

“And” Thinking vs. “Or” Thinking

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2014, published in the July, Aug., Sept. 2014 issue of the “In CASE” Newsletter

You are selfish. So am I. We’re all selfish! Don’t you wish you could change that (both in yourself and in the people who work with you?)

Oh, it’s nobody’s fault. It’s our human nature. We look out for our unique interests more extensively than we do anybody else’s. The characteristic has been around throughout history!

We are always on the lookout for what might be a “win” for us. We may not necessarily require that another individual “lose,” but we sure don’t want to lose out ourselves.

Can we learn to consider the interests of others more intentionally? Sure! That’s the point of this article. I want to raise your awareness of how you as a leader can serve others, intentionally considering what might be a win for them. (You probably already do this a lot. Please don’t consider this article a condemnation of your behavior. Instead, consider it a mutual exploration of potential improvement!)

Why are the concepts of winning and losing so much a part of our lives? Despite any desires you might have to the contrary, competition is deeply ingrained in our culture. The structure of sports, elections, and legal proceedings dictates winners and losers. Examples of collaborative activities in which both parties win big are much less abundant.

Further, we tend to categorize. An object is either animal, vegetable, or mineral. Animals are vertebrates or invertebrates. Each individual tends toward being more of an extrovert or more of an introvert.

I invite you, as a leader, to reflect on the frequency with which your outlook is punctuated with “or” thinking. For example, “or” thinking occurs each time you consider how you will apply your energies. Will you work on this project or that one? Will you talk with this team member, or will you return the phone call to that important customer? Will you take some time off next week to spend with your family, or will you continue to press on with the never-ending demand challenging you at work?

“Or” thinking implies winners and losers. If you choose one option, you forego the opportunity to pursue others, at least for the moment. You might “count the cost,” but do you include lost opportunity costs?

Our obsession with winning is rarely an intentional choice. Our drive to look good (or at least avoid looking bad) lurks under the surface of our conscious awareness. Further, a strong implicit requirement for most of us is the protection of our well-being. It’s the source of the ever-present question “What’s in it for me?”

After reflecting on your own experience, can you agree that we all practice unconscious “or” thinking? We unintentionally limit our generation of options, and then we often choose the one that results in our short-term wins at the exclusion of others. Yet the effect of our habitual behaviors is that we often overlook options that might better serve important “others” in our lives--customers, colleagues, and direct reports.

How can we overcome this limitation? One solution is that we adopt conscious “and” thinking. “And” is a quite acceptable conjunction, often serving our co-workers a lot better than “or.” “And” tends to be inclusive, whereas “or” tends to exclude others. “And” thinking can result in a win for both parties; “or” thinking usually results in winners and losers, often with longer-lasting impacts than we’d prefer!

“And” thinking does not occur automatically. That’s why it has to be a conscious, intentional effort. Could you discipline yourself to willfully consider “What’s in it for her, him, or them?” Are you willing to take a risk and ask others “What would be of benefit to you?” It is a risk, of course, because once you ask, it puts in the mind of the other that you will go out of your way to seek ways to meet those interests.

I typically advocate that leaders build future leaders. You may want to develop your direct reports, but maybe you can't imagine conducting normal day-to-day operations at the same time. As the responsible leader, can you trust them to do as good a job as you when they lack so much of your experience?

Perhaps you are one of those individuals who is trapped in "or" thinking. "I can do it myself and know it will be done right, or I can delegate it and have to answer a million questions and wait forever for a result."

One of the characteristic improvements I find with my clients is that they could delegate better and more frequently. By doing so, they could achieve good results AND develop the skills of their direct reports.

Want a short lesson in delegation? Go to the archives page of my website (address below) and scroll down to "Delegating Well." Make yourself a simple form identifying these five elements of a good delegation, and you are ready to go! Have questions? Please contact me--no charge. I'd love to help!

If you are willing, please send an email with a clear example of when you consciously chose "and" thinking where it resulted in a far superior outcome than would have occurred with "or" thinking. Thanks!

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