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The Power of Thinking Grey, Part 2

When You Need to Apply a Different Way of Thinking

All issues are not Either-Or

Tim Stevenson

BINARY THINKING MEANS viewing an issue or situation as an Either-Or: **Either** good **or** bad … black **or** white … right **or** wrong … all **or** nothing. Thinking Grey is recognizing that Either-Or does not apply in a given case and looking for multiple possibilities.

I am not suggesting that Binary Thinking is wrong or bad, or that Thinking Grey is always right. Those prone to Thinking Grey often need to grow in their ability to recognize when

Either-Or *is* appropriate and to take quicker, more decisive action accordingly.

In my experience working with people, however, I have more often encountered the problem of Binary Thinking: People thinking Either-Or where it does *not* apply.

"Uncertainty actually <u>increases</u> with increased leadership responsibility. . . . The cost of success as a leader is greater uncertainty, not less."

— Andy Stanley

Here is the real issue: We all can benefit from learning to think in *both* of these ways, and discerning *how* and *when* to apply them.

An ancient word of wisdom

If you were around during the 1960s you will no doubt remember one of the biggest

hits of the decade, Pete Seeger's *Turn! Turn! Turn!* recorded by The Byrds. What many people don't know is that nearly all the lyrics came from a 3000 year old book called *Ecclesiastes*. It says in part:

> *To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven:*
> *a time to be born, a time to die,*
> *a time to plant and a time to uproot,*
> *a time to tear down and a time to build up,*
> *a time to search, a time to give up as lost,*
> *a time to be silent and a time to speak.*

Meditating on this one day, I was thinking, "There's a time for this and a time for that. So what? What am I supposed to do with that?" Then it hit me, and I came up with my favorite definition of wisdom: **Wisdom is to know what time it is.**

The writer of *Ecclesiastes* could have added, **"There's a time for Binary Thinking and a time for Thinking Grey."** Again, wisdom is to know what time it is.

So if you lean toward Binary Thinking, accept it as a strength … except when it's not.

Consequences of using Binary Thinking where it does *not* apply

Inappropriate use of Binary Thinking is one of the most common reasons for self-limitation. Here are some consequences:

- ### *Limiting creative problem-solving*

  "**Either** we borrow the money, **or** we go bankrupt." Are those truly the *only* possible options? Believing this problem is an Either-Or means you don't apply your creativity to searching out more possibilities.

- ### *Discarding ideas for improvement because they don't <u>perfectly</u> solve the problem*

"Since I can't carve out two hours for exercise three times a week, there's no point in doing anything." I hate to admit it, but I once fell into this for a while. For years I had a predictable and consistent exercise schedule. Then I got a new job where my old pattern was impossible. For a time I griped about not exercising … before I realized that I had fallen into this mindset. I changed it to an expectation that worked within my new situation, instead of thinking there's only one possible answer.

- ### *An unrealistic view of human nature*

  A perennial bull-session question: *"Do you believe people are basically good, or basically bad?"* Throw that question into the middle of a group, and in an instant you'll see people taking up sides and defending their view.

  Either answer is unrealistic. And whichever side you take, you are set up for cynicism or continual disappointment.

  Leaving aside the question of what "basically" means, I refuse to give an Either-Or answer. *We all are a mixture of both.* A realistic view of human nature (which is essential for any successful leader or manager) recognizes this. As the poet Carl Sandburg said, "There is an eagle in me that wants to soar in the heavens, and there is a hippopotamus in me that wants to wallow in the mud." That's realistic.

- ### *Leaving yourself open to pressure and manipulation*

  Those of us who have raised teenagers have learned to see through this kind of thing. *"You must hate me! Because if you loved me you would let me go out with my friends."*

  It's odd to me to see how many people are vulnerable to this kind of reasoning. Many employees in the workplace will try this angle with their manager. They'll try to position their issue so that you are "mean" if you say no, and "nice" if you say yes. Don't buy the Either-Or.

- *Forming opinions and judgments prematurely and closing your mind*

Yogi Berra said, "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." That's funny, but who says you have to choose between only two options? There are many applications of this point. We are often presented with questions and issues implying that "yes" or "no" are the only answers (high pressure salesmen do it all the time). Feeling pressure to make a decision, *and seeing only yes or no as possibilities,* a Binary Thinker will give an answer without exploring what else may be possible.

- *Being easily swayed by the strongly-held opinions of others*

This consequence flows out of the previous one. Let's say you are in a committee meeting, and a controversy is introduced. If you are applying Binary Thinking, all you see is Either-Or. You must choose one or the other, but you are unsure which way to go. Typically, what we tend to do at this point is to go with the best argument by another person. But what if, instead of bowing to pressure to choose Either-Or, you reserved judgment long enough to consider other possibilities?

- *Losing your intellectual independence and creative freedom*

I placed this one at the end of the section, but I believe it to be the most important consequence of the improper application of Binary Thinking. In fact, this consequence sums up all the others. The ability to think for ourselves is one of the most fundamental principles of what it means to be human. It is also the source of human creativity, innovation, and freedom. It is why people can achieve astonishing break-throughs in their problem-solving abilities ─ provided they do not limit *themselves*.

Retaining your intellectual independence is not easy or automatic, but it is a goal worth fighting for.

A realistic view of life and work

The world doesn't always fall into neat categories like good or bad, success or failure, broken or fixed. Leading and managing in the real world sometimes means navigating ambiguous waters toward fuzzy goals with uncertain success. I like what Andy Stanley has written:

> **Contrary to what you might think, uncertainty actually *increases* with increased leadership responsibility. The more responsibility you assume as a leader, the more uncertainty you will be expected to manage. The cost of success as a leader is greater uncertainty, not less.**

Leaders who can Think Grey when it's called for are best positioned for success in a world of uncertainty.

There is a time for Binary Thinking, and a time for Thinking Grey. *Wisdom is to know what time it is.*

Next week I'll offer some practical applications for learning to Think Grey. In the meantime, you will be way ahead of the game if you will face decisions by first pausing to ask, "What time is it? Is this a true Either-Or situation, or is it broader than that? Is it time for Thinking Grey?"

That self-awareness alone will help you be a better leader and decision-maker. **L**[i]