

Embrace Paradox

Solve conflicts by replacing either/or with both/and.

Reviewed by Terrence Fernsler

Both/And Thinking: Embracing Creative Tensions to Solve Your Toughest Problems. By Wendy K. Smith & Marianne W. Lewis. Hardcover. 310 pages. Harvard Business School Publishing, hbr.org.

Working on seemingly intractable problems presents us with dilemmas – choices between alternatives that appear contradictory yet are interdependent. The result can be conflict and polarization. However, conflict isn’t negative if we can use it to span boundaries. Novel approaches generated from tension can catalyze creative strategies.

Both/and behavior increases the ability to find solutions with greater participation and buy-in. This book encourages us to reflect on options by using a holistic approach. It goes further than merely identifying paradoxes; it includes how to adjust perspectives from either/or to a wider lens.

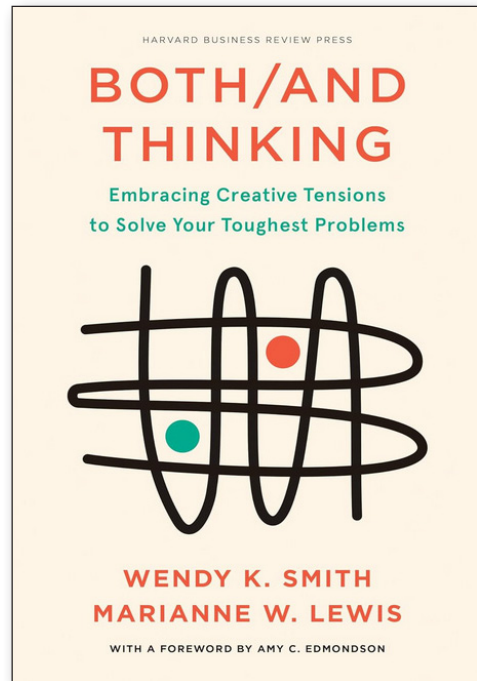
The authors’ backgrounds are firmly entrenched in the for-profit sector. They refer little to the purpose-driven challenges faced by nonprofits, and when they do, it can be paternalistic. But the real value of their book to the nonprofit sector is the way it expands problem-solving to look beyond the competitiveness so rampant in society.

The authors note that polarity often is a result of short-term answers benefitting one party, usually the one with the most power. They incorporate non-Western thought to explore how to seek innovation from paradox and suggest ways to live in a paradoxical world:

Pause when you face contradictions. React with curiosity rather than defensiveness. Embrace the complexity of your situation.

Acknowledge the interdependence of all people and things.

Be open to serendipity, which the authors define as finding something valuable when you’re not looking for it. Even if



not actively looking, you can be in a position to surface new possibilities and be aware of them when they arrive.

Create boundaries to contain tensions. An overarching vision, for example, can serve as a structure to help people navigate short-term chaos.

Shift from negative emotions by tapping into the underlying positive feelings. Be open to the whole range of human emotions.

Find comfort in discomfort. Accept uncomfortable conditions rather than fighting them.

Learn to unlearn. Be prepared to let go of your existing certainties so that you can move forward.

Experiment with small steps to test new ideas. Use frequent feedback to see how you’re doing.

The book expertly looks at how to regard contradictions as opportunities. It’s a good read for nonprofit organizations willing to use creative solutions to address the complexities and paradoxes of the nonprofit environment. **S**

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“Regard contradictions as opportunities.”