



## BLOGS: The Conversation

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by Roger Martin |

### Barack Obama's Integrative Brain

There was something intriguing, even a little perplexing, about [President Obama's State of the Union address](#) Wednesday night. It's the same intriguing note to be found in many of Obama's most important speeches. And before you ask, it isn't ideology or rhetoric or even oratory, but something deeper and more complex: It is the clear evidence of a way of thinking not often seen in the Oval Office, or indeed in the corner office.

This way of thinking — which at first blush can be mistaken for indecision — is characterized by a willingness to embrace conflicting ideas or models. I've seen this pattern of "integrative thinking" employed by a number of highly successful business leaders — so much so that I set out to study it. What I've found is that these leaders, rather than defining their job as choosing from between opposing ideas, are inclined to reject the choice and instead seek a new and better model. (There is more about this research in my HBR article "[How Successful Leaders Think](#)" and my book [The Opposable Mind](#).)

This is Obama's approach. A signature line from his inauguration speech — "As for our common defense, we reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals" — was repeated in his speech — "Let's reject the false choice between protecting our people and upholding our values." He fully understands that many, even most people believe that these ideas are usually opposed. Yet he just doesn't believe that means he has to choose; in fact, he refuses to choose until he can come up with a better idea, one that overcomes the seeming trade-off. This determination to reject unacceptable trade-offs and seek a better answer is the most common characteristic that I found in my study of highly successful leaders.

Throughout his State of the Union speech, Obama held up and contemplated a series of seemingly opposing models:

"We find unity in our incredible diversity."

"One woman wrote to me and said, "We are strained but hopeful, struggling but encouraged."

"And if there's one thing that has unified Democrats and Republicans, and everybody in between, it's that we all hated the bank bailout. I hated it. You hated it. It was about as popular as a root canal...But when I ran for president, I promised I wouldn't just do what was popular — I would do what was necessary. And if we had allowed the meltdown of the financial system, unemployment might be double what it is today."

"Look, I am not interested in punishing banks. I'm interested in protecting our economy."

Because people generally see leadership as synonymous with decisiveness — recall Harry S. Truman's "**the buck stops here**" — the notion of embracing opposing ideas can seem wishy-washy. It's easy to think: "Just decide! Is it security or ideals? Do you love the banks or hate them? Are we for unity or diversity?" However, I side more with F. Scott Fitzgerald's view of intelligence:

"The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise."

It is Obama's inclination to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time that explains why he took the time to articulate the opposing view rather than simply say: "Come on; let's be bi-partisan." He carefully laid out the conflicting models: on one hand, we are ideologically opposed and are expected to act that way (and represent our bases); on the other hand, we are expected to move America forward. These responsibilities are opposed but is there a way to overcome the tension between them?

He consistently lays out the opposing models, not to set up an either/or choice, but to begin the thinking process toward an integrative solution. This process may feel a bit messy to observers, who would prefer not to see the sausage-making process up close and personal, but I am heartened by Obama's thinking pattern. It is the harder approach — to attempt to overcome apparent trade-offs — but it is the form of intelligence that can produce breakthrough solutions that move an organization or a country forward.

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