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When two thoughts beat one

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THE OPPOSABLE MIND

By Roger Martin

Harvard Business School Press, 210 pages, \$29.95

F. Scott Fitzgerald opined that "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function."

Roger Martin, dean of the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, says it's also key to the integrative thinking that effective leaders display when they hit major challenges.

Instead of picking between two less-than-perfect or even dismal options, they patch together a path that combines those two alternatives into a stirring, new vision.

He gives the process a colourful name: The Opposable Mind. That's drawn from humans' opposable thumbs, which allow us to accomplish some marvellous things that no other creature can manage, be it writing, threading a needle or painting a picture.

"Similarly, we were born with an opposable mind we can use to hold two conflicting ideas in constructive tension. We can use that tension to think our way through to a new and superior idea. Were we to hold only one thought or idea in our heads at a time, we wouldn't have access to the insights that the opposable mind can produce," he writes in his new book *The Opposable Mind*.

Luxury hotelier Isadore Sharp, founder of Four Seasons Hotels, displayed integrative thinking when starting out in business, refusing to accept that only two types of lodging could be built: small motels with intimacy and comfort, or large hotels with excellent location and amenities.

Instead, he decided to create hotels with the intimacy of the small motor inn and the amenities of a large, conventional hotel.

When he took the helm at Procter & Gamble Co., chairman and chief executive officer A. G. Lafley refused to pick between low pricing or intensive innovation investment; rather, he embraced both, and reached beyond the borders of his own company to find a whole new cadre of eager innovators.

CITY-TV founder Moses Znaimer operated in an industry where the choice was to stay local or go global, but he built a zestful local brand that he then licensed globally.

Mr. Martin says that, in thinking and deciding, we consider four factors:

Salience: What features do I see as important?

Causality: How do I make sense of what I see?

Architecture: What tasks will I do in what order?

Resolution: How will I know when I am done?

Integrative thinkers take a broader view than conventional thinkers of what is salient to the issue, how those factors connect, and how to design their decision, Mr. Martin writes.

They allow complexity to mushroom, rather than try to minimize it. "The complexity presents a cognitive challenge that integrative thinkers welcome, because they know that complexity brings along in its train an opportunity for a breakthrough resolution."

They resist the lure of simplification and specialization - two dominant trends in business - and don't panic as the scope of issues under consideration mounts.

They dance through complexity, looking for patterns, connections and causal relationships that others have missed by keeping mental models too narrow.

They bring all the factors together in a novel approach.

To build your integrative thinking capacity, you must improve the three elements of your personal knowledge system, he says.

Stance: This is how you see the world around you, and how you see yourself in the world. We all have a stance, whether explicit or implicit, and it guides our actions.

Tools: These are the models, theories and processes used to organize your thinking and understand the world.

Experiences: This is the knowledge built from past events that help to guide you.

Integrative thinkers share six common features in the stance they take toward challenges.

First, they believe that whatever models exist now do not represent reality but are simply the best or only constructions yet made.

Second, they believe that conflicting models, styles, and approaches to problems are to be leveraged, not feared.

Third, they believe that better models exist that are not yet seen.

Fourth, they believe that they are capable of bringing that better model from abstract hypothesis to concrete reality.

Fifth, they are comfortable wading into complexity to ferret out this new model.

Finally, they give themselves time to build the new model, rather than caving in to pressures for quick decisions.

"This is an inherently optimistic stance. Integrative thinkers understand that the world imposes constraints on them, but they share the belief that, with hard thinking and patience, they can find a better outcome than the unsatisfying ones they're presented with," Mr. Martin writes.

They accomplish that with three main tools: generative reasoning, to inquire into what might be rather than fixate on what is; causal modelling, to keep the whole interlocking structure of the complex causal relationships at stake in mind while working on the individual parts of a solution; and assertive inquiry, to explore models that oppose their own ideas rather than defend against such apparent threats.

And they bring a wealth of experience to the problem, having developed mastery and combined it with originality.

Mr. Martin shows mastery in his own approach to the issue, supplementing his rigorous thinking with extensive interviewing of top leaders and a story-telling style influenced by advice he took from journalists, such as *Tipping Point* author Malcolm Gladwell and *The Wisdom of the Crowd* writer James Surowiecki.

The result of his efforts is an easy-to-read, thoughtful look at how to improve our business thinking.

In addition: Some leaders face extreme conditions where lives are at stake as they guide followers.

In *In Extremis Leadership*, Col. Thomas Kolditz, head of the Department of Behavioural Sciences and Leadership at the United States Military Academy at West Point, brings together his own research and that of others into this formidable leadership challenge, and tries to draw lessons for those of us who lead in less risky situations.

In Extremis leaders embrace continuous learning, share risks with their followers by leading from the front, and share a common lifestyle with their followers, shunning elitism.

His stories - from combat in Iraq to parachute teams - are illuminating, but the book doesn't quite hold together, with the various chapters tenuously linked at points, and his lessons far from earth-shattering.

Just In: Consultants Marcia Worthing and Charles Buck explain what to do next when you're bored, burned out, retired or fired in *Escape the Mid-Career Doldrums* (John Wiley, 204 pages, \$22.99).

Alex Frankel went undercover to find out what life was like in companies such as United Parcel Service Inc., Gap Inc. and Starbucks Corp.

He reports his findings in *Punching In: The Unauthorized Adventures of a Front-Line Employee* (Collins, 22 pages, \$28.95).

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