



Bad or worse? Find a new choice

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Folk wisdom has it that the metaphor "fork in the road" comes from an ancient Russian tale. A knight approaches a point where the road splits. He sees an inscription: If you ride to the left, you will lose your horse. If you ride to the right, you will lose your head.

We seem to be facing a lot of those kinds of forks in the road these days:

Do we pollute the planet to stoke economic growth or do we sacrifice our standard of living to preserve our habitat?

Do we allow the gap between rich and poor to widen in our quest for excellence or do we seek to be a more inclusive society?

Do we give up our civil liberties to protect ourselves or do we take the risk of remaining open?

Seeking solutions to these apparently intractable problems, Roger Martin, dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, interviewed 50 of the most successful people he knew – in the corporate world, the non-profit sector and the arts – to find out how they approached no-win choices.

The result is a book entitled *The Opposable Mind*, which will be released this week.

Martin's thesis is that outstanding leaders refuse to pick the least bad option. They either combine the best aspects of both alternatives or they create a possibility no one had considered.

"Unlike the rest of us, they don't need to take sides," he says. "When I pressed them on why they felt compelled to think past the existing models when everyone around them encouraged them to choose one, I got a few variations on a single answer: 'I'm just not an either-or kind of person.'"

Superficially, his subjects had little in common. They included financier Michael Lee-Chin, dancer Martha Graham, software entrepreneur Ramalinga Raju, broadcaster Moses Znaimer, pharmaceutical innovator Victoria Hale and university founder Taddy Blecher.

Yet their mindset was similar. Each came to a fork in the road, found both branches unpalatable and carved out a new route.

Lee-Chin faced his crisis in 1999. His money management firm, AIC Ltd., was sinking fast as investors jumped on the dot-com bandwagon. He could either renounce his "buy, hold and prosper" philosophy or stick to his principles and watch his business die. He did neither. He sold off enough of his holdings to cover AIC's losses, then invested heavily in a single company, defying market expectations and making a killing when it was taken over.

Hale found herself at an impasse in 2000. The American biochemist no longer wanted to work in a drug industry that overlooked diseases of the poor. But there was no publicly funded organization with the capacity to develop new medicines. So she founded the first non-profit pharmaceutical company in the United States. The Institute for OneWorld Health has brought help – and hope – to millions.

Blecher, a South African actuary, reached his crossroads in 1999. He dreamed of offering young blacks access to post-secondary education. But universities in his country charged \$5,000 a year and online courses required a communication infrastructure that did not exist in the black community. Rather than lower his sights, he invented a new kind of campus. He convinced a Johannesburg bank to donate a decaying building. He and his students refurbished it, grew their own food and set up income-generating activities. It became a self-sustaining university.

Martin believes anyone can acquire the mental habits that allowed his subjects to move beyond stultifying trade-offs. He teaches his students to question accepted wisdom and create new choices.

Regrettably, he does not apply the lessons in his book to the daunting global challenges he identifies at the outset. He invites readers to do that. "Work hard, think hard and don't dawdle," he urges.

His parting piece of advice might be summed up (with apologies to baseball legend Yogi Berra) this way: When you come to a fork in the road, *don't* take it.

Carol Goar's column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.