The strategist's bookshelf

Synthesizing and modeling creative solutions

Alex Lowy

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Creating Great Choices: ***A Leader's Guide to Integrative Thinking***

Jennifer Riel and Roger Martin (Harvard Business School Press, 2017)

Every veteran strategist has had to wrestle with business issues that present as dilemmas, and business history is full of war stories about leaders who rightly or wrongly chose one of two daunting options and then met their fate, fairly or unfairly. A new book co-authored by Jennifer Riel and Roger Martin recounts a rarer achievement – leaders who confronted an unsatisfactory set of choices and synthesized a breakthrough alternative. Moreover, *Creating Great Choices: A Leader's Guide to Integrative Thinking*, offers to help us all learn how to create breakthrough solutions to dilemmas through a step-by-step guide to integrative thinking methodology.

Examining the intellectual and practical context

So I'm going to dig a bit more deeply into two subjects that make the book much more than just another how-to-make-better-decisions book. First, let's consider the intellectual context that gives legitimacy to the claim that it represents hard-fought insights that synthesize ideas flowing from several important and related sources. And second, I will offer my take as a practitioner on what makes the Riel and Martin four-step integrative thinking method powerful and original.

The history of this new book began ten years ago when Roger Martin published *The Opposable Mind*.[1] It introduced the idea that the best leaders approach problems with what he called integrative thinking as opposed to other more short-term, either-or approaches. Faced with unsatisfying trade-offs, rather than settling for weak compromises or abandoning one of the desired ends, these talented leaders found ways to make use of the tension and creatively forge syntheses with greater potential than either of the original options. The new models they synthesized were instrumental in achieving positive futures for their organizations. From rich examples ranging from the Four Seasons' founder Isadore Sharp to Red Hat's Bob Young, we learned how integrative thinking creates an enviable edge when facing wicked problems and strategic challenges. Now, drawing on a decade of executive education and consulting projects, the Riel and Martin book *Creating Great Choices* introduces a four-step method anyone can learn to apply

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integrative thinking: (1) Articulate the models (define problem and identify opposing models), (2) Examine the models, (3) Explore the possibilities, (4) Assess the prototypes.

What has happened in the past ten years that should make us believe this is more than just another recipe book? I can point to three noteworthy developments: growing evidence as to the power of dialectics in business strategy; a confluence of rich, interconnected thinking and writing by innovators in other disciples like design thinking and lots of applied testing and learning by Riel and Martin.

The intellectual history

Let's start with the dialectical premise underlying the original notion of *The Opposable Mind*. Its central premise has intellectual roots that go back as far as Aristotle and more recently to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Writing in the early 19th century, Hegel described an elemental and unstoppable progression of ideas and politics as a process of building and resolving tensions, a sequence of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. The dynamic and dialectical structure of dilemmas makes them at once thorny and hard to deal with and also full of creative energy and potential that is waiting to be harnessed. The challenge of course is knowing how to do this. Most us avoid these two-headed demons when we can, but there are rare executives who seem to thrive on them, and when they handle them well, reap enormous rewards. This powerful insight is at the core of the process Riel and Martin have developed and refined over the last decade and describe in *Creating Great Choices*.

When writing the *Opposable Mind*, Martin was not alone in wrestling with questions about what distinguished the best leaders and problem solvers from all the rest. Two lines of research and practice on this topic are of special interest, both amply referenced in *Creating Great Choices*. The first is design thinking, the creative blending of applications and insights from the world of product design to other areas of innovation. Ideas central to design thinking are immersion in the user experience before and during the search for solution; embracing constraints as enabling rather than as barriers and prototyping as a means of stimulating and testing ideas. While early rumblings about design thinking go back to the late 1960's and the writing of Herbert Simon, progress accelerated right around the time *The Opposable Min*d was published. Tim Brown's book, *Change by Design* was released in 2008 and Roger Martin's own foray into the field, *Design of Business*, was published in 2009. Inspired by the work of the firm IDEO and others, the essential set of methods and principles of design thinking were taking shape. Arguably, the sequence of activities and methods that comprise integrative thinking build directly on this work, and marry it with the dialectical model developed in *The Opposable Mind*.

A second important line of inquiry into the mysteries of human choice was making noteworthy strides around that time – what is now known as behavioral economics. Led by the work of Daniel Khaneman and Amos Tversky, the field offered a fundamental challenge to the notion of rationality in decision making, and identified a slew of biases that systematically derailed efforts. Important books in this sphere appeared in rapid succession – Ariely's *Predictably Irrational* in 2008, Thaler and Sunstein's Nudge in 2009 and Kahneman's own opus, *Thinking, Fast and Slow,* in 2011. Drawing on this research, Riel and Martin's integrative thinking approach recognizes the forces of irrationality in decision making and employs metacognition, empathy and creativity to understand and meet challenges.

Also supporting the new book's methodology is the extensive, careful and creative work done at the Rotman School of Business applying concepts from *The Opposable Mind* to solve clients' problems. This is a highly iterative process, and the experimenting and learning continues. The book is full of teaching and consulting examples from their work: they include coaching corporate leaders, teaching critical thinking to school age kids, launching hotel chains and helping managers design their operations. There is an impressive empiricism in evidence here, adding greater credibility and confidence to what is prescribed.

Putting the methodology to work in the field

Now on to the second point of interest; what makes the method powerful and worth careful study by strategists? Based on my experience, two parts of the integrative thinking process stand out as special and unique. The first is the core of Step 1, "Articulate the Models," where a problem is split into two essential possible directions that are worth following. Of particular interest, are those instances when the options are or appear to be in violent opposition

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with each other – for example, quality versus cost or short-term maximization of shareholder value versus long-term investment. The methodology Riel and Martin recommend is to build opposing models that can then be explored and held in contrast. The objective here is not to choose one or the other model, but to go beyond them. “Ultimately, integrative thinking is about leveraging the tension between models to create something new.”[2] This may seem obvious to the more experienced professionals, but in practice companies do it so rarely and poorly.

Why is it not done more often when companies reach an impasse? Practitioners confront many hurdles: time pressures push us towards accommodation or partial solution; pessimism often prevails, limiting openness to considering options and listening; processes become politicized, creating factions. In our pursuit of a viable solution, especially under pressure, it's easy to fall prey to unhelpful dynamics and biases. By inserting this one simple step into the decision process, a chain of positive effects is unleashed. First, the benefits of at least two interesting options are actively explored; then people can advocate openly and positively for what they believe in most and as this occurs, there is more listening and learning, which together help to foster creativity.

The methodology's second potentially transformative effect occurs in Step 3 of the process, “Explore the Possibilities,” where synthesis is required to creatively resolve tensions between the two models and move forward toward a solution. Achieving such insight-driven progress is much easier to write about than to do. Many practitioners probably have arrived at this point with clients or colleagues and felt the pressure mounting, while they wait and hope for inspiration to enter the fray. And with patience, good will and luck, it often does. But wouldn't we love to have ways to productively pursue new ideas, rather than feel the weight of the moment with no solution in sight?

Three exercises that can break deadlocks

Drawing on their extensive field experience, Riel and Martin offer three tested paths for promoting integration of the two conflicting models: (1) “The hidden gem” - creating a new model using one building block from each opposing model, while throwing away the rest of each model; (2) “The double down” - exploring conditions where a more intense version of one model actually generates one vital benefit of the other, and; (3) “The decomposition” - breaking the problem apart in a new way so that each model could be applied in whole to distinct parts of the problem. By introducing one of these three methods as a bridge here, you maintain forward motion at an often difficult and fragile point in the process. You can't remove tension and uncertainty entirely, or you risk deflating the very dialectical essence that drives integrative thinking. But keeping this in mind, these pathways to integration can be game changers that can sustain effort after tensions have been established and are having their desired effects.

In summary, *Creating Great Choices* is a welcome follow-up to the *Opposable Mind*, introducing a powerful and clear method that should be widely studied, one faithfully modeled on the behavior and tactics of exemplary leaders described in the first book.

Notes

1. *The Opposable Mind: How Successful Leaders Win Through Integrative Thinking*, Roger L. Martin (Harvard Business School Press, 2007).
2. *Creating Great Choices: A Leader's Guide to Integrative Thinking,* Jennifer Riel and Roger L. Martin, Harvard Business School Press, 2017. p. 101.

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