



## Helping Leaders Overcome All-or-Nothing Thinking

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In many of my ExPI insights conversations, I've become fascinated by a phenomenon that I've come to think of as "all-or-nothing thinking" or "binary thinking." What I've noticed is that many leaders tend to have a curious way of reacting to feedback that suggests that they may need to consider changing some of their behaviors. They react as if they are now being forced to choose between two behaviors that are polar opposites. Here are several actual examples from my coaching conversations:

- When receiving a relatively low score on items relating to sharing life lessons or personal stories in the facet of Authenticity, leaders sometimes say something like this: "So people are saying that they want me to come in and spill my guts—sharing my most painful childhood memory. And if don't do that, people will think that I'm a secretive closed book."
- A leader who had an over-strength in Integrity gave an example that highlighted this kind of thinking: "I was asked to make a commitment outside of work to an organization that matters very much to me, but I was fiendishly busy the following week, when they wanted me to come in. I suppose most people would just say 'I'm on vacation' and leave it at that, but that's not acceptable to me." She saw no middle ground between lying and sucking it up to overextend herself.
- Another leader was frustrated when her team rated her much lower on Inclusiveness than she rated herself. When we dug into it, it seemed probable that her strong action bias made her too impatient to do more than go through the motions of being inclusive. Attempting to rush the process along, she would "leave a trail of breadcrumbs" to the "right" solution. This led her to be viewed as manipulative rather than truly empowering others to have a voice. Asked what to do about it, she said, "Well, you *want* me to say that I should just let the team make these decisions on their own. But you're making me choose between



being a dictator who gives people no input or sitting back and watching while the team spins its wheels and makes no decision. I can't win either way!"

I could go on with examples across most of the model, but you get the idea. I would add that when I suggest that there may be middle ground between their stated absolutes, many leaders are stumped! Now why would that be? I have a few hunches:

- **All-or-nothing thinking may help us rationalize our reluctance to change.**  
By portraying the alternative to our current approach in such an extremely negative light, we can affirm the "rightness" of our current path. We don't need to change!
- **It's much simpler to consider a black-and-white view rather than a more nuanced view of one's options.** It's faster and easier to think of yes versus no, on versus off, and so on, while it can be overwhelming to process the fact that there are hundreds of degrees between the two extremes.
- **Many tend to focus on the hurdles rather than how to overcome them.**  
To be clear, there are almost always going to be obstacles when we want to change and grow. These could be a leader's internal habits or personality, or they could be external circumstances that add varying degrees of difficulty when attempting to make developmental progress. We can't just dismiss these; we have to deal with them. That said, I find that many leaders get stuck on cursing the darkness rather than lighting a candle. To be fair, we often can see the hurdle in front of us; it's harder to see beyond it.

So how can we help leaders overcome all-or-nothing thinking? Sometimes it's enough to get the leader to acknowledge that they're acting as if there are only extreme choices and then get them to generate a middle-ground option. More often, I need to model a middle-ground option for them. Here are some examples of all-or-nothing thinking with one extreme on the left-hand side and the other extreme on the right-hand side. In the center column, you'll see the "healthy middle ground" option.

Facet	Extreme #1	Healthy Middle Ground	Extreme #2
<b>Authenticity</b>	Maintain strict boundaries between the personal and professional with the downside of people not knowing what you stand for or who you really are.	Share stories about yourself but understand that you can choose what to share and how much to reveal. Sharing stories from earlier in your career or college is a good start.	Spill your guts by sharing your most personal and painful stories, making yourself and others uncomfortable.
<b>Authenticity</b>	Don't reveal what you're thinking and feeling: You need to think before you speak! Of course, this means that people may make negative assumptions about your silence—that you don't have an opinion or don't care, for example.	If you need more processing time to be ready to share a point of view, you need to know what's on the agenda and prepare talking points before meetings. Otherwise, the moment to share may pass you by.	Open your mouth and blurt out whatever comes to mind, even if that is out of your comfort zone, feels unnatural, and means that you risk missing the mark with your impromptu comments.
<b>Integrity</b>	Come across as an unreliable person who does not appreciate the importance of keeping your word.	Appreciate that circumstances change, and sometimes a rigid adherence to a deadline has real human costs and not much upside. Communicate with others to get clarity on whether the deadline is critical or more in your mind.	If you have committed to hit a deadline, adhere to it no matter what—even if you have to push yourself and your team to exhaustion.

Let's look at some more examples on the next page.

Facet	Extreme #1	Healthy Middle Ground	Extreme #2
<b>Resonance</b>	Be viewed as someone who lacks emotional intelligence and is completely out of touch with what others are thinking and feeling	Take a little more time to anticipate what others might be thinking, feeling, and needing from you, adjusting your message accordingly. Hit the pause button occasionally in meetings to play back your understanding or to check in with others about their thoughts and feelings.	Believe that you need to have lengthy heart-to-heart conversations and have mushy conversations about feelings, even if goes completely against your rational temperament and seems likely to make your stakeholders uncomfortable.
<b>Vision</b>	Come across as someone who is not visionary—who really can't articulate where we're going and why would be excited about it.	Realize that you don't need to be the source of the vision: Get ideas from others, sharing the best and giving credit. Talk about what motivates and excites you, but feel free to share it with the tone and voice that are true to who you are.	"Fake it until you make it" and attempt to transform yourself into a fiery, charismatic leader who goes off into seclusion and emerges mysteriously with big ideas.
<b>Inclusiveness</b>	Don't let others have input into decisions: You probably have the best ideas, and you don't have time for people to debate what to do endlessly. Let's get it done, even if people are left feeling disengaged because they have no voice.	If you need buy-in, you need build-in—giving people a say in important matters. But you also can set limits: You may tell people WHAT to do and let them determine HOW to do it... You may allow for debate and group decision making but set time limits for deliberation.	Give the lunatics the keys to the asylum! Give up all control over decision-making processes, no matter how long it takes for the group to make a decision and no matter how you feel about the quality of the outcome.

These are just a few examples of how all-or-nothing often surfaces. This tendency can show up in just about any quality of executive presence, and there's no question that it needs to be addressed to get leaders "unstuck" when it comes to taking action on a developmental need.

There is one last important note to consider here. Sometimes leaders will share a quandary that they feel about their data: "I can see that people want more of the \_\_\_\_\_ facet from me... but if I change my behavior, won't I be seen as inauthentic because I'm not being true to who I am? After all, Authenticity is one of the facets of the model!"

This is a common anxiety and not an unreasonable one. The key is that we need to find a middle-ground option that seems completely consistent with who the leader is. At a recent program, one woman who was working on improving Resonance said, "I'm more of a thinker than a feeler, and I work in a male-dominated environment. If I start going around saying, 'How do you *feel* about x...?' then that's going to feel weird for me, and I can't the guys I work with reacting well to it."

With plenty of men in the room, we opened up the question to them: Did they see emotions as relevant to their roles? Yes, they did: If people are feeling frustrated, resentful, or cynical about a proposed change, that needed to be addressed. "Fine," the woman said. "But how I could I ask questions about emotions without it seeming all touchy-feely." After some discussion, the consensus from the room was this: "Ask the guys, 'So what's your gut reaction to this?'" She was delighted: That felt like a comfortable question for her to ask to surface emotions, and a bunch of guys similar to her stakeholders had just endorsed it.

There is always a middle ground we can find that allows us to amplify a quality of executive presence without feeling fake or phony. We just have to remember that the answers to some of important questions are not simply yes or no. It's always multiple choice.