

“And” Thinking vs. “Or” Thinking

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You are selfish. So am I. We're all selfish!

Oh, it's nobody's fault. It's our human nature. We look out for our own interests more extensively than we do anybody else's.

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 more consciously consider the interests of others? Sure! In fact, 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.

Why are the concepts of winning or losing so much a part of our lives? Because competition is so deeply ingrained in our culture. The structure of elections, legal proceedings, and sports dictates winners and losers. Examples of collaborative activities in which both parties win are less abundant.

Further, we tend to categorize. Objects are animal, vegetable, or mineral. Animals are vertebrates or invertebrates. Some individuals are trustworthy and some are not.

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 employee, or will you return the phone call to that important customer?

“Or” thinking implies winners and losers. If you choose one option, you forego the opportunity to pursue others, at least for the moment.

Having recently read Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking, I am strongly attuned to the “implicit associations” that exist in our minds. 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?”

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.

After reflecting on your own experience, can you agree that we all practice unconscious “or” thinking? We don't intentionally generate options, then choose the one that results in our short-term wins at the exclusion of others. Yet the effect of our behaviors is that we overlook options that might better serve our customers, colleagues, and direct reports.

How can we overcome this limitation? One solution is that we adopt conscious “and” thinking. “And” is a perfectly good conjunction, often serving our co-workers a lot better than “or.” “And” tends to be inclusive, where “or” tends to exclude others. “And” thinking can result in a win for both parties; “or” thinking usually results in winners and losers.

“And” thinking does not occur automatically. That's why we have to make it a conscious, intentional effort. Could you discipline yourself to willfully consider “What's in it for them?” Are you willing to take a risk and ask others “What would be a ‘win’ for you?” It is a risk, of course, because once you ask, it implies that you will seek ways to meet those interests.

In this column, I typically advocate building future leaders. You may want to serve your direct reports in that way, but maybe you can't imagine conducting the normal day-to-day operations at the same time. Over the next few weeks, I will show you some conscious “and” thinking, stimulating your creativity in how both can be achieved concurrently!