

# Leadership for the future: What's different about dilemmas?

The “foresight to insight to action” cycle is a framework for detecting and making sense out of dilemmas – even if you cannot fully understand or control what's going on. This article helps you engage with the dilemmas in your world so you can “get there early” and compete in the present.



**When you come to a fork  
in the road, take it.**

**YOGI BERRA**

**THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE FOR** leaders is to learn to live with – even embrace – the tensions inherent in dilemmas. How can you prepare your mind to win when you are faced with dilemmas, to win what appear to be no-win games? Dilemmas disguised as problems are particularly dangerous. If you engage with a dilemma as if it were a problem, you may get there early, but you are not likely to win.

Most leaders understand the methods of problem solving very well; these methods have worked in the past, and they still work in some situations. For leaders, however, dilemmas have become more important than problems.

Many of today's senior executives are simply not prepared for the dilemma-laden environment of today, let alone tomorrow. As I work with senior executives, I find that they immediately recognize the notion of a dilemma and the challenges that dilemmas present. Few leaders would claim that their organizations are facing today's dilemmas optimally, while even fewer would claim to be prepared for tomorrow's.

Most of today's leaders were taught – many of them very well – to solve problems. Of course, there are still many problems to solve. The solve-and-run approach, however, is dangerous when applied to dilemmas. The expectation of a solution can lead to frustration and false urgency when the solution doesn't appear. The twisting lack of clarity implicit in dilemmas does not yield to the analytics of problem solving. The mysterious aspects of dilemmas remain puzzling, even after the analytics have been exhausted.

The language of problem solving inhibits problem solvers, who tend to assume either/or. Words take on a life of their own, with

built-in assumptions and baggage. We hear words, but we don't necessarily understand them – at least not right away. The world of dilemmas requires us to shift our words and our thinking, to embrace both/and. When we're dealing with dilemmas, we need words that can be used with flexibility. We need the ability to avoid taking our words too seriously. The words of problem solving are holding us back as we struggle to engage with dilemmas.

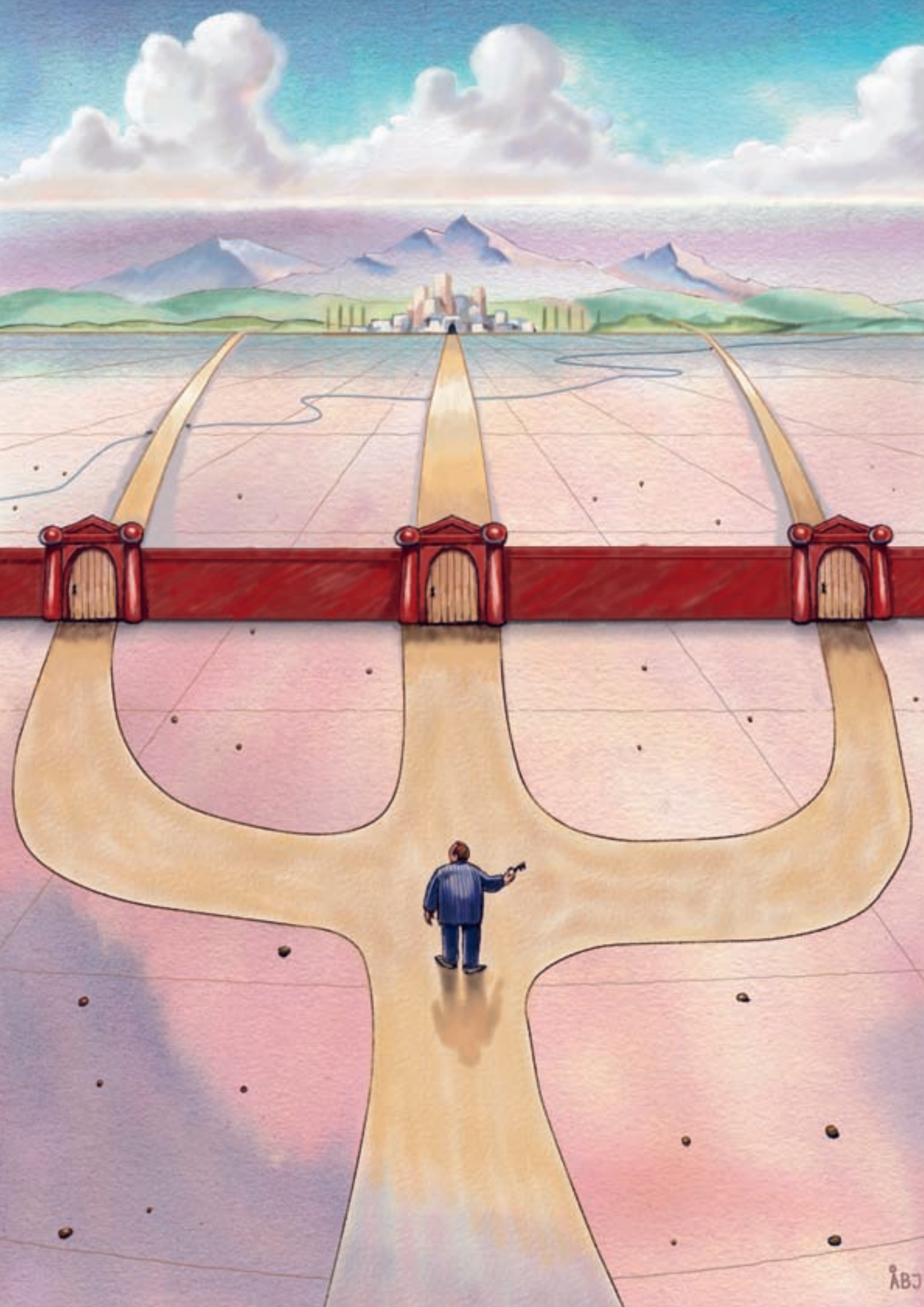
Problem solvers have been taught to move fast. Shooting from the hip feels good to them. Winning when you are faced with dilemmas, however, requires an ability to hold complexity in your mind without knowing too soon and without taking words or data too seriously. If you get there early, you've got time to sort out a situation. Some leaders act fast because they get there late and don't have the time to do anything else.

## **Getting there early**

With dilemmas, you need to listen for what's behind the words, what's beneath the data. We need the discipline and the restraint to avoid forcing a premature decision or trying to solve a problem that has a dilemma lurking inside. If you get there early, you've got more time to decide if you're dealing with a solvable problem or a dilemma. You need time to live with a new situation without becoming mired in it. Decisions still must be made in the world of dilemmas.

I was personally introduced to the world of dilemmas when I went to divinity school in 1967. Divinity school allowed me to understand that life is not a problem that can be solved by one simple religious answer or one conversion experience; it is a dilemma with which we have to be engaged.

I was lucky enough to attend the same divinity school as Martin Luther King Jr: Crozer Theological Seminary. When Dr King was at Crozer, race relations in the United States were deeply polarized.



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Dr King learned how to engage with the dilemmas of race relations without getting stuck in the polarities. He learned how to live in the necessary tension between judging too soon and deciding too late. Premature judgment in his world could lead to more polarization and sometimes to violence. Deciding too late would mean missing opportunities for change.

Dr King held strongly to his vision of a promised land, where all races would live together, but he had great strategic and tactical flexibility regarding how to get there.

Divinity school allowed me to explore world religions and to begin to understand the dilemmas of life that religions address. Religions have always wrestled with the basic dilemmas of life. The varieties of religions, however, have varied needs for clarity. The uncertainties and alternative approaches to life are apparent when you look across religious and mythic traditions, if you can avoid getting stuck in one point of view.

The “problem solvers” of the religious world are those who believe that theirs is the only way. These groups have solved the dilemmas of life, or so they believe. Rule-based ethics, however, can go only so far. Empathy-based ethics is required in a world that is so diverse, with so many different views of life.

### **Can you tell a dilemma from a problem?**

Modern dilemmas have evolved beyond the traditional definition of dilemma, which focused on an either/or choice between two bad options. Webster's defines a dilemma as, “a state of uncertainty or perplexity especially as requiring a choice between equally unfavorable options.” In today's complex world, choices are many (we face not just dilemmas with two choices, but trilemmas and multilemmas) – even as the context within which dilemmas are arising is becoming more intractable.

Based on our experience with leaders in corporations, government, and nonprofit organisations, I suggest the following characteristics for modern strategic dilemmas:

- Unsolvable
- Recurrent
- Complex and often messy
- Threatening
- Enigmatic and confusing
- Puzzling, with two or more choices – and decisions are still required
- Possibly positive (dilemmas with attractive but competing options are possible).

In our problem-solving culture, we are quick to write off as oxymoron's things that don't seem to go together. We get stuck, especially if we are constrained by time, on what we perceive as contradictions in terms without exploring deeply enough how apparent misfits or opposites might align to create new opportunities. The socialist market economy is certainly no oxymoron in China, nor is it a problem the Chinese are trying to solve. The socialist market economy is a way of life for them.

The difference between problems and dilemmas is not just a language thing, although language certainly plays a role and does

embody assumptions. Problems and dilemmas require different kinds of engagement processes. Table 1 (p. 44) summarizes the key shifts in leadership emphasis from problem solving to winning when faced with dilemmas. Getting there early requires an ability to make this shift toward dealing with dilemmas while still honoring the problem solvers of the world.

A problem is “a question or a puzzle that needs to be solved.” Typically, at least in current thinking, a problem has a binary (either/or) solution, or at least a clear solution. Problems are there to be solved. It is fun to solve problems, and you get a sense of accomplishment.

In a world of dilemmas, we still have many options for response, but usually the options aren't simple, and usually they don't come in pairs. Yes/no will not be enough. What's beyond the yes/no? What might be a third way, or a fourth, or a fifth? Expecting a binary solution can get you in big trouble in the world of dilemmas.

Most of today's leaders, and most of today's organizations, are designed to solve problems – not to win with dilemmas that have no single solution. Many methods of management have emphasized the quest for control. They have tended to be linear, sequential, and driven by time.

The prized leader in many corporate cultures is tough and fast: “I'm a better manager because I make tough decisions, and I can solve tough problems faster.” As a result of this very understandable and solid training, many of today's leaders expect to solve problems, and they are frustrated when solutions don't happen – no matter how well they organize, how well they solve problems, how hard they try, or how fast they run.

### **Psychological benefits of having answers**

Almost everyone likes an answer. Answers feel a lot more secure than questions. In the face of uncertainty or complexity, however, a fixed mind-set can close too soon and too rigidly. It will see only the familiar pieces of a puzzle – not the things that don't fit.

Fundamentalism is kindled and fueled by uncertainty. A voice inside says, “This is too much for me to handle” or “I need an answer, right now.” In today's world, fundamentalism has become a politically loaded word as more and more people move beyond the threshold of uncertainty where they can live comfortably. Naturally, they strive to relieve their own pain. Predictably, fundamentalism is growing.

How do you live comfortably in an uncomfortable world? From a psychological point of view, fundamentalist thinking can give comfort, even in times of great discomfort. Fundamentalism gives the comfort of certainty – but sometimes that certainty happens to be wrong.

Choosing a fundamentalist filter for your life can make things easier for you, at least psychologically.

But fundamentalism runs the risk of becoming dysfunctional at an organizational or societal level. If fundamentalism is wrong in dangerous times, it can be dead wrong. A fixed mind-set can lead to confrontation, and when fixed mind-sets confront one another,





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Table 1: **Problems versus dilemmas**

	<b>Problem solving</b>	<b>Dilemma sense-making</b>
<b>Frame</b>	Operational, with an emphasis on analytics in search of certainty	Strategic, with an emphasis on foresight and stories in a context of uncertainty
<b>Process</b>	Respond: consider options, but quickly reduce them to the two best possibilities	Reframe: consider options, but reframe to explore and hold complexity in your mind
<b>Decision orientation</b>	Decide – the faster the better – on the best possible solution; reverence for speed	Decide with cognizance that there is no solution, but figure out how you can win anyway; reverence for reflection, but you still need the courage to act
<b>Time orientation</b>	Oriented toward short-term relief; go fast	Oriented toward long-term success; go slow initially so you can go fast later
<b>Process</b>	Run to execute the chosen solution and avoid failure at all costs; fix the broken parts quickly	Prototype rapidly – “fail in interesting ways” – and learn from failures; try out many scenarios
<b>Belief orientation</b>	Faith that certainty is possible, with a trust in reason and analytics to get you there	Acceptance of uncertainty, with intuition accepted as a valid contributor to decision making in the face of uncertainty
<b>Best organization</b>	Chain of command, with consistent problem-solving methodologies	Decentralized network for flexibility, within a structure of strategic intent
<b>Best way to learn</b>	Learn by way of rule-based training in problem-solving methodologies	Learn by way of immersive experiences and principles-based simulation gaming
<b>Downside risk</b>	Judging too soon	Deciding too late

the result is usually polarized conflict and sometimes violence. From inside a protective bubble of self-righteousness, the world feels like a better place: volatility is calmed by a believable image of order, uncertainty becomes certain, complexity is repositioned as simple, and ambiguity appears to be resolved. In this world, even dilemmas look like solvable problems.

In the IFTF 2005–2015 Ten-Year Forecast, we included a driving force that we called “strong opinions, strongly held.” Consider a threshold of self-righteousness: it is one thing to believe that you are right but quite another to believe that not only are you right but that others are wrong. Unfortunately, large numbers of people globally are going to the dark side of the righteousness blade.

Of course, the world has always been complex and has always offered up dilemmas of life that people have experienced. Closed mind-sets are not new, but are the number of people and groups with “strong opinions, strongly held” increasing in number or in importance? My opinion is that there are more extreme groups today. Certainly, life’s dilemmas are more amplified today and spread more rapidly around the world. There are now many people, in both the developed and developing worlds, who cannot cope with the uncertainties all around them. What is clearly new is that almost everyone sees the extremes now, often in vivid color. A splendid array of media spread messages across the rich-poor gap – often not accurately but almost always vividly.

How do reasonable people whose minds are filled with questions engage with those who have only answers? How do organizations engage with extreme groups, extreme individuals, and extreme points of view? In a world where nobody knows – nobody can know – the answers, how can leaders at least be ready to engage with everyone?

### **Dilemmas as a source of inspiration**

Winning when you are faced with dilemmas requires a prepared mind. The first discipline is to resist jumping to premature conclusions. Unless you are in an extreme situation where you absolutely have to respond immediately, reflection is usually more useful than reaction. Leaders need an ability to hold, listen, and learn – while resisting the temptation to know too soon. In addition, leaders need the courage to decide when the time is right.

There are still many problems that have binary solutions, and it is very important that someone solve them. Looking ahead, however, most problems with binary solutions will tend to be tactical, important for successful execution but more appropriate for the operational people within a firm. Strategic thinking will be dominated by dilemmas. The senior leaders in the firm who create and implement strategy will be dealing with dilemmas most of their time.

Dilemma-management skills and arts are quite different from problem-solving skills, as you can see in a glance if you look back at Table 1. Expectations, methods, and outcomes are all different.

The ideal leadership state in emergency situations is somewhere between decisive and righteous, but the immediate challenge is to listen – to figure out what’s really going on. Once a leader is over

the righteousness threshold, it is hard to go back. Once a dilemma has been sold as a problem, it is hard to recast it as having no solution (that is, recasting it as a dilemma) without being perceived as having failed. Casting a dilemma as a problem is leading oneself into a corner with no easy exit on the good side of failure.

When trying to decide if a new challenge is a problem or a dilemma, you will do better to expect a dilemma most of the time. Mistaking a problem for a dilemma usually means only a mistake in time – because problem solving (when it works) is faster than dilemma management. Mistaking a dilemma for a problem can be far more costly.

### Chaotic and uncertain world

The events we most want to know about are those that have not yet happened: we would like to be able to predict the future, and we would like it to be a world of problems with foreseeable solutions. But prediction is not possible. Because the world is uncertain and chaotic, it is best to be prepared to respond to abrupt changes – even to expect them and practice for them through effective use of simulation gaming and immersion experiences.

Baby boom leaders are now beginning to experience a gap in expectations created by what used to work for them – as compared with the challenges of today, and especially of tomorrow. Younger workers are more likely to be comfortable improvising their way through dilemmas – rather than trying to solve problems that cannot be solved.

The mixed-generation firm is likely to have better development resources to deal with this future, if we learn how to tap those resources.

In the world of problem solving, there is usually one winning solution and one winner for each problem. One winner, one loser: a zero-sum game. But there is a special hope implicit in dilemmas: it is often possible to come up with win-win strategies – where there is more than one winner. Win-win solutions require cooperative approaches to resolution, and open-source strategies are becoming increasingly sophisticated and increasingly available. Cooperative models can work even when competition continues.

IBM, for example, used to sell primarily hardware and software in a competitive climate. In the current marketplace, IBM rarely sells hardware and tends to give away software. While it cooperates in the increasingly open-source and cooperative world of software, the company competes aggressively in the world of high-margin services. Often, cooperative strategies work best in the world of dilemmas.

### Using tuning levers

Fortunately, cooperative networking tools have been under development for more than 30 years now, and they are beginning to have practical impacts. This ongoing stream of research has identified a series of tools and frameworks for dealing with dilemmas, tools that include seven “tuning levers” for organizations and leaders:

- Structure (for organization and for cooperative exchange)

- Rules (and principles that guide interaction)
- Resources (available to fuel the organization)
- Thresholds (that are important to any of the players)
- Feedback (that might be provided to lubricate the process)
- Memory (of previous organizational learning, as well as decisions made)
- Identity (both in person and in online worlds).

Leaders need to understand how each of these levers can be used to tune specific aspects of their own organization.

Dilemmas are messy and frustrating, but they are also fertile ground for new insights and new inspiration, to create strategy that succeeds – even when you cannot solve them. Dilemmas must be held in one’s mind and exercised. Dilemmas must be understood through stories and experiences. It takes a story to understand a dilemma. Stories, an ancient medium, will become even more important in the future world of dilemmas. Dilemmas cannot be exercised by quick judgment or eliminated with analytics. The best leaders for the future will be those who thrive in the tension-filled stories between knowing too soon and deciding too late. As Voltaire said: “Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd.”

**Bob Johansen**

This article is based on a chapter of the forthcoming book *Get There Early: Sensing the Future to Compete in the Present*, by Bob Johansen. It will be published by Berrett-Koehler in San Francisco on August 20, 2007. The book focuses on using foresight to provoke strategy and innovation. It describes approaches to forecasting used by the Institute for the Future (Palo Alto, USA) over the past 40 years and includes a 10-year forecast, as well as many case studies of how forecasting has been used to improve decision making.



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