Integrative Synthesis Thinking

Idea In Short

Faced with two attractive but conflicting options, most leaders pick one and give up the other. Roger Martin, former dean of the Rotman School of Management, studied more than fifty successful leaders and concluded that the best of them do something different. They hold both ideas in mind, examine the tension, and build a new option that improves on each. He called the skill integrative thinking and described the capacity as an opposable mind. This article explains the idea, lays out a practical process for synthesizing opposing models, and shows how teams can use it without losing speed or discipline.

Strategy meetings often end with a vote between two plans. One side wants growth, the other wants profit. One side wants central control, the other wants local freedom. Each option has real merits, and each costs something important. Many leaders accept the cost as the price of choosing. Integrative synthesis thinking asks whether the choice is as binary as it looks. This article explains the idea, outlines a process for using it, and offers cautions that keep the method honest.

The opposable mind

Roger Martin built the concept from a long study of leaders. According to a profile of his work, he interviewed more than fifty successful leaders, sometimes for up to eight hours at a time, and looked for a pattern in their success.1 His central claim, set out in a 2007 Harvard Business Review article, was that studying how leaders think teaches more than studying what they do.

An abstract of the article, held in a management journal, describes the idea in terms of method. It suggests that many leaders develop a habit of thought that Martin calls integrative thinking, and that examining the way they think is more useful than copying their actions.2 The shift is subtle. Instead of asking what a famous executive decided, you ask how that executive framed the problem before deciding.

The title of his book uses a biological image. A research summary explains that the opposable thumb allows greater options and flexibility in moving objects, and that the opposable mind gives greater options and flexibility in decision making.3 A mind with this capacity can pick up two opposing ideas at once, which a less flexible mind cannot do.

Synthesis, not compromise

The key distinction in integrative thinking is the difference between synthesis and compromise. A compromise gives each side part of what it wants, and often leaves both unhappy. Synthesis looks for an option that serves the underlying goals of both sides better than either original plan did. A publisher's overview of the book puts it plainly. Successful businesspeople, it says, creatively resolve the tension between opposing models by forming entirely new and superior ones.4

Imagine a hypothetical manufacturer that debates whether to build premium products or low-cost ones. A compromise yields a mid-priced line that satisfies neither buyer. A synthesis might separate the product into a durable premium core with low-cost, replaceable modules, which serves both price-conscious and quality-conscious buyers. The example is invented, but it shows the pattern. The new option came from questioning the assumption that quality and cost must move together.

Leaders can recognize a promising synthesis by a simple test. Does the new option keep the main benefit that each side cared about? If one side's core goal vanishes, you probably have a compromise or a victory, not a synthesis.

An example from consumer goods

Martin's book tells the story of A. G. Lafley, who led Procter & Gamble. According to a University of Toronto magazine article, the company was back on track before long after Lafley applied the approach, and the article tells his story as an illustration of integrative thinking.5 The detail of each decision matters less than the habit behind it, which is the willingness to examine two competing models before choosing between them.

The example points to a recurring theme. Many corporate disputes pit two reasonable philosophies against each other, such as internal research versus external partnerships. Leaders who accept the either-or framing pick a side. Leaders who treat the dispute as a

design problem ask what an organization would look like if it kept the strengths of both.

Treat such stories carefully. They come from the author's selection, and a skeptical reader should ask how many integrative attempts failed. The stories are best read as demonstrations of a thinking process and not as proof of its success rate.

Where integrative thinking helps most

The method pays off in decisions where both options rest on strong logic. Choices between centralization and local autonomy, standard products and custom ones, or speed and quality all fit this description. Each side has evidence, and each side has been right in some earlier case, which is why simple debate rarely settles the matter.

A quick screen helps leaders decide when to invest the effort. Ask whether the decision will shape the organization for years, whether smart people disagree about it, and whether the team feels trapped by the choices on the table. When the answer to all three is yes, the time spent searching for a synthesis is likely to pay back. For small or reversible decisions, a quick pick and a fast review will serve better.

A five step process

Martin and his colleague Jennifer Riel later developed methods for practice. A Rotman summary of their 2017 book, Creating Great Choices, describes it as a guide that presents new ideas for putting the theory of integrative thinking into practice.6 The following process draws on that spirit and adds common facilitation practices.

Step one is to articulate each opposing model fairly, so that its supporters would say you captured their view. Step two is to map the causes behind each model, asking what has to be true for it to work. Step three is to look for the tension, the point at which the models disagree about a fact or a value. Step four is to generate options that address the tension in a new way. Step five is to prototype the best options and test them cheaply.

Each step guards against a common failure. Fair articulation stops caricature of the opposing side. Cause mapping keeps the group from arguing over conclusions. Prototyping stops the group from falling in love with an elegant idea that does not work.

Skills and mindset

The process only works with the right habits of mind. The first habit is tolerance for tension. People like closure, and an unresolved conflict creates discomfort that pushes them toward a quick vote. Leaders must slow the group down and keep the question open long enough for a better idea to appear.

The second habit is respect for opposing models. A research summary notes that a successful opposable mind can see the merits of its own models and also those of other people. If a team treats the other side as foolish, it will not study its logic, and the search for synthesis will fail.

The third habit is confidence that a better answer may exist. Teams that believe every choice involves a loss rarely look for a third path. Leaders can model the belief by asking, "What would have to be true for both of these goals to be met?" and by waiting for real answers.

Cautions

Integrative thinking is not magic. Some tensions have no creative resolution, because the goals conflict at a basic level. A company cannot both hire and not hire the same person, and a budget has a fixed size. In such cases, the discipline of studying the tension still improves the choice, but the leader must still choose.

Time is another limit. The process takes longer than a vote, and a crisis may not allow it. Use it for decisions with lasting effect, where an extra week of thought is cheap compared with the cost of a poor choice.

Finally, watch for the appeal of novelty. A clever synthesis can attract a team because it feels creative, even when it is more complex or costly than a simple option. Test every new idea against evidence, and be willing to select a plain solution when it works best.

- 1The Opposable Mind
- 2How successful leaders think
- 3Integrative thinking
- 4The Opposable Mind

- 5When opposing thoughts attract
- 6Creating Great Choices is an essential guide for leaders looking to innovate

Summary

Integrative synthesis thinking turns a forced choice into a design problem. Martin's research suggests that leaders who tolerate tension, study the logic behind each side, and search for a third option often reach results that a simple trade-off cannot. The method asks for patience, curiosity, and a willingness to question what causes the conflict in the first place. It does not replace deadlines or evidence, and it does not always succeed. Pick one current either-or dilemma, write down the strongest case for each side, and spend an hour searching for an option that keeps the best of both. Bring the result to a colleague who favors the opposite side, and ask what she would add.