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## Navigating Complexity: A problem to be solved or a polarity to be navigated?

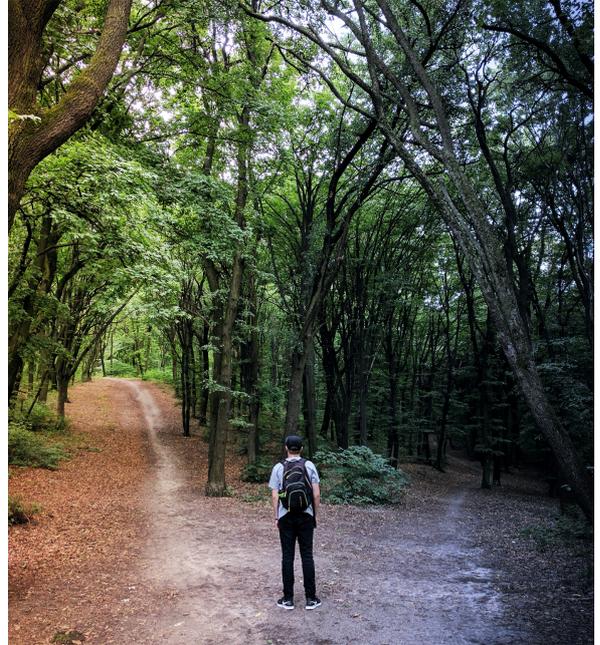
In life and work we are constantly faced with choices – do X or Y, choose A or B, take direction C or D. Often these are hard choices to make, causing us to deliberate at length. This article reflects on the challenge of such recurring problems and seemingly impossible choices. Why might approaches that focus purely on how we think about these issues only scratch the surface and leave us tethered to “either / or” rather than able to find and forge a transformational path forward?

By Melanie Long

As I reflect across my career in consulting, I remember oscillating between a focus on customising products for clients and a focus on standardising products. In my corporate life I also vividly remember debates over the principles of talent management – do we transparently disclose nine-box grid ratings, or do we keep them secret? Do we focus on the needs of the employee or the needs of the organisation? I also noticed that these “problems” often generated a lot of heat and emotion - in me and in others - leading to protracted debate, conflict and in some situations entrenched positions. Sometimes this led to a swing to one option where there was a majority, or in some cases to a “stuckness”, often leading to frustration as there seemed no way through the disagreement.

Now, more than ever, these difficult choices seem to be emerging all around us. In the current pandemic, as lockdown restrictions ease and life starts to rebuild, you only have to turn to social media to witness the emotion and angst associated with many of these issues. Should we allow employees to work from home or should we encourage them back into the office? Should we send our children to school or keep them at home? Should we look with optimism to the future or accept the reality that is facing us and hunker down?

Why is it so hard to find a way through these situations? One major factor is that they require us to move beyond traditional either / or thinking, in which we cleave to the paradigm of ‘solving’ the problem, based on expertise and experience, to a recognition that these are indeed not problems to be solved but complex issues to be navigated.



*photo by Vladislav Babienko on Unsplash*

In all of these cases, there is no right or wrong, better or worse – each choice has its relative merits and challenges and they are interdependent and at the same time contradictory, adding to the angst.

Rather than suffer these polarities we need to find a way to understand the benefits and downsides of each end of the pole. We need to explore how we might pursue an alternative path that marries the benefits of each side, while at the same time avoiding their overuses - finding a third way. Frameworks and tools do exist to help us navigate and make sense of the polarities we face. So why do these issues engender such heated discussion?

Recently, exploring a polarity my husband was facing, I was quickly able to consider the upsides and pitfalls of both sides of the polarity. He appeared really stuck to one pole and could not see any benefits to the other side. His description of the polarity surfaced a rather “them and us” perspective. While readily and fluently able to map out his preferred pole and its benefits, he found it hard to appreciate the upsides of the other pole, seeing only the pitfalls. I also noticed that his language was more emotive and less balanced than usual. Why do people get so attached to a polarity and a pole in this way?

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### Finding a new path forward

At MDV we recently had the privilege of exploring with Brian Emerson his and Kelly Lewis' work on navigating polarities, and found it greatly enlightening. Emerson & Lewis move polarities beyond cognitively looking for "best of both" solutions to raising often deeply held attachments to sense of self or identity. This helps shed light on why it is so much harder to navigate polarities in which questions of 'who am I?' and 'courage to change' start to emerge. I was not alone in appreciating a moment of clarity and deep self-insight as I realised what was making me "stuck" and how my deeply held beliefs were holding me back from imagining a new path forward. Sharing my new self-insight with a colleague, caused him to remark on a noticeable shift as I started to imagine and embody a transformational third way. ►

### Polarities emerging post lock-down

Fuelled with a new found energy from our time with Emerson & Lewis, we have been exploring some of the decisions that colleagues and clients need to make in the wake of Covid-19 – about returning to offices or the children going back to school. On the one hand, firms want to bring people back together and 'get back to work', and Government is exhorting us to kickstart the economy. On the other, leaders and employees have a deep sense of responsibility for personal safety and security. How to travel safely when crowded commuter services may enable transmission events? How to physically distance in open plan offices, classrooms and canteens? On the surface the decisions may seem quite cognitive and yet, as revealed through dialogue, they have many intricate and personal challenges.

### Return to school?

I am not a parent and can only imagine how challenging this decision must be. Exploring this with a colleague soon surfaced an underlying polarity that she was grappling with. Yes, she needs to make a decision about whether to send her son back to school, but at the heart she is caught by a much more fundamental human polarity – does she focus on the safety and physical health of her son or does she focus on his development and happiness. As our conversation progressed, my colleague

acknowledged her own attachments and how these make this polarity much harder for her to navigate. She could also appreciate how finding a third way would alleviate many of the worries and fears she is having to face – by getting the benefits of both / and thinking.

As I reflected on our conversation I noticed that we both fell into the trap of the use of the word "versus" to describe the two poles – safety versus happiness. This immediately placed more emphasis on the need for "either / or" rather than "both / and" thinking and started shutting down the possibility of a third way. I also noticed that for this, and many other polarities people are facing right now, a collaborative effort is required to define the third way. Whether this is teachers and parents, or employers and employees, navigating these complex issues requires a system-wide effort. What might be possible if such an effort were to be made? I am hopeful.

### Look ahead in a time of crisis with hope or reality?

MDV's Managing Partner, Mike Vessey, decided to focus on the personal impacts of large scale contexts as he explored 'Hope::Realism'. He was really struck by what he experienced as the 'wreckage' from Covid-19: a health crisis, and an economic one emerging; stark structural inequalities in western societies with protests on the streets; the UK facing a 'no-deal' Brexit; and the ever deepening culture war polarisation in many western societies.

As I talked to Mike about the polarity of 'hope for the future::reality for the future', the challenge for many leaders right now became apparent. On the Hope side, a focus on hope can be infectious and encouraging. Hope sustains energy and commitment and is a stronger emotion than fear. However, a leader overusing hope might be viewed as naïve, making false or unrealistic commitments. Over time this undermines trust and leads to cynicism. Also, hope as an emotion might blind one to the facts and, in extremis, lead to an avoidance of taking tough decisions.

In polarity navigation, we get to see that the overuses of Hope just listed relate to the positive aspects of the other pole, which in this case is Reality. There is an interdependence. Positives of Reality, such as taking on

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board facts to inform decisions, could be something of an antidote to naivety or side-lining useful data. When we actively choose the positives of Reality, such as seeking and reviewing data, we might proactively take helpful steps earlier and give people advance warning that helps them make informed choices of their own.

However, an overuse of realism may lead to pessimism, and having excess faith in our interpretations of data may lead to wrong decisions: we all have bias in what we see and attend to in data. Are we very rational at all, particularly in a crisis when emotions are heightened?

Continuing to explore the polarity, Mike considered a balanced 'transformational third way' with the benefits of both poles:

*"My first words were, 'to be guided by data but live in hope' and 'hopeful realism'. Where the conversation became interesting was when I turned to what Emerson & Lewis call the 'Vulnerability Through Way'. I quickly alighted on issues of my identity and self-image associated with 'letting people down' and 'contending with the prospect of failure' which weighed heavily. Recalling Emerson's counsel to develop a metaphor, statement or shape that embodies this transformational way helped me bring clarity to my third way - enabling people to make their own decisions, whilst also holding the concern to 'protect' others."*

This sort of reflection, which Mike was happy to share, illustrates the power of Emerson & Lewis' approach and how it can efficiently and helpfully shift us from a solely cognitive issue to something that accesses and includes the core of a person's beliefs about themselves and the world.

For those of us on the Emerson training, this approach to make the link between the cognitive and the social-emotional has been elegant and usable and has already had impact for the MDV community. It truly has been a revelation, shedding much needed light on why we find navigating polarities so hard – our very selves are on the line. ■

If you would like to find out more about how you can navigate polarities in leadership and in your organisation, please do get in touch.

For more information contact:

Melanie Long [melanie.long@mdvconsulting.co](mailto:melanie.long@mdvconsulting.co)

Mike Vessey [mike.vessey@mdvconsulting.co](mailto:mike.vessey@mdvconsulting.co)

MDV

Leadership and talent consultants

[www.mdvconsulting.co](http://www.mdvconsulting.co)

