

CREATING GREAT CHOICES

A LEADER'S GUIDE TO
INTEGRATIVE THINKING

JENNIFER RIEL
ROGER L. MARTIN

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW PRESS

CREATING GREAT CHOICES

A LEADER'S GUIDE TO
INTEGRATIVE THINKING

JENNIFER RIEL
ROGER L. MARTIN

Harvard Business Review Press
Boston, Massachusetts

HBR Press Quantity Sales Discounts

Harvard Business Review Press titles are available at significant quantity discounts when purchased in bulk for client gifts, sales promotions, and premiums. Special editions, including books with corporate logos, customized covers, and letters from the company or CEO printed in the front matter, as well as excerpts of existing books, can also be created in large quantities for special needs.

For details and discount information for both print and ebook formats, contact booksales@harvardbusiness.org, tel. 800-988-0886, or www.hbr.org/bulksales.

Copyright 2017 Jennifer Riel and Roger L. Martin

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior permission of the publisher. Requests for permission should be directed to permissions@hbsp.harvard.edu, or mailed to Permissions, Harvard Business School Publishing, 60 Harvard Way, Boston, Massachusetts 02163.

The web addresses referenced in this book were live and correct at the time of the book's publication but may be subject to change.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Riel, Jennifer, author. | Martin, Roger L., author.

Title: Creating great choices : a leader's guide to integrative thinking / by Jennifer Riel and Roger L. Martin.

Description: Boston, Massachusetts : Harvard Business Publishing Press, [2017] | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017012026 | ISBN 9781633692961 (hbk : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Problem solving. | Contradiction. | Thought and thinking. | Decision making. | Leadership—Psychological aspects.

Classification: LCC HD30.29 .R53 2017 | DDC 658.4/03019—dc23 LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017012026>

ISBN: 9781633692961

eISBN: 9781633692978

The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Publications and Documents in Libraries and Archives Z39.48-1992.

Contents

| | |
|------------------------------------|-----------|
| <i>Preface: The Opposable Mind</i> | <i>ix</i> |
|------------------------------------|-----------|

Part One **In Theory**

| | |
|-----------------------------|----|
| 1. Integrative Thinking 2.0 | 3 |
| 2. How We Choose | 17 |
| 3. A New Way to Think | 41 |

Part Two **In Practice**

| | |
|---------------------------------|-----|
| 4. A Methodology | 63 |
| 5. Articulating Opposing Models | 75 |
| 6. Examining the Models | 107 |
| 7. Generating Possibilities | 137 |
| 8. Assessing the Prototypes | 173 |
| 9. A Way of Being in the World | 199 |

| | |
|--------------|-----|
| <i>Notes</i> | 221 |
|--------------|-----|

| | |
|--------------|-----|
| <i>Index</i> | 227 |
|--------------|-----|

| | |
|------------------------|-----|
| <i>Acknowledgments</i> | 239 |
|------------------------|-----|

| | |
|--------------------------|-----|
| <i>About the Authors</i> | 241 |
|--------------------------|-----|

Preface

The Opposable Mind

*There is an invisible strength within us;
when it recognizes two opposing objects of desire,
it grows stronger.*

—RUMI

In 2007, Roger wrote a book called *The Opposable Mind*. The title was a nod to that most useful of tools, the opposable thumb. Shared by humans and most primates, the opposable thumb is what we use to create tension against our fingers to grasp and manipulate objects. Similarly, the opposable mind is one that can create tension between ideas, using that tension to develop new answers to challenging problems. Roger called this practice *integrative thinking* and argued that mastery of it is what sets highly successful leaders apart from the masses.

In the book, Roger tells the stories of remarkable leaders like Isadore Sharp, founder of Four Seasons Hotels; Bob Young, former CEO of Red Hat, Inc.; and Victoria Hale, creator of the Institute for One World Health. Although these leaders shared little by way of context or background, Roger saw one powerful connection between

them: each of these leaders used integrative thinking to solve their toughest problems. These most difficult choices came in the form of an unsatisfying either-or choice: a trade-off between existing answers that were not good enough to truly solve the problem. Rather than choose between the suboptimal options, these leaders used opposing ideas to help them build integrative answers. The result of their thinking processes were new choices that creatively resolved the original either-or problem and produced new value for the world.

The leaders that Roger studied share “the predisposition and the capability to hold two diametrically opposing ideas in their heads. And then, without panicking or simply settling for one alternative or the other, they’re able to produce a synthesis that is superior to either opposing idea.”¹ In *The Opposable Mind*, Roger explored this “discipline of consideration and synthesis,” explaining what he believed these leaders had done to solve their toughest challenges. It was, he said, a way of thinking that contained within it four critical elements.

First, they expanded what was salient to a decision, taking more things into account when thinking about a problem. Second, they explored complex causal relationships, embracing the relationships between the salient variables. Third, they architected the problem so as to take the whole problem into account, structuring with discipline and purpose rather than focusing only on the piece-parts of the problem. Finally, they actively worked toward the creative resolution of unacceptable trade-offs rather than meekly accept them; before moving on, these leaders strove to gain new insight and a resolution of the tension between ideas.

Articulating this theory of integrative thinking was one thing. It was another to teach it. So Roger asked Jennifer to join him in his work, helping translate the theory to action and expanding from the (mainly corporate) executives profiled in *The Opposable Mind* to individuals in a wide range of organizations. Over the past decade,

together with some wonderful colleagues, we have engaged with corporate executives in various industries but also with undergraduate students, graduate MBA and executive MBA students, business managers, nonprofit and government agency leaders, teachers, and even elementary-school students. From each group, we have learned a great deal about the theory and practice of integrative thinking.

LESSONS LEARNED

We found, for instance, that the stories in *The Opposable Mind*, which had proven inspirational to readers, could actually be a barrier to learning. We also learned that integrative thinking is applicable to a much broader set of problems than we once imagined, by a much broader array of leaders. And we saw, as we had always hoped, that integrative thinking is not an innate skill—one you either have or don't have—but rather is a practice that can be cultivated over time.

The Stories

As we began to translate the book into lesson plans and courses, we found a troubling gap emerged between knowing and doing. Even for students who could easily recount the stories and who understood the tools at a cognitive level, it was often a struggle to apply integrative thinking to their own challenges and in their own contexts. In part, this was the effect of using aspirational leaders as our subjects; it proved difficult to understand how to translate the actions of, say, A.G. Lafley, then CEO of Procter & Gamble (P&G), to students' own contexts. Our students didn't work for P&G, and they weren't CEOs. The translation task, it turns out, was especially difficult when the story was both vivid and real. It was easy to get swept up in the details of the narrative, the characters, and the specific actions undertaken. The broader lessons could be overlooked.

In our teaching, we had to strike a more effective balance between storytelling and application. We have attempted to do that in this book as well. We still tell stories, because they're fun and instructive, but you will find much greater emphasis on methodology in this book than in *The Opposable Mind*. In that way, this one is intended to be a how-to book rather than a know-what book. We encourage you to work on your own challenges as you read and to engage in the short "Try This" exercises you will find throughout the chapters. They're intended to help you apply what you're reading in real time. You will also find templates at the end of many of the chapters, to help you structure these discussions.

Application

In *The Opposable Mind*, Roger argued that integrative thinking was a tool to be used in the face of trade-offs: those tough either-or situations that are a feature of every managerial career. Trade-offs are an element of almost every decision, but Roger argued that integrative thinking was best used when the trade-off in question was simply too painful to make; he focused on situations in which choosing one of the options wasn't good enough. And, indeed, we have seen integrative thinking used to great effect in these kinds of situations. What surprised us, though, was the extent to which integrative thinking has proven to be a better tool for generating great solutions to a multitude of problems, challenges, and opportunities—even those in which a truly painful and unacceptable trade-off wasn't part of the original problem construction. In those cases, reframing the problem as an either-or choice often shifts perspectives and changes the discussion in a way that makes new answers possible.

Then there is application in terms of the person making the choice. Many of the stories in *The Opposable Mind* feature CEOs and entrepreneurs who overcame unacceptable trade-offs to great success. This

focus on individual transformative leaders was useful from a narrative perspective: it made the stories clear, memorable, and powerful. But it proved misleading. Those profiled, almost to a person, would be quick to clarify that they made their choices together with their teams rather than alone in a corner office. Integrative thinking, it has become clear to us, is both an individual skill and a team sport. In our experience, applying the process of integrative thinking in a diverse team, rather than as an individual, almost always leads to superior outcomes.

An Innate Skill?

Finally, let's look at the notion that integrative thinking is an inherent skill. To be sure, the folks profiled in *The Opposable Mind* did not have the benefit of taking a course or reading a book to learn about integrative thinking. Integrative thinking was a problem-solving approach each developed in a unique way, over a lifetime of work and practice. But the fact that each leader came to this way of thinking without formal training does not necessarily mean that it was innate. To find out whether it could be taught, we needed to translate the idea of integrative thinking into a methodology, supported by a set of tools. Now, rather than a description of how successful leaders think, integrative thinking has become a process anyone can learn and practice.

This process makes up the heart of this book. It is a methodology for problem solving that, we believe, enables all leaders to leverage the tension of opposing ideas to create transformative new value. But before we get into the methodology, we also share some enriched theory that incorporates what we have learned from others who are thinking about decision making in different, but complementary, ways. In particular, we share principles from behavioral decision making and design thinking that have become increasingly influential on our work.