**How To Transform Dualistic Thinking**

*(adapted from Conscious Leadership in the Workplace: A Guidebook to Making a Difference One Person at a Time)*

*By Rosalie Chamberlain*

***Nothing is either good or bad but thinking makes it so.* William Shakespeare**

Duality and the “Box”

Duality presents a challenge to effective leadership. Dualistic thinking assumes a universe where there are only two contrasting, mutually exclusive choices or realities. This thinking is either/or, bad/good, negative/positive and has a powerful effect on our belief system and actions.

Dualistic thinking contributes to our fears and concerns by presuming the false restriction that no other choices exist. When we think this way, we are locked in, with little freedom. We may feel stuck in a situation, or as though we lack a sense of independence. Our opportunities, our choices and our willpower may seem stifled. We tend to react emotionally in such circumstances, sometimes not even aware of the reasons why.

People are absorbed in dualistic thinking on a daily basis. We evaluate the situations and people around us—and our own thoughts and feelings—on a binary scale. We often don’t allow for a spectrum of possibilities, and this is the primary way dualistic thinking becomes a roadblock in our personal and professional growth. By identifying only two choices, we close off our ability to see other paths forward.

Think about the various experts in business advice and personal fulfillment. How often are we advised by such people to “think outside the box”? Dualistic thinking is the perfect “box.” Instead of considering multiple ways we can succeed or ways our business and career can prosper, we are bouncing back and forth between the walls of our box. And, how often do we judge others based on a narrow lens and thus, metaphorically place them in a “box?”

If we believe that something is good or bad, we have assigned a judgment based on our experience, learning or habits. As with any bias (a predetermined belief or attitude about people, things and events), we are prejudging. Instead of evaluating each experience on its own merits, we evaluate situations or people based on the category our judgment places them in. A bit more about biases. Without our awareness or conscious control, biases shape our likes and dislikes, our judgments about people’s character, abilities, and potential. This is important information for anyone in leadership. Conscious leaders are committed to becoming aware of their biases and exploring their impact on decision-making, inclusion, strategy and development.

There is a danger for us in dualistic thinking that hampers learning to become more conscious leaders beyond that potential loss of insight and information and missed opportunities. We have “decided” what is, rather than being able to consider what could be. What if it is both/and? What new possibilities may emerge from that frame of thinking?

Separating Force

Duality is a separating force. It separates us from others and from our authentic self. Duality is not a friend to different perspectives because the attachment to one way versus another way is too powerful. This can be very limiting to you and to the people you lead. In today’s global society and competitive work environment, being open to the world of talent, perspectives and cultural differences can have a powerful impact on success.

Consider a participative leadership style that encourages collaboration and mutual respect. It involves making decisions once there is an exchange of ideas, a vetting of different possibilities. It sends the message to employees that they are able to have a voice at the table and contribute. Their idea may not be the final choice, but they will have had the opportunity to discuss their opinions and the team will work together to create options for the best choice. The choice may be the final decision of the leader. The leader can check the plausibility of proposals. There is mutual trust which is critical to having effective and collaborative teams. It is a multi-team effort.

Fear of differing perspectives is an interesting phenomenon. When you are in fear and duality, you really do not want to hear, and I mean *really* hear, another’s perspective. There could be a misconception that taking in another perspective to understand where someone is coming from will invalidate your own perspective. *Either* your perspective, *or* mine. This is a dualistic way of thinking. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Dualistic thinking encourages us to get territorial about our points of view. However, our work environments demand that we be more collaborative than ever before. An inability to negotiate multiple possibilities is a serious barrier to our own personal career and can present obstacles to creating collaborative teams. On a personal level, we can wreak all sorts of damage to interpersonal relationships by maintaining this dualistic approach.

How to Transform Dualistic Thinking

Be aware if you are only paying lip service to wanting to hear multiple perspectives at the table. Recognize how often you really consider these perspectives and even set your own perspective aside to determine if there may be another way to enhance the outcome the team is trying to achieve. Be curious about how you react to alternatives beyond your own. Just as I am asking you to not prejudge situations with dualistic thinking, also do not prejudge yourself. Recognize that your emotional triggers and unconscious biases may likely play a leading role in your thought processes. This type of recognition takes practice; we often need to be aware of these dynamics more than once to learn what we need to move forward.

There may be consequences or results that come with whatever decision you make. Sometimes those consequences may seem like a choice between what you leave behind versus what you gain, or there may be things that you enjoy with either choice. An important thing is to realize that it is often unrealistic to think that there will not be feelings about our choices. Thinking one choice is “right” only when everything is lined up perfectly or in a way you determine is perfect is limiting. Once you realize this, you can focus on what seems to be the best course of action for the situation. Stepping away from the idea that only one choice is “right” will free you up to see what may be most helpful and useful in a variety of options.

When we are not operating from a dualistic mindset, we can experience non-attachment to an outcome and invite and entertain possibilities and perspectives that have a powerful impact.

Duality blocks our progress. The more we can break through this either/or mentality, the sooner we are on our way to nurturing greater consciousness and success, in the workplace and in our lives.

Here are some tips to explore and work with dualistic thinking:

1. Listen to your either/or thinking.
   1. How do you recognize duality at work in your thoughts?
2. Listen for the one versus the other thinking.
   1. Notice if there is tension, anxiety or resistance to other perspectives and suggestions.
   2. Explore why this might be.
   3. Do you fear or believe in a negative outcome as a result of a different perspective or suggestion?
   4. Allow yourself to consider a neutral possibility.
3. Take the process deeper by discovering if there is a fear or belief of a negative outcome if your preferred way is not chosen.
4. Explore a middle ground.
   1. What if it is neither good nor bad, and it is just different—different from your usual way of being or doing?
5. While observing your either/or thinking, be aware if you are focusing on having a dialogue or a debate.
   1. In dialogue, you are interested in what the other has to say and they are interested in what you have to say. In a debate, it is a clear intention of either/or, right/wrong—that focuses on win/lose.
   2. How often do you have a dialogue, and how often do you have a debate?
   3. Can you think of a situation where dialogue would be the most useful type of communication?