

DILEMMAS

We all face dilemmas every day. Under pressure to make important decisions between two equally acceptable (or equally unacceptable) alternatives, or determined finally to settle long-standing issues, most of us have been trained to fling ourselves into intensive fact-finding and analysis.

I had a business client one time who was trying to make a decision about bringing in a partner. When I first visited him, he had filled up more than half the pages of a yellow legal pad with lists of pros and cons. For every “pro” he immediately thought of a counterbalancing “con”. He told me he would make the decision when one list clearly outnumbered the other. How was that ever going to happen if it hadn’t started to happen after nearly 50 pages? The way he was thinking, if he had the idea, “We could grow the business and make a lot of money,” it would immediately be followed by the idea, “We would have to take risks and could lose a lot of money.” As I read through his lists of pros and cons, it was like a textbook case of the analytical process run amok.

It’s always true that anything could happen. We could make money, we could lose money; partnerships could work out, they could fail; we could follow our plan, we could depart from our plan; markets could favor us, markets could shift against us. It’s also true that much of what does happen never shows up on our lists. How many people who invested heavily in the *dot.com* businesses that were flourishing less than two years ago had “sudden catastrophic collapse of the NASDAQ” on their “con” lists? How many people saving for a transatlantic Concorde flight had “the whole fleet grounded indefinitely” on their “con” lists? Our “pro” lists are equally uncertain, just not as unsettling.

The amount of information we amass is usually of interest, but not of extreme value, in the final disposition of a dilemma. Also, in hindsight, most people would say we rarely ever have the prescience to allow for the events that actually do transpire when we try to look ahead. It appears that the things we put huge energy into – gathering data and anticipating possibilities – are the least relevant to outcomes of our life situations. Ironically, what actually happens – which could be described as unanticipated new information – isn’t usually relevant to our experience of the outcomes, either. What we call “things working out” is highly variable, anyway, because any outcome can seem positive or negative to us depending on how we’re thinking as it occurs.

As an example, my client considering the partnership had missed out on two potential partners in the 4 months during which he was amassing his enormous review of pros and cons. In one instance, the potential partner walked away, offended by the idea of the list, and said, “If you can’t make up your mind about me based on our learning about each other from regular human contact, then we’re not going to be good partners. I don’t need

a list to tell me that.” The other potential partner held off his own decision-making for several weeks, but when my client still hadn’t come to the end of his list-making, he took another opportunity offered to him.

I asked the client if he liked either of these two people, since both were highly qualified on paper. He said he had liked the first one a lot; he was ambivalent about the second one. What did he like about the first one? Irony again. He liked the fact that the man was sure of himself, decisive, optimistic, seemed confident without being overbearing, and had a lot of faith in the business.

At the time I met this client, he had only a few weeks left to make a five-year decision about his leased office space. If he were going to add a partner, he believed he would have to commit to additional space and a new lease. He had no idea how he was going to break free from what appeared to be an endless cycle of equal pros and cons so he could figure out what to do about the lease.

I asked him if he could bring himself to tear up the list. Just rip it up and throw it in the trash and start over, in a completely new way. The moment stands out in my mind because at first he glared at me and I thought he was going to fling himself across his desk and strike me. He had the look of a cornered animal. That lasted only a split second, though, and then his look turned to wonder. He picked up the pad and dangled it in front of his face, fanning the closely-written pages out before his eyes. He flipped the used pages over the back of the pad and felt their thickness.

“What would it do to me to give it up?” he mused.

“I don’t know,” I said. “You’d have to give it up to find that out. There’s no way to pretend through this kind of thing. You won’t be able to tear the list up unless you change your mind about it and really do stop thinking it’s the end-all and be-all of your decision-making. If you do change your mind about it, it won’t matter any more whether you tear it up or not, but it will be easy for you to do. It’s a paradox.”

He got up and walked around a few minutes, and then he sat down at his desk and ripped the list to shreds, piled them all up in the middle of the blotter, and scraped them into a trash can. “Well,” he said with a big sigh, “what’s next?” He acknowledged that even though he had just “thrown away his crutch (the list),” he felt stronger and more optimistic having done so, and that was surprising to him.

I asked him what he thought would be a good idea to do next. He sat for a moment, then responded that it had just come to his mind to call his first partnership candidate, the one he liked, and tell him he’d thrown away his list and decided to get a new start at thinking about the partnership. Maybe the person was still available, or would be available again.

What I learned from this exchange, up to this point, was that he was, at last, focused on the “real” question. As long as he was tied up with making his list, the only dilemma on his mind was how to get the pros and the cons to make sense to him so he would know what to do about a lease. This actually had nothing to do with the more important questions: Do I really want to change my business and have a partner? If so, what kind of partner do I want to spend my time with and share my work with?

The problem with analytic methodology is it distracts us from the real points. It directs our attention to the need to think about things and to generating a lot of thoughts, but it doesn't allow room for wisdom about what's important and what isn't and it obscures our clarity about what really matters. It keeps the dilemma alive, rather than lifting our thinking to transcend the dilemma. As soon as the client set his mind free from the list, he had a really novel idea – one that turned out to be perfect for him. Of course, again, the actual outcome wasn't what he thought it might be when he first had the idea.

He did call the first partner candidate. They had a great talk. The candidate reassured my client more effectively than I ever could that his thinking was on the right track, and he was still interested in pursuing the business idea, although he had subsequently started a different venture that would keep him from any immediate involvement. They began a series of discussions with each other that led to my client engaging a different partner highly recommended by the candidate he liked. Rather than leasing more space, he ended up moving into the new partner's leased space which was already large enough to accommodate their business, and less costly overall. They succeeded very well together, and within two years, the original preferred partner candidate joined them and they built their own building to house their growing business, which had started to expand in some totally new directions. This was a completely unanticipated outcome, triggered by a simple little insight, which came to the client's mind as soon as he dropped his stubborn attachment to pros and cons as the one and only one way of thinking about things. He calmed down and opened his mind to insight and insight entered.

Over the years, for me as well as for many people with whom I am fortunate to work, this simple shift in direction, away from details and complexity and towards the essential questions, has made a world of difference. It's become routine for us. If we find ourselves looking blankly at the same information and ruminating about it, we know we need to quiet down and let our minds take a new direction. Just recognizing the warning signs of non-constructive thinking is enough. It's like recognizing that you're going the wrong way down a one-way street. As soon as you see the back of one street sign on your right, where you should be seeing the front, you know to turn around. You don't have to keep going the wrong way indefinitely to be sure that ALL the signs are facing away from you.

Dilemmas are flat and arid. We can view them from any angle in our thinking and stare at the grains of sand and bits of scrub without any hint of which direction will offer us the quickest relief from the monotony of indecision. The ability to stop staring, rest and

reflect is the internal eagle that lifts us high enough to see the surprising landscapes beyond the dilemma and know which way to turn.

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