



# Choice

## OPPOSABLE THINKING IN AN OPPOSABLE WORLD

In a world that's ever-more polarised, **Karen Ellis** and **Richard Boston** encourage us to develop our capacity for opposable thinking to better navigate the tensions of a complex world.

We live in a hugely polarised world right now. We're being asked to choose between health and prosperity; individual freedom and collective responsibility; compassion and accountability; equality and focused investment; crisis and business as usual.

Each choice brings with it those who favour A and those who favour B. The higher the stakes or stress levels, the more passionately and irrationally people argue their case and the less willing they are to listen to others.

It's an environment that tests our capacity for 'opposable thinking' – a term we coined inspired by Roger Martin's *The Opposable Mind*. The more developed our capacity for opposable thinking, the more effectively we can navigate the conflicts and tensions in our daily lives – particularly when we find ourselves in complex situations that are continuously evolving.

As we argue in our book *Upgrade*, opposable thinking is one of four 'meaning-making' capacities that we rely on increasingly as the world around us gets messier. It's the capacity F Scott Fitzgerald was referring to when he defined 'a first-rate intelligence' as 'the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.'

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It's also the capacity we typically find hardest to truly develop – at least in the Western world. We generally understand it on an intellectual level, but we struggle to switch it on. Why? Here are two reasons:

1. For centuries Western culture has encouraged us to 'pick a side'. We've equated strength with taking and defending a position. Focus, goals, linear progress and persistence: all are presented as virtues. Reversing is anathema; changing tack is a sign of weakness. It's a narrative with numerous sources: medieval monotheism's focus on the duality of good and evil; cherry-picked messages from the classical Greek philosophers that focused on parts, not the relationships between them; and legal systems pitting one side against another.
2. Think you're immune? How often have you helped clients work diligently towards a clearly defined goal? Do you encourage others to adhere to their values more tightly and consistently, or hold them more lightly and questioningly than they currently do? Every value has its dark sides, after all. We're far more comfortable externalising polarities than looking within.

As we develop our opposable-thinking capacity, we become increasingly aware that the polarities [see panel] causing tension around us almost always also exist within us. In the past few months, most of us have experienced some internal tension between doing what's personally convenient and doing what's socially responsible. Most of us have said we believed one thing and then done the opposite, breaking our own 'rules'.

We've learned to loathe hypocrisy. So, we avoid exploring the uncertainties, inconsistencies and polarities within ourselves or our 'in group'. We focus our attention (and others') externally. We claim one side of the 'divide' as ours and find an 'out group' to brand as epitomes or champions of the opposing position. The higher the stakes and the more personally confronting that polarity is, the more blindly and passionately we defend the distinction between 'us' and 'them'.

Think you're immune? How many coaches do you know who believe the opposite to you when it comes to climate change or social policy? How well do your actions day to day show you've resolved the polarity between taking a 'nurturing/collaborative' approach to life on this planet and one that's more 'extractive/exploitative'? Notice that those labels are almost as polarising as 'good' and 'evil'? Who would even consider looking for positives in the 'exploitative' side of the debate?

A polarity is 'a pair of interdependent opposites – if you focus on one of those to the neglect or exclusion of the other, then at some point in time you dip into negative unintended consequences.'

*David Dinwoodie, Center for Creative Leadership*

### PROGRESS IN PRACTICE

Most tools compensate for a lack of opposable thinking, but do less to actually develop it.

If you've used coaching tools to help people work with dilemmas or polarities, you'll have seen some people take to them more easily than others. That's probably because they're operating at different developmental levels when it comes to opposable thinking. In *Upgrade*, we focus on four of these levels: our 'Level 1' is the benchmark most people in organisations have already reached.

Tools like risk-benefit analysis, polarity/dilemma mapping and line-ups do a really good job of helping people create a physical representation of the various opposing perspectives in the situation they're facing. What they don't do nearly as well is help the individual (or team) upgrade their actual capacity for opposable thinking.

An individual operating from what we'd call 'Level 2' will quite readily switch from 'either/or' thinking to 'both/and' thinking. They'll seek to tick everybody's boxes or craft a compromise. However, they'll probably still privately cling to their preferred position.

At Level 2, people are unlikely to go beyond a creative compromise to engage in the kind of 'Level 4' thinking many complex situations demand. These tools aren't enough to help them reinvent the entire narrative – rejecting the prevailing Western tradition that demands that we all pick a side – or gain buy-in to a way forward that will continuously and consciously evolve. They're also unlikely to internalise any work they've done with the tool. So, they're unlikely to apply the same mental and emotional processes to future challenges.

### SO, HOW SHOULD WE PROCEED?

You're already developing your own and others' capacity for opposable thinking – whether you call it that or not. We wrote *Upgrade* to help accelerate that development. One small step, though, is to step back from messy, emotive situations – perhaps pausing right here and now – and ask:

- What am I attending to? What's missing?
- In what ways am I polarising?
- What conflicts around me am I avoiding seeing within me?

When coaching a client, ask:

- What might I be inadvertently imposing on them?
- In what ways might I be polarising with them, perhaps by taking a side?
- Am I 'rescuing' them from the discomfort of facing an important polarity?

Rather than simply helping them resolve a polarity they're facing right now, help clients develop their underlying capacity for opposable thinking so they're better equipped to solve ever-more complex problems themselves. And let's all free ourselves from that old-fashioned nonsense of seizing a metaphorical hill, fencing it off and spending our lives defending it without ever exploring the rest of the world.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Karen spent 30 years as an executive coach and is now a management consultant with an increasing focus on adult development and meaning-making. Having researched all of the main theories in this field, she is determined to demystify and democratise these ideas and help others make practical use of them. Co-authoring *Upgrade* is part of that, as it captures the learning in a way that has practical application for people in organisations as well as other coaches and consultants.

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Richard is a psychologist who draws on a range of other disciplines to inform his work with individuals, teams and organisations. He has consulted across six continents, helping a diverse client base simultaneously enhance their performance, culture and contribution. He is MD of LeaderSpace, co-author of *Upgrade* and author of *ARC Leadership* and *The Boss Factor*. He also contributed to Routledge's recent *Practitioner's Handbook of Team Coaching* and co-wrote a Henley Business School report on the future of leadership development.

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