



*The Power of Thinking Grey, Part 1*

## **Break Through Mental Barriers**

*Avoid the self-limiting effects of  
Binary Thinking*

Tim Stevenson

**ONE OF THE** maxims of coaching is, “Your greatest strengths are also the source of your greatest weaknesses.” While this seems counterintuitive, it proves true in people’s lives over and over.

Why is this? First, we become so comfortable with our strengths that they go on autopilot. We continue to use them thoughtlessly in situations where they are not appropriate or helpful. It’s like the old saying: “A carpenter who only has a hammer in his tool belt will treat every problem like a nail.”

We continue to hammer away with our strengths and fail to realize that another approach might be called for.

*“Really thinking free is hard work,  
and it usually requires a good deal  
of effort and determination.”*

— **Steven Sample**

Second, we become so reliant on our strengths that thinking creatively outside them takes too much effort, and, we also believe, too much time. But how much time is wasted as we continue doing what has proven not to work? Like the popular definition of insanity, it’s “continuing to do the same thing over and over while expecting a different result.”

This is why another set of eyes can be so helpful. In my role as a coach, I often suggest options people can’t see, helping them think beyond their mental boxes.

One of the most common and limiting mental boxes is called **Binary Thinking**.



Tim Stevenson • Certified Executive Coach  
E-mail: [csc.tstevenson@yahoo.com](mailto:csc.tstevenson@yahoo.com) • Phone: [\(469\) 585-3982](tel:(469)585-3982)

[www.StevensonCoaching.com](http://www.StevensonCoaching.com)

Twitter: [@StevensonCoach](https://twitter.com/StevensonCoach)

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## The strength of Binary Thinking

First, let's define it. Binary Thinking means approaching all issues as **Either-Or**:

Good	<b>OR</b>	Bad
Black	<b>OR</b>	White
Right	<b>OR</b>	Wrong
True	<b>OR</b>	False
All	<b>OR</b>	Nothing
Friend	<b>OR</b>	Foe

(If you respond with, "What's wrong with that?" you may be a prime candidate!)

There are times and situations when Binary Thinking is a strength and clearly called for: Medicine, aviation, engineering, and computers come to mind.

If a nurse is coming toward me with a long needle, or a surgeon is preparing to cut me open, I want them to *know* what they are doing. I don't want them to say something like, "Well, I *think* this is the right thing to do. Let's try it and see what happens." *No thanks.*

If I get on a plane at the airport, I don't want a pilot who announces, "Well, folks, I *think* we have good chance of making it to LA. I guess we'll find out in the next couple of hours." *Let me off now.*

What if you heard an engineer say, "That last bit of concrete looks pretty good. I *think* this bridge will hold up. Why don't we drive a few cars and trucks over it to see?" *You first.*

Finally, while I would never claim to be an expert in computers, even I know enough not to start hitting keys just to see what will happen.

No, these are all spheres where there are *right and wrong* answers, and we rely on the expert to *know* what he or she is doing, and to be sure they are doing the right thing.

I have run into binary thinkers among all occupations, but they seem to predominate in certain professions. I have found "All or Nothing" thinking especially among physicians. Whether it is because they are drawn to medicine because of their inclination, or if it is because of their training, it's hard to prove (I'm inclined to say, both). After coaching several doctors I created a "Thinking Grey" section for my physician leadership development process called LEAP Training. Talking about this subject in class, one of them recited a saying he had been taught in residency: "A surgeon may be wrong, but never in doubt." They must *decide* and bear the consequences of their actions, so they had better be right.

## The weakness of Binary Thinking

So what's the problem? There are times and situations where Binary Thinking is *not* helpful, and in fact, counterproductive to success.

Here are a few examples of when Binary Thinking can be a drawback:

- ***Problems without a clear solution***

For much of life — and this includes many leadership and management situations — there is no clear right or wrong answer: it's about making a **judgment call**. Sometimes your options are between good, better, and best; and, unfortunately, sometimes between bad, worse, and disastrous. Then it can be about choosing the "least bad" option.

That's why I got a big kick out of a scene in 2012's Oscar-winning film, *Argo*, directed by Ben Affleck. Set in 1979, the plot revolves around a CIA agent (Affleck) and his bizarre plan to rescue some people from revolutionary Iran. Affleck and his associate are meeting with

the CIA Director going over some lame proposals, when he floats his idea of creating a fake movie company to go in to retrieve them. The dialogue goes like this:

AFFLECK: **“There are only bad options. It’s about finding the least one.”**

CIA DIRECTOR: **“You don’t have a better bad idea than this?”**

ASSOCIATE: **“This is the best bad idea we have, sir ... by far.”**

Sometimes in life we can be in a situation where we can only try our “best bad idea,” but that’s at least better than doing nothing. Binary thinkers can refuse to face this, which leads to another problem:

- ***Inaction where incremental improvement is possible***

“All or Nothing” thinking leads to a fixation on the perfect solution. It says, “Unless I can come up with a solution that *perfectly* solves the problem, *it’s not worth doing anything.*” The paralysis of analysis follows, leading to complete inaction. Nothing changes.

I often remind my coaching clients, **“Incremental improvement is good!”** Let’s say the problem is his or her management of time. I don’t know how to *completely* solve someone’s time management issues in the real world. “But,” I say, “*what if* you could get 20% of your time back? Wouldn’t that be worth doing?” Of course it would, so long as they aren’t fixated on the *perfect* solution.

- ***Misinterpreting human behavior***

No one can read minds, but it’s amazing how many managers try. They will not only criticize an employee’s behavior or performance, they will proceed to pass judgment on *why* they did so:

“He just doesn’t care about his work! He has no work ethic!” *Translation: “EITHER he’s willing to work as many hours as I do OR he has no work ethic.”*

“She does that because she’s completely insensitive to others! She has no empathy!” *Transl: “EITHER she says it like I would, OR she doesn’t care about people’s feelings.”*

My reply to comments like these is to suggest that I know at least 6-8 reasons why someone might behave that way, so slow down about assuming you know the answer. It’s not Either/Or.

### The value of “Thinking Grey”

I’ve adopted the term Thinking Grey from *The Contrarian’s Guide to Leadership* by Steven B. Sample. Written during his tenure as President of the University of Southern California, it is on my short list of favorite leadership books. Sample writes:

**Contrarian leaders think differently from the people around them. In particular, such leaders are able to maintain their intellectual independence by thinking gray, and enhance their intellectual creativity by thinking free.**

It’s not always easy, he says:

**Really thinking free is hard work, and it usually requires a good deal of effort and determination.**

That’s because it means going against our natural inclinations. It is, however, definitely worth the effort!

Sharpen your awareness by noticing how Binary Thinking creeps into your everyday life. Note some examples. We will continue looking at this subject next week. **L**