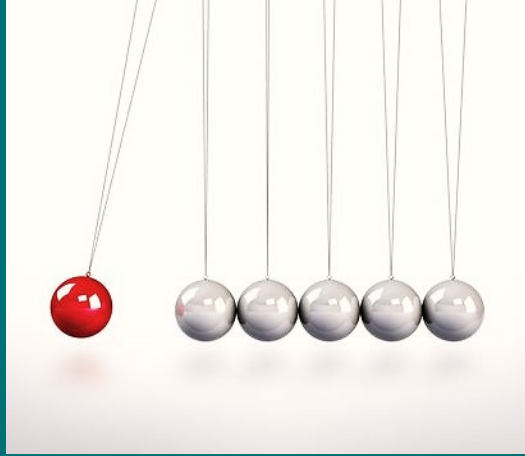
natural approach
but
limited or detrimental

3 Vicious Cycles



rabbit
holes

we get stuck
and can't change
course



wrecking
balls

we change course
and swing in the opposite
directions



trench
warfare

we defensively dig into
our own position and fire
at the other side

Contradictory

Core
Today
Short Term
Convergence
Efficiency
Performing
Certainty
Hierarchical



Explore
Tomorrow
Long Term
Divergence
Experimental
Learning
Uncertainty
Organic



Interdependent



Today creates *resources* for tomorrow
Tomorrow creates *energy* for today
Sustainability depends on *both* today *and*
tomorrow






Paradox

contradictory
interdependent
persistent

Smith and Lewis, *Academy of Management Review* 2011; 2022

Tensions

Strategy	Leadership	Personal	Yours?
Short-term vs Long-term	Performing vs Learning	Passion vs Stability	
Inclusion vs Excellence	Head vs Heart	Work vs Life	
Global vs Local	Courage vs Vulnerability	Trust vs Control	
In person vs At home	Competency vs Compassion	Cooperative vs Competing	
Time vs Cost			
Political Polarization			

Paradoxes

Strategy

Short-term *and*
Long-term

Inclusion *and*
Excellence

Global *and* Local

In person *and* At
home

Your side *and*
My side

Leadership

Performing *and*
Learning

Head *and* Heart

Courage *and*
Vulnerability

Competency
and Compassion

Personal

Passion *and*
Stability

Work *and* Life

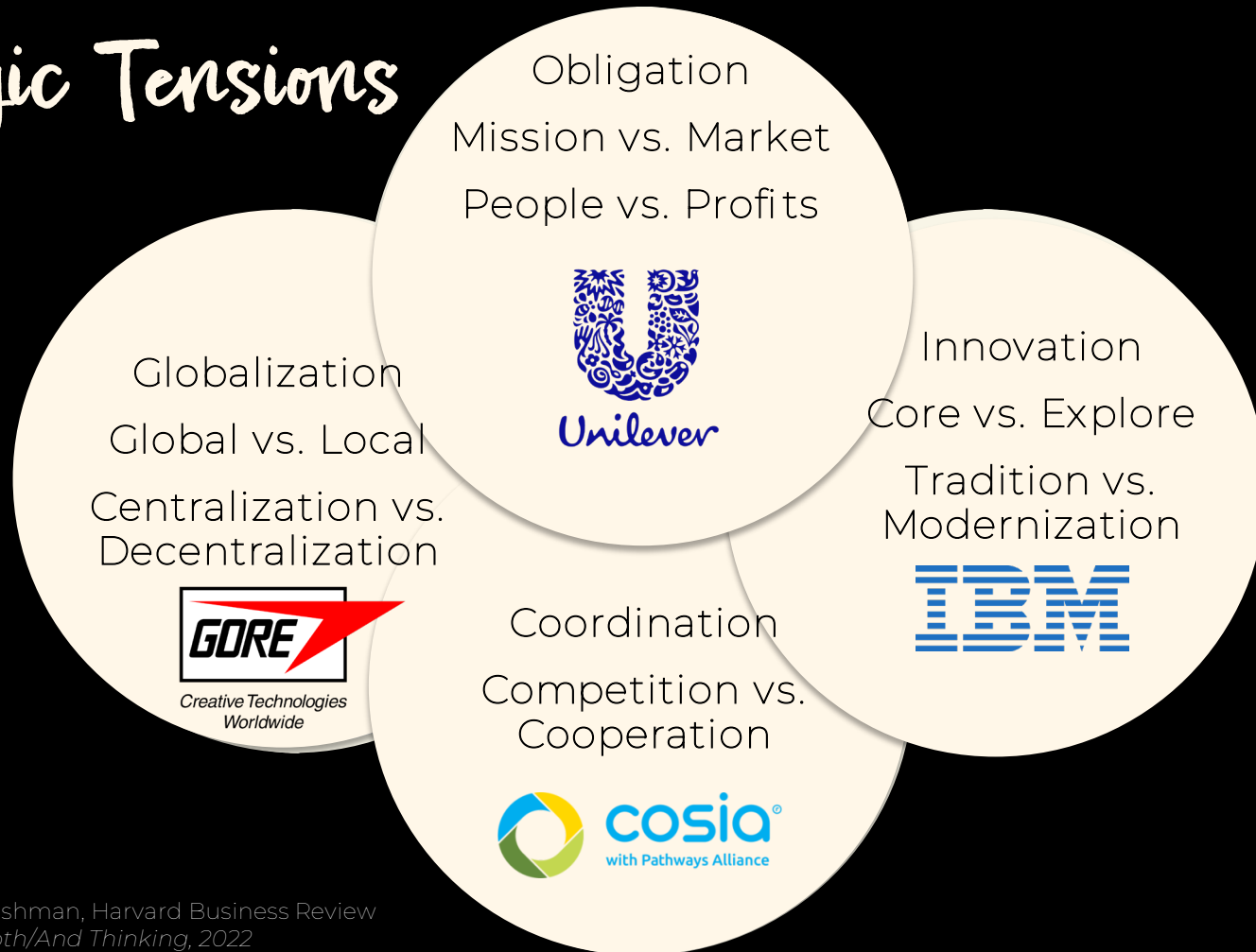
Trust *and*
Control

Cooperative *and*
Competing

Yours?



Strategic Tensions



Strategic Paradoxes





What opposes unites, and the finest attunement stems from things bearing in opposite directions, and all things come about by strife. - Heraclitus



All things are born of being Being is born of nonbeing
-Tao Te Ching, Chapter 40

..... and the halakha is like the House of Hillel." A question was raised: Since the heavenly voice declared: "Both these and those are the words of the Living God," why was the halacha established to follow the opinion of Hillel? It is because the students of Hillel were kind and gracious. They taught their own ideas as well as the ideas from the students of Shammai. Not only for this reason, but they went so far as to teach Shammai's opinions first.

These and these are the words of the living God...
- Eruvin 13b:10-11

Presenting dilemmas

Challenging problems that can be solved with an either/or

Underlying Paradox

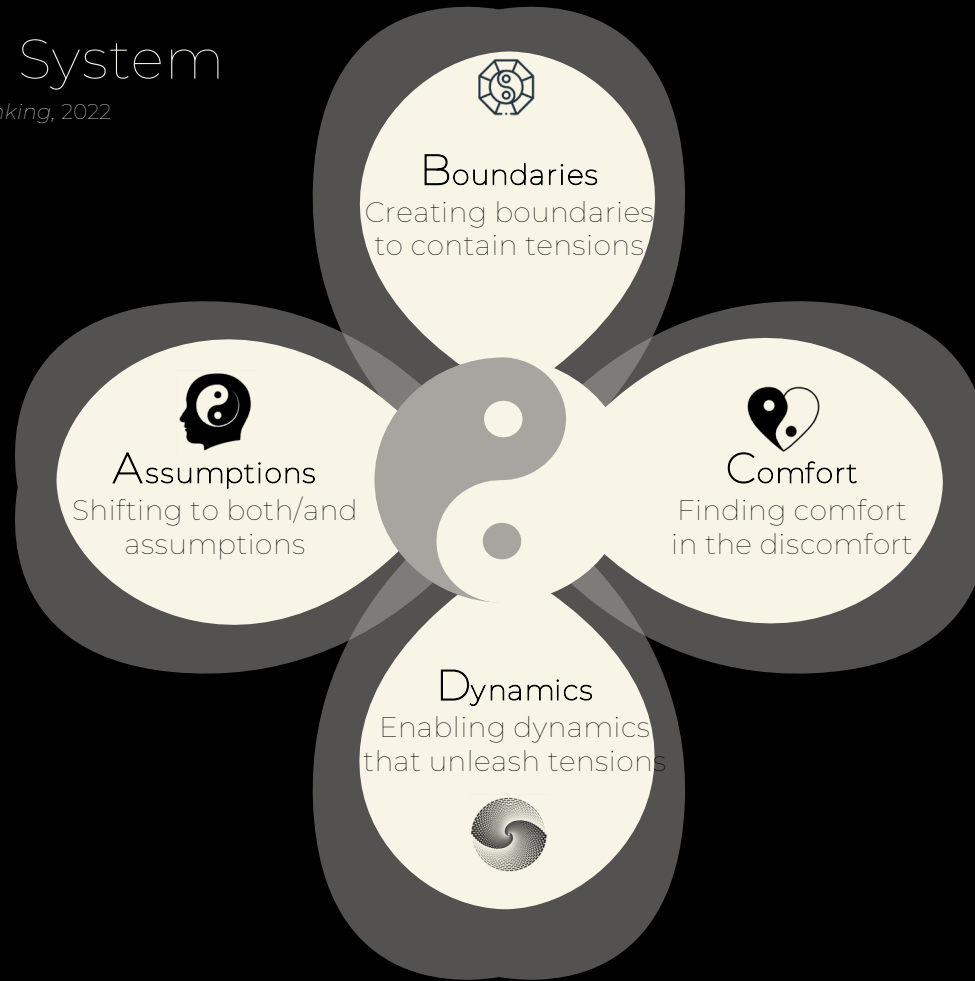
Persistent interdependent contradictions



Paradoxes are not different problems than dilemmas, but different lenses on the same problem.

The Paradox System

Smith and Lewis, *Both/And Thinking*, 2022



	Traditional Approach (Either/Or)	Paradoxical Approach (Both/And)
Assumptions	A OR B?	Change the question A AND B?
Boundaries	Separate and Analyze	Separate and Connect
Comfort	Minimize Discomfort	Find comfort in the discomfort
Dynamics	Make a Choice	Rethinking the Outcomes Mules and Tightrope Walkers





ABCD Paradox System

A Both/And Thinking Decision Making Framework

 ASSUMPTIONS CHANGE THE QUESTION <small>From an either/or question to a both/and question</small> Framing	<p>What is your dilemma?</p> <hr/> <p>What are the alternative options?</p> <p>(A) _____ (B) _____</p> <p>Can you frame your dilemma as a both/and question?</p> <p><small>You might need to come back to this question after working through the pro/con of each option below.</small></p> <hr/>
 BOUNDARIES SEPARATE & CONNECT <small>From separate and choose to separate and connect</small> Analyzing	<p>Where is option A at its best/worst? Where is option B at its best/worst?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <p>What is your higher purpose (long-term goal)? How do both options inform the higher purpose?</p> <hr/>
 COMFORT FIND COMFORT IN THE DISCOMFORT <small>From avoiding to engaging emotions</small> Comfort	<p>What are you feeling as you explore this dilemma?</p> <hr/> <p>How are these emotions enabling/obstructing your decisions?</p> <hr/>
 DYNAMICS RETHINK the OUTCOME <small>From making the right choice to choosing over time</small> Experimenting	<p>What is a 'creative integration' that offers a perfect win/win (a mule)?</p> <hr/> <p>How can you make small shifts between options over time that allow you to be 'consistently inconsistent' (tightrope walking)?</p> <hr/>

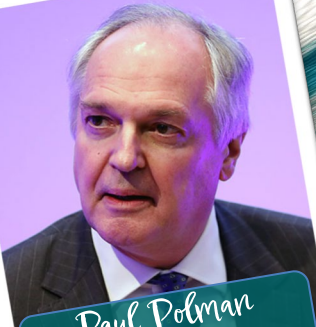
Want more details and information? Check out *Both/And Thinking* for more specifics as well as references to research and insights by other scholars and thinkers.



Assumptions: Change the Question



Change the question



Paul Polman
Unilever, CEO

Unilever Sustainable Living Plan

- How can we double profit THROUGH a commitment to social and environmental outcomes?
- Global and Local
- Innovation and Existing Product



Aoki Toyoda
Toyota, CEO

Toyota Production System

- How can we always have any part necessary while carrying no inventory?
- Standardized process and Constant improvement
- Centralized Philosophy and Decentralized Decision Making

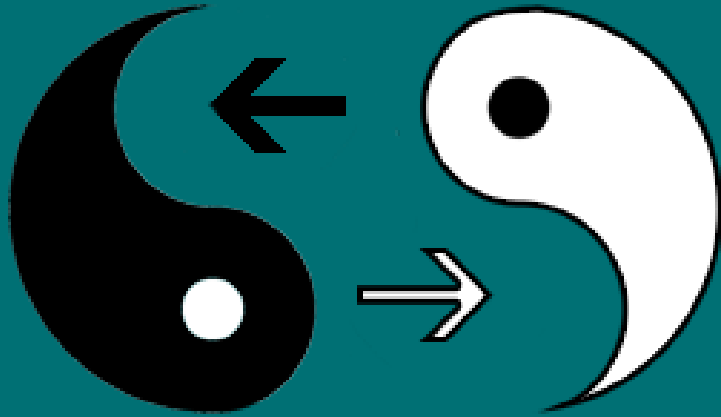


Indra Nooyi
Pepsi, CEO

Performance with Purpose

- How can we ensure a healthy planet while continuing to provide the brands people love?
- Global Consistency and Local Responsiveness
- Efficiently and Sustainability

Boundaries: Separate and Connect



Separate

Pull apart options to
understand and value
each



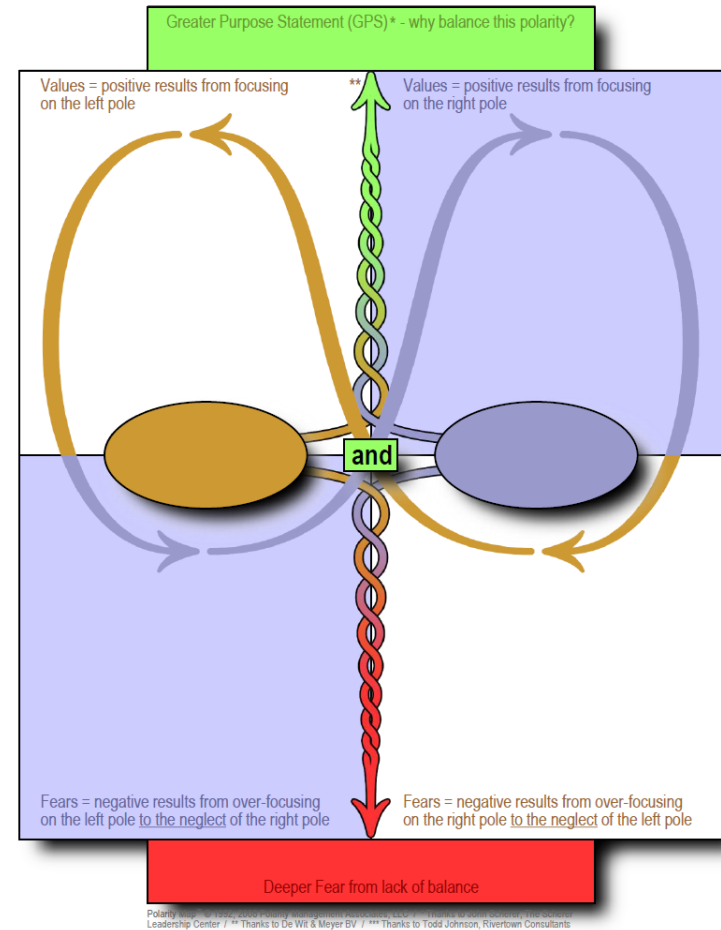
Connect

Seek points of
integration and synergy

Connect

What is the higher purpose
(long-term, overarching
vision)?

How do the opposing
demands both inform the
higher purpose?



Strategic Paradoxes

Everyday sustainable living



Paul Polman
Unilever, CEO

To be the most successful car company in the United States



Aoki Toyoda
Toyota, CEO

Creating joyful moments through delicious and nourishing products

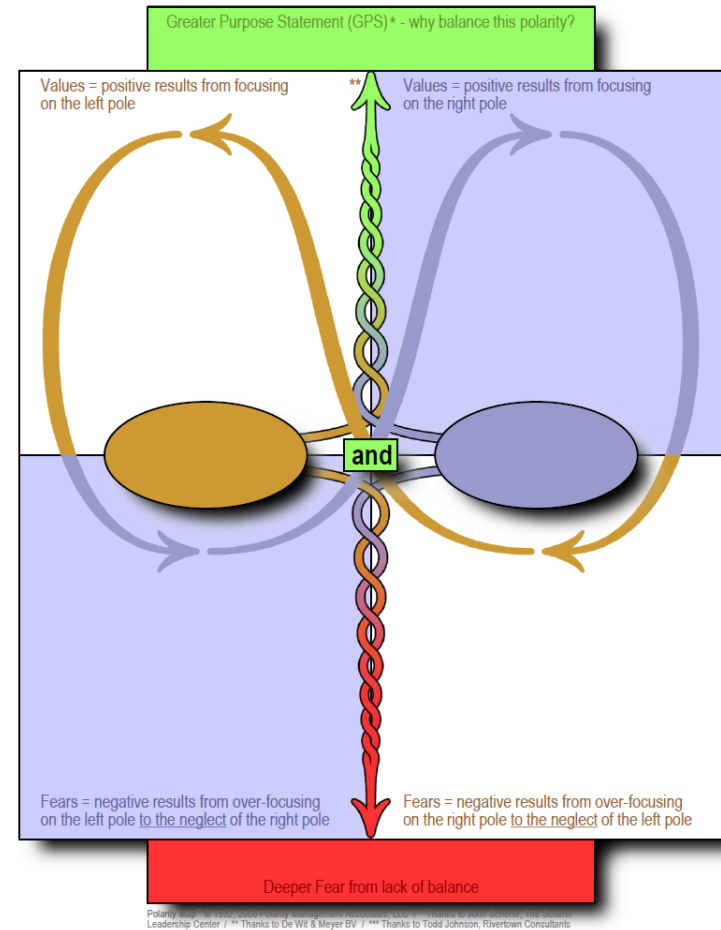


Indra Nooyi
Pepsi, CEO

Separate

What are the positive benefits of each option?

What are the negative repercussions when each option goes to the extreme?



Comfort

Finding comfort in the discomfort

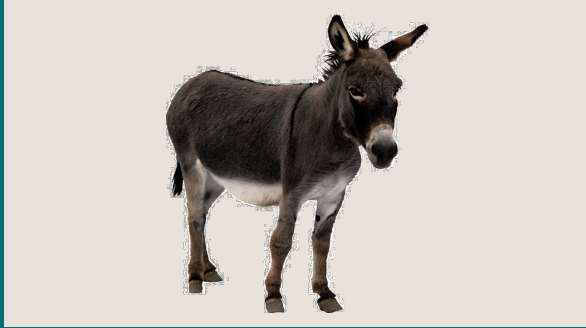
- Pause
- Accept
- Broaden



Dynamics: Rethink the Outcome

Creative integration

The mule



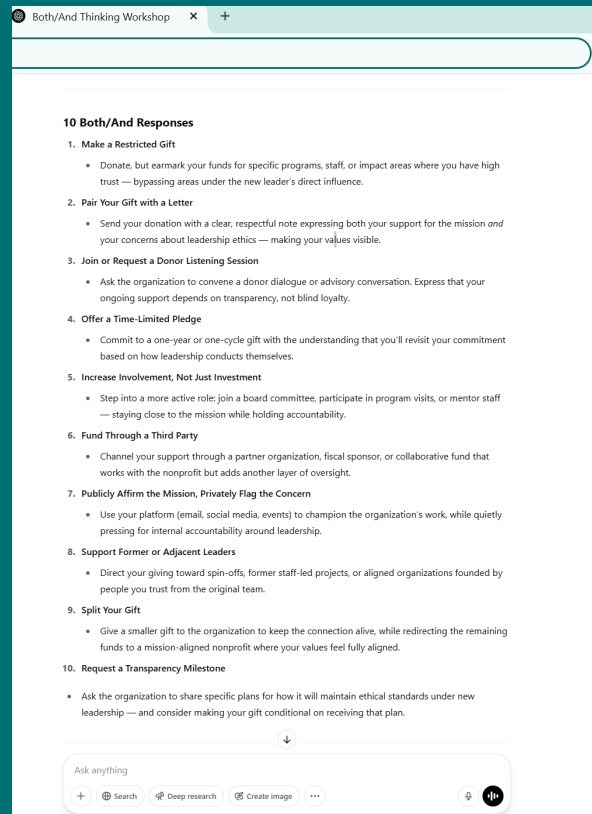
Consistent Inconsistency

The tightrope walker



Dynamics: Rethink the Outcome

Identifying a Both/And outcome for our own challenges can be hard!



Paradoxical Approach

(Both/And)

Assumptions

Change the question

Change the Question
A AND B?

How can I...

Support the organization and question the leader?

Boundaries

Separate & Connect

Higher Purpose
Separate and Connect

My goal is long term impact.

Comfort

*Comfort in the
Discomfort*

**Find comfort in the
discomfort**

Say “YES” to the discomfort

Dynamics

Rethink the outcome

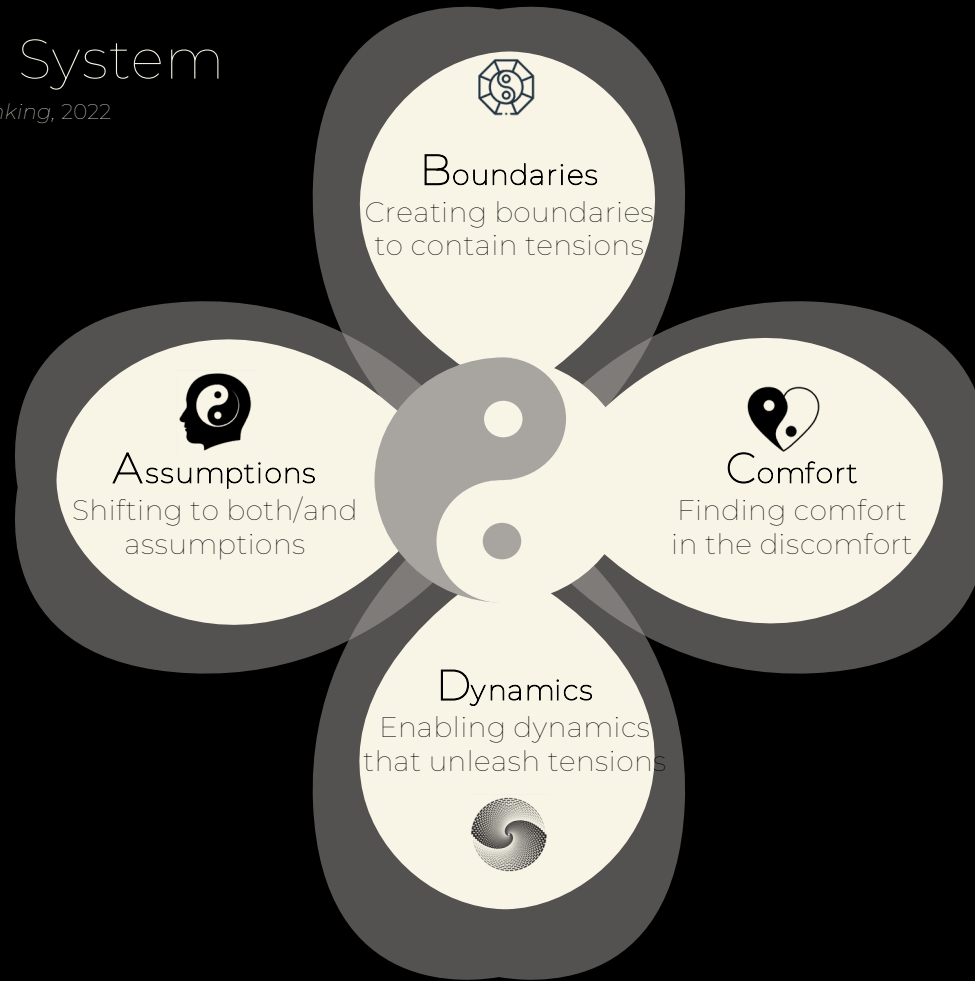
Choosing

Mules
Tightrope walking



The Paradox System

Smith and Lewis, *Both/And Thinking*, 2022





Questions?

- Line between appropriate balance – between honoring different positions; self interests and other interests;
- How to take into account power, risk, benefits etc.?
- How to navigate with different ideologies? Reconcile? (i.e. Unity and uniformity)
- Resolution? Is this about process? About resolution? Finding a process to bring understanding

4 Steps to Both/And Thinking

A

Assumptions



change the question

B

Boundaries



separate and connect

C

Comfort



find comfort in the discomfort

D

Dynamics



mules and tightrope walking

Key TakeAways

We all face tensions; its not if but how.

Our typical frame is either/or.

Reframing to both/and starts;

- changing the question

- defining the higher purpose

- clarifying the different perspectives

- navigating emotions



Homework?

- Tune into tensions
 - Spot the either/ors
 - Change the question
- Bring a dilemma that you are working on
- Read chapters 3,4,5,6,7

Problem-solving happens when people, in the spirit of bridging differences, embrace the tensions that arise from opposing forces....

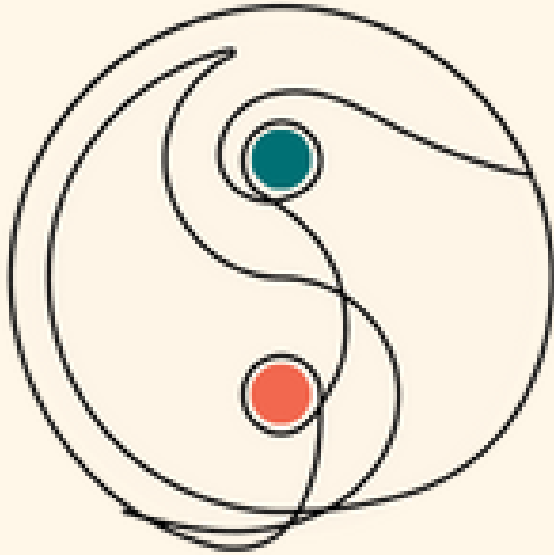
Instead of insisting on "either X or Y," I've seen how much more is achieved when we consider "X and Y."

It's tempting to run from conflict, but it's more effective to face it...This is true for people, for organizations, and for countries.

Ginny Rometty
Good Power
CEO, IBM 2012-2020



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