

PAMPHLET 12

BEYOND DUALISM

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The mechanistic world is an atomistic either/or world. Either/or thinking provides the illusion of control (and a false sense of security) and allows mindless and simplistic choices between two alternatives. Dualistic thought is reactive, creates enemies, simplifies relationships unrealistically, and establishes boundaries that must be defended. Infinite potentials are lost when people select one duality blindly.

For example: When a paradigm shifts, there is a tendency to throw out the accumulated wisdom of the “old” in the zest to embrace the new. The danger of a reactionary mode is that much of value is lost. Knowledge is embedded in the old to be brought forward and synthesized with the new resulting in the loss of the certainty that dualities offer. We need a more unifying concept--a both/and orientation--to take us beyond the limits of the mechanistic worldview.

Physicist Niels Bohr developed the concept of complementarity to describe the wave/particle duality of light (A particle is an entity confined to a small volume. A wave is spread over a large area). Imagine a scientist who wants to observe these attributes of light. If the scientist chooses one experiment, the wave aspect of light is seen. If the scientist chooses another experiment, the particle aspect of light is seen. Light cannot display wave/particle aspects at the same time, but both are necessary to understand light. The interaction between the scientist, the experiment, and the light determines the behavior (wave or particle) that is brought forth. This paradox can be understood only in terms of a greater unifying concept “both/and” instead of “either/or.”

The wave/particle duality of light in quantum physics is the beginning of the end of dualistic thinking. Either/or thinking makes no sense in the world of quantum physics and living systems. We can never know for sure what the “right” action is. The “right” action will change from moment to moment depending on our perceptions and the context we are in. On a human level, we know from our own experience that little of importance in life is either “this or that.”

Both/and instead of either/or is a characteristic of most things in life. For example, people are not good or bad, cooperative or competitive, friendly or antagonistic, a team player or an individualist. People are both good and bad, cooperative and competitive, friendly and antagonistic, a team player and an individualist. Organizations can be ethical and successful, emotional and rational, and orderly and creative. We choose the aspects of our humanity we display based on our interaction with others and with our environment. People are “both/and” instead of “either/or.”

The knowledge that no objective reality exists independent of the observer and that the observer brings forth what is observed by the nature of the interaction with reality has major implications for managerial thought. For example, a manager came into a senior management staff meeting visibly agitated. He had just finished a staff meeting and was upset because the members of his staff had not participated. “I don’t understand why these idiots just sit there and look at me,” he exclaimed.

A few weeks later, I observed one of his meetings. He did all the talking, spoke in absolutes, threatened and intimidated, and allowed no room for participation. He scared people without any awareness of how he impacted others. Then he got angry at them for not participating and wanted to change them to be the way he wanted them to be. Of course they could not change their honest reactions, and they feared being honest with the manager about how they felt. So they were inauthentic and resisted in passive ways.

The manager was not aware of his impact on his staff, nor of his underlying belief that their reactions were somehow independent of his behavior. A Newtonian thinker, like many managers, he was disconnected emotionally from himself and his staff. The complementarity principle teaches that this manager brought forth the reaction he experienced in his staff by the nature of his interaction with them. If he wants to change their response, he must change his thinking and his behavior instead of trying to “fix” them mechanically.

If we saw a scientist “beating up” on the wave aspect of light because he wanted to observe the particle aspect of light we might think he was ignorant at best or crazy at worst. We would ask, “Why don’t you change the experiment so you get what you want?” Yet this behavior, like the manager’s, happens all the time in mechanical organizations.

Supervisors and managers don’t get the results they want so they blame, demonize, and scapegoat others (usually those lower on the organizational chain of command or the union). They work hard to get others to change and complain of resistant employees. Then they reorganize to create the

illusion of progress. This behavior is insane. I tell executives, “You get what you lead.” If you are not happy with what you see in the organization, quit blaming the employees, look in the mirror, and examine your own thinking. This ownership and responsibility for congruence in the organization is a more honest and courageous way of living and leading than is blaming, demonizing, and scapegoating those less powerful.

Both/and thinking challenges our creative abilities and our relational skills. We are challenged to forge new possibilities when we struggle to find common ground and to meet the needs of all constituents and stakeholders. Both/and thinking does not seek to **balance** dualities equally nor does integrative thinking seek to **maximize** each of the polarities at the same time (and all of the variables within each polarity). Both/and thinking takes what is needed at the time from each polarity and creates a new, encompassing reality that seeks to **optimize** the whole. Maximizing a polarity places stress on the system.

Temporary stress is an essential aspect of life, but prolonged stress is harmful and destructive to the system. These considerations lead to the important realization that managing a social system--a company, a city, or an economy--means finding the **optimal** values for the system's variables. If one tries to maximize any single variable instead of optimizing it, this will invariably lead to the destruction of the system as a whole.

A simple process can help us work through polarities. Select a polarity--for example, team or individual. List the positives of teams and individuals. Then list the negatives of each. Then brainstorm a new reality that optimizes the plus's and minimizes the negatives of each. When circumstances change, do the exercise again for the context is dynamic.

The Chicago Bulls professional basketball team is an example of this merger of dualities. They are a great team with a great star in Michael Jordan. At times the team dominates, at times Michael Jordan dominates. We need great teams, and we need great individuals. Teamwork can only take us so far and then we need individual greatness. Individual greatness can only take us so far and then we need team greatness. Team and individual are not separate and distinct concepts. They are in dynamic relationship merged organically into one whole.

The Chicago Bulls, as their success demonstrates, optimize the interwoven strengths of teamwork and individual stardom and minimize the weakness of reliance solely on team or individual performance. The coach (leader) is mindful and optimizes the “whole” by influencing it continually.

Optimization is not being at the “edge of chaos” all of the time. Between games optimization is rest and renewal.

Some executives believe their organizations need an enemy to compete against and to use to motivate employees. I think not. This is a reactive response that limits potential. Most organizations are mediocre, most jobs are too small for the people who do them, and most people perform far below their potential. If people compete against these “enemies” they might end up slightly better than mediocre. This is not enough for great people and great organizations who compete against their own performance and standards. **Both/and thinking opens a vast potential of creativity in people and organizations.**