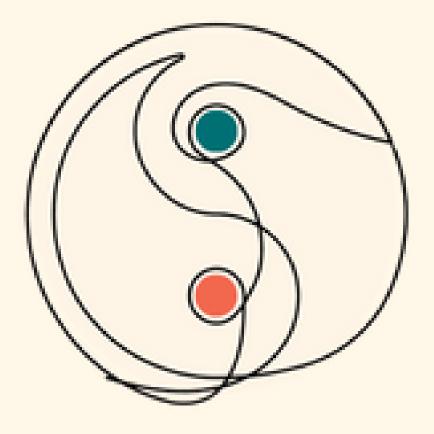
Transcending Polarization The Power of AND

## Wendy Smith, Ph.D. The Wexner Foundation 2025



Wendy K. Smith





alternative expectations, demands, priorities in competition with one another



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

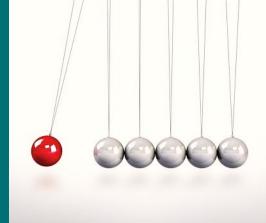
## Either/Or

natural approach

but limited or detrimental

# 3 Vicious Cycles











we get stuck and can't change course



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





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

tomorrow

Wendy K. Smith







contradictory interdependent persistent

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

# Tensions

Short-term vs Long-term Inclusion vs Excellence

Strategy

Global vs Local

In person vs At home

Time vs Cost

Political Polarization Performing vs Learning Head vs Heart Courage vs

Leadership

Vulnerability Competency vs Compassion Passion vs Stability

Personal

Yours?

Work vs Life

Trust vs Control

Cooperative vs Competing

# Paradoxes

Strategy Short-term **and** Long-term

Inclusion and Excellence Global and Local

In person and At home Your side and My side Performing and Learning

Leadership

Head and Heart

Courage **and** Vulnerability

Competency and Compassion Passion **and** Stability

Personal

Yours?

Work and Life

Trust and Control Cooperative and Competing Strategic Tensions

Obligation Mission vs. Market People vs. Profits

Innovation

Core vs. Explore

Tradition vs.

Modernization

Globalization Global vs. Local Centralization vs. Decentralization



Creative Technologies Worldwide Coordination Competition vs. Cooperation

> COSIO<sup>®</sup> with Pathways Alliance

Unilever

See Smith, Lewis, Tushman, Harvard Business Review Smith and Lewis, *Both/And Thinking, 2022* 

## Strategic Paradoxes Obligation Mission AND Market People AND Profits

Globalization Global AND Local Centralization AND Decentralization GORE Competition AND Creative Technologies Worldwide



Coordination

Cooperation

vith Pathways Alliance

Innovation Core AND Explore

Tradition AND Modernization



See Smith, Lewis, Tushman, Harvard Business Review Smith and Lewis, Both/And Thinking, 2022





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

All things are born of being Being is born of nonbeing -Tao Te Ching. Chapter40

Lao Tzu

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 teach Shammai's opinions first.

> These and these are the words of the living God...

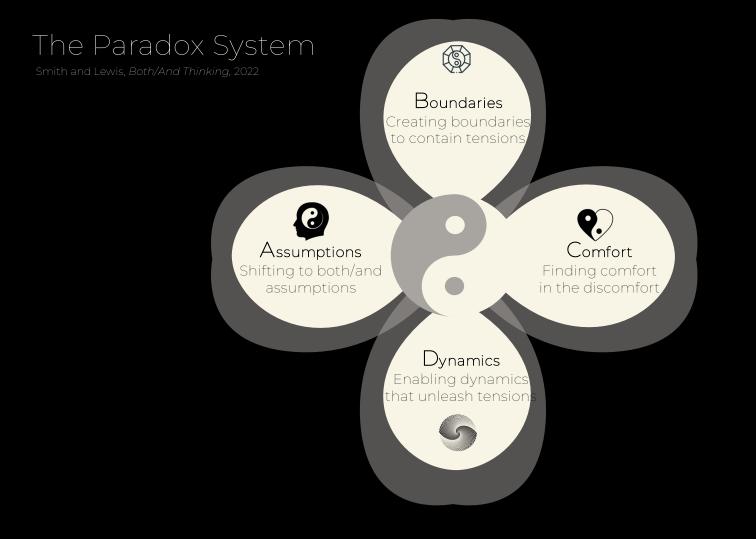
- Eruvin 136:10-11

## 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.



	<b>Traditional Approach</b> (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	Rething the Outcomes Mules and Tightrope Walkers





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

**Or**?

And?

## Change the question

## Unilever Sustainable Living Plan

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

Paul Polman Unilever, CEO

Indra Nooyi Pepsi, CEO Innovation and Existing Product



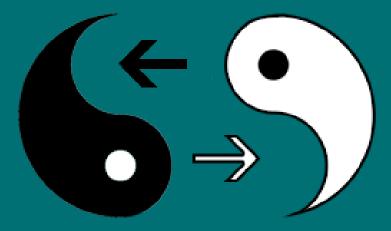
### Toyota Production System

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

## 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



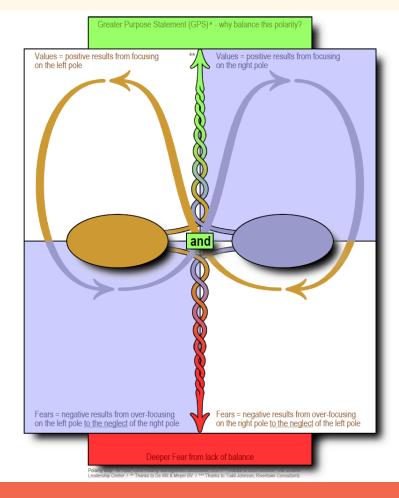
## Connect

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?



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## Strategic Paradoxes

## Everyday sustainable living



Paul Polman Unilever, CEO

Indra Nooyi

Pepsi, CEO

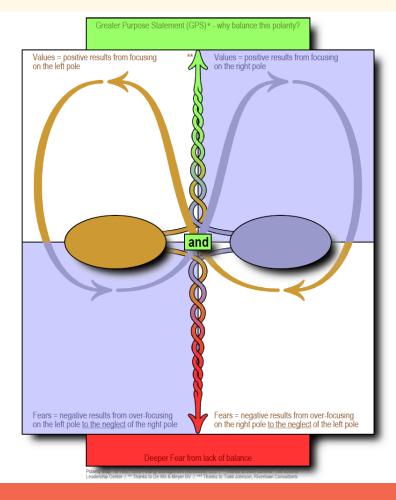
To be the most successful car company in the United States

Creating joyful moments through delicious and nourishing products

Separate

What are the positive benefits of each option?

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



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## 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

### Both/And Thinking Workshop × +

### 10 Both/And Responses

### 1. Make a Restricted Gift

· Donate, but earmark your funds for specific programs, staff, or impact areas where you have high trust - bypassing areas under the new leader's direct influence.

### 2. Pair Your Gift with a Letter

· Send your donation with a clear, respectful note expressing both your support for the mission and your concerns about leadership ethics - making your values visible.

### 3. Join or Request a Donor Listening Session

- · Ask the organization to convene a donor dialogue or advisory conversation. Express that your ongoing support depends on transparency, not blind loyalty.
- 4. Offer a Time-Limited Pledge
  - · Commit to a one-year or one-cycle gift with the understanding that you'll revisit your commitment based on how leadership conducts themselves.

### 5. Increase Involvement Not Just Investment

· Step into a more active role: join a board committee, participate in program visits, or mentor staff - staying close to the mission while holding accountability.

### 6. Fund Through a Third Party

· Channel your support through a partner organization, fiscal sponsor, or collaborative fund that works with the nonprofit but adds another layer of oversight.

### 7. Publicly Affirm the Mission, Privately Flag the Concern

· Use your platform (email, social media, events) to champion the organization's work, while quietly pressing for internal accountability around leadership.

#### 8. Support Former or Adjacent Leaders

· Direct your giving toward spin-offs, former staff-led projects, or aligned organizations founded by people you trust from the original team.

### 9. Split Your Gift

Ask anything

· Give a smaller gift to the organization to keep the connection alive, while redirecting the remaining funds to a mission-aligned nonprofit where your values feel fully aligned.

### 10. Request a Transparency Milestone

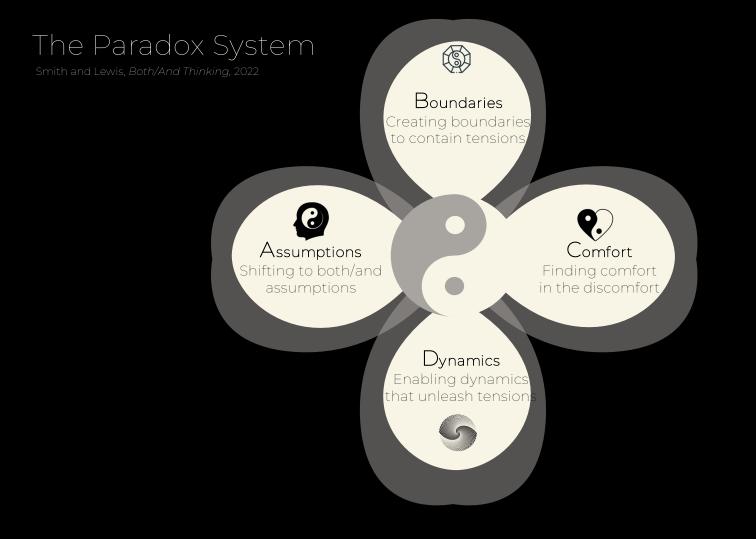
· Ask the organization to share specific plans for how it will maintain ethical standards under new leadership - and consider making your gift conditional on receiving that plan.

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	Paradoxical Approach (Both/And)	
Assumptions Change the question	Change the Question A AND B?	<b>How can I</b> Support the organization and question the leader?
<b>Boundaries</b> Separate & Connect	Higher Purpose Separate and Connect	My goal is long term impact.
<b>Comfort</b> Comfort in the Discomfort	Find comfort in the discomfort	Say "YES" to the discomfort
Dynamics Rethink the outcome	Choosing	Mules Tightrope walking





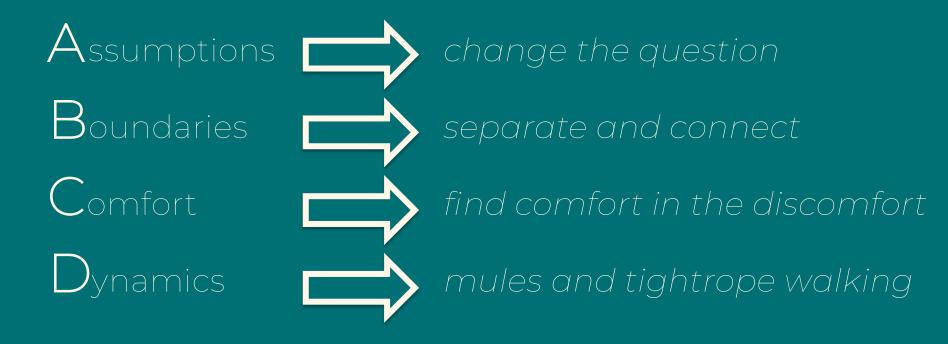


# Questions?

?

- 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



# 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....

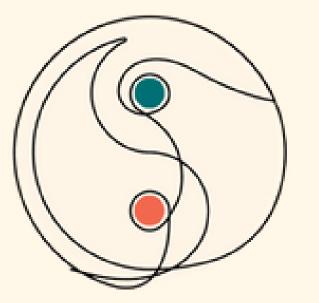
Instead of insisting on "either X or Y," I've seen how much more is achieved when we consider "X and Y."

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



## Join us to continue the conversation



either or Subscribe to: It's not an



Wendy K. Smith 🛛 (S