IDENTIFY TWO EXTREME AND OPPOSING MODELS

When we first started teaching integrative thinking, we framed it as a tool to be used in those moments when you face a difficult trade-off: a clear but unappealing either-or choice. We presented it in this way because when we had asked highly successful leaders to share their most difficult choices, they almost always did so by articulating an untenable either-or dilemma: When he became CEO, A.G. Lafley could either fix P&G’s financials in the short run or invest in innovation to win in the long run. When launching the Four Seasons, Isadore Sharp could either build small, friendly, but economically tenuous motels, or he could build large, luxurious convention hotels that would be financially sustainable but cold and impersonal for guests. At Red Hat, Bob Young could embrace either the free software model or the proprietary model. Based on interviews, for years, we taught integrative thinking as a tool to be used when life hands you one of those tough either-or situations.

But as we did so, we came to see that beginning with an abstract problem (How should I think about the right level of investment in innovation? What is the right business model for my hotels? What kind of a software company do I want to build?) and moving to a clear choice between two opposing choices is a powerful way to progress toward a solution, whether or not the final choice is clear from the outset. This insight led us to wonder, What if the world didn’t hand either-or choices to our integrative thinkers? What if the world instead gave them a wicked problem and they instinctively converted the problem into an either-or choice as a way to help them think about the problem more effectively? If this were the case, perhaps we could help those learning to solve tough problems to do the same thing.

What might this look like? Consider a sales director we met in an executive MBA class. She was working for a wire-mesh distributor.
The organization had recently acquired a competitor and was struggling with the integration of the two firms. One particularly knotty issue was the question of how to structure the sales force. One of the companies had a large direct sales force, whereas the other had traditionally relied on wholesale dealers to sell to the end user. With the merger, the sales teams had to be integrated, but what was the best way to do that? The debate had raged for months, with little progress toward an answer. The sales director feared that the organization would spend even more time talking about the problem, studying best practices, surveying stakeholders, and crunching the numbers, and yet wind up no more certain of the best way to move ahead. To avoid that, she asked her team to move from a general consideration of the problem (we need to integrate these two sales forces) to a defined articulation of two opposing models that might solve the problem (we need to either go direct or go through dealers). As they proceeded, we encouraged the team members to focus on the two most extreme versions of the sales models: an entirely direct-sales model and a dealer-only model. The problem as it was provisionally framed, then, was this: How might we create an integrated sales model that captures the best parts of the all-direct-sales and dealer-only models? With the problem framed in this way, the team was able to analyze its choices productively and soon came to an answer in which a small, focused direct sales force would treat the dealers as its customers, upskilling and supporting this much broader dealer network, which would then be far better equipped to serve the end customers.

Why begin with two extreme and opposing models? We start with two models primarily because it is a lot better than one model. Translating a problem into a two-sided choice raises the emotional temperature and provides momentum to the group process. Factions on both sides start to grapple with the implications of the choice. You want, as Alfred Sloan did, to use disagreement to help you understand the real issue and the potential solutions. Exploring more than
one model also provides a fail-safe defense against confirmation bias, groupthink, and a too-early commitment to any single answer.

So starting with two models is better than starting with one, but it is also better than starting with ten models. Seeking to deeply understand ten models would be an almost overwhelming task. Choosing two models instead provides a manageable starting place. It is a way to navigate the complexity of the situation that isn’t paralyzing right off the bat.

We use opposing models rather than any two models to produce helpful tension. We learned from Roger’s early interviews with integrative thinkers that the tension between ideas often helped spur creative thinking. It was only when engaged in the constraining consideration of opposites—each of which had value but could not be adopted at the same time as the other—that the highly successful leaders found helpful insights. So to keep you in a state of consideration rather than evaluation (considering what each model is all about rather than evaluating whether each model is good or bad), make the models as opposing as you can. This state of consideration can provide the time and space to challenge assumptions and provoke new thinking.