Becoming an Integrative Thinker: The Keys to Success

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Highly-successful leaders do so many different things that it is baffling to ascertain the key to their success by observing their actions. After interviewing and studying over 50 highly-successful leaders, the key that I have found is to not ask what these leaders do, but rather, how do they think?

I believe the answer is that they think with their "opposable minds": when faced with an apparent choice between conflicting models or options -- each of which bears problematic shortcomings -- rather than choose the "least-worst" option, they utilize the tension of the opposing models to forge a creative resolution in the form of a new model that contains elements of the individual models but is superior to each.

For example, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts founder Isadore Sharp refused to choose between building small motels with intimacy but limited amenities versus large convention hotels with all the amenities but a cold, impersonal feel. Rather, he innovated to create a model that rules the luxury hotel world: the medium-sized luxury hotel with service so spectacular that it commands a price premium that easily funds all the amenities, even at what the existing models viewed a sub-scale number of rooms.

Bob Young, co-founder of dominant Linux software provider Red Hat Software, refused to choose between the proprietary software model and the "free" software model. Instead of attempting to make Linux proprietary -- which ran against the grain of everything the open source movement stood for -- or trying to eke out a living selling shrink-wrapped CDs of Linux for $15 apiece to hackers, Young decided to 'give away' Red Hat totally free over the Internet to build dominant share and emerge as the only scale Linux provider, which then had the size and presence to sell services to large corporations.

How did Sharp, Young, Jack Welch, AG Lafley and the other successful leaders I have interviewed get to be able to think in such a uniquely successful way? The critical starting point is their stance toward the world in which they operate and their conception of their role within that world. Conventional thinkers, who are inclined to choose from among the existing sub-optimal models, have the following stance about the world in which they live:

CT1: They believe they can see the 'true reality' of any situation;

CT2: Views that oppose theirs are 'not reality', and are therefore wrong;

CT3: No better model could exist, because they are looking at 'reality'.

In contrast, integrative thinkers hold the following stance about the world in which they live:

IT1: Existing models do not represent 'reality' but rather are a construction;

IT2: Opposing models are there to be leveraged;

IT3: Better models exist that are not yet seen.

Conventional thinkers' view of the world influences their view of their role as a 'model chooser' as follows:

CT4: Where an opposing view exists, it must be crushed;

CT5: the situation at hand must be simplified to avoid unnecessary complexity;

CT6: choices and actions must be taken quickly and decisively.

Not surprisingly given their view of the nature of the world around them, Integrative thinkers view their role as a creative 'model builder', not chooser:

IT4: I am capable of building a better model;

IT5: I will wade enthusiastically into complexity;

IT6: I will give myself the time to create a better model.

Adopting the six aspects of the Integrative Thinking stance won't on its own transform a person into an Integrative thinker, but it is a necessary starting point. To build the creative models targeted by the stance, the Integrative thinker needs to acquire three key tools. The first is to add abductive logic - which is the logic of what might be - to the conventional reasoning tools of deductive logic (the logic of 'what must be') and inductive logic (the logic of 'what is operative'). The second is to become more explicit and rigorous about reverse-engineering one's own existing models and building new causal models. And the third is to add the tool of inquiring into and understanding the models of others to the conventional tool of advocating one's own model.

With the stance and tools in hand, the Integrative thinker should seek to accumulate experiences that both deepen their mastery and nurture their originality rather than lapse into the more conventional approach of attending to one or the other, but not both. Mastery without originality becomes rote; originality without mastery is shallow, if not flaky. Mastery, however, provides the foundation for great originality, while originality establishes new foundations on top of which greater mastery can be built.

Is it easy to become an integrative thinker? No, but if you adopt the stance, work toward acquiring the tools and seek out experiences that both deepen your mastery and nurture your originality, you will steadily improve your Integrative Thinking capacity.