Learning in the Connected Economy: About Dilemma Theory

Introduction
Theories grounded in observable, recordable, and repeatable facts are the basis of scientific study. The important point about scientific theories is that they make sense of a series of observations, or experiments. Within the scientific community the limitations of these theories, and the rigour with which experiments are conducted is commonly understood. In effect, scientific practitioners have a common vocabulary.

However, lay people often find the subtleties of theories or the fine conditions under which they operate difficult to appreciate. They do not share the same vocabulary as the scientists. This is why many people find scientific theories boring, “too academic”, impractical or one-dimensional.

Even between academic fields there is considerable misunderstanding. The medical doctor does not always understand the lawyer, the molecular biologist has difficulties in comprehending the argument that the economist is trying to make and so on. One does not need a different national culture or language for misunderstandings to take place. It can occur through a lack of a shared vocabulary and also shared values. What is of great interest and significance to a particle physicist is not likely to be the same for an anthropologist.

Similarly it is often the case that any given theory or formula is true under very specific circumstances, for example in laboratory conditions. But it is often difficult for the lay person to appreciate the subtle effect of sample sizes, dependant variables, or carbon-dioxide levels during an experiment, and thus to determine whether the theory is generalisable. When it comes to daily issues, we are talking about “social sciences” (as well as social theories), and here, more often than not (assuming that one is using a theory in the first place), we are interested in the practicality of the theory, and the concrete “use” of it.

There has been a tendency in recent years, particularly in the business world to develop more general theories, that attempt to ‘speak the same language’ as the average business person. Such theories take into account the difficulties, uncertainties, tensions, and dilemmas that are constantly present in our everyday lives, as business people, teachers, students or parents. These theories attempt to be practical in human terms to value the whole but also to reveal how its parts are
organised, consider the organisation and the individual and analyse the text in its context. Whilst these theories often have an innate, powerful appeal they suffer from not being testable in the way that true scientific theories are. Thus their proponents can never be quite disproved, which is why many academics do not count these as proper theories. In effect their success, or truth even, is measured by the practical benefits they bring to individuals or organisations and their uptake.

Key proponents of such theories have been Charles Handy (author of The Age of Paradox/The Empty Raincoat), North-American strategy gurus Gary Hamel and Henry Mintzberg and Stephen Covey, (author of the world-wide best-seller The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People). This paper looks at the work of British management guru Charles Hampden-Turner, who has devoted much of his life to the investigation of complementarities, tensions, uncertainties and dilemmas. This paper aims to elaborate Hampden-Turner’s Dilemma Theory further.

Dilemmas and Paradoxes: what and why
From the very beginning life has had a paradoxical element to it. There have always been imponderables. Everyone knows the old dilemma of the chicken and the egg. Which came first?

In organisations and in the lives of individuals each day brings up various problematic situations and choice combinations. Currently, the dilemmas we face are becoming much more complex and difficult to manage. The Internet, for example, has assisted in the creation of virtual organisations, which lack both physical location and tangible presence. Organisations have become much less mechanical; cause-and-effect linkages harder to foresee; intangible elements in business seem to be even more important than tangibles. In short, everything around us has become much more equivocal, or ambiguous. This causes anxiety, which is apparent if we consider the positive and negative connotations of our language: equilibrium, linearity, stability, order versus disequilibrium, non-linearity, instability, and disorder. Yet, it is important to remember that there is no order without disorder, no stability without instability, no change without continuity, no rules without exceptions, no risking without securing the proceeds of those risks, no individuality or personal gain without satisfying a community. Many phenomena come to us in “pairs” of opposing values, or dilemmas, from the Greek meaning “two-propositions” which appear to be seemingly in conflict. As this paper will explain, both “propositions” should be seen as equally important and positive.
Beyond Compromise

Imagine you are a journalist writing about a restaurant run by a friend. The food is awful. Should you say so in your review?

Few things in life are clear-cut, either / or, or black and white. Therefore, it is important to consider our thinking processes, and the ways we “manage” dilemmas. In organisations a common scene is two groups arguing across the table, both defending their respective points of view. The trick in these situations is not to compromise (where both parties end up losing), but to manage the dilemma. So, in the case of the journalist, s/he is under pressure to write an article. There is a professional duty to tell the truth versus a duty of loyalty to consult with your friend on ways to improve the food. It may not be the first thing that comes to one’s mind, but it is possible to write the article in a way to satisfy both obligations: good journalism and supportive friendship.

Dilemma theory does not argue that individuals and organisations face standard dilemmas; nor does it offer standard solutions. Dilemma theory urges to view the world through underlying polarities, or opposing values: competition versus co-operation, differentiating versus integrating, order versus chaos, dependence versus independence, to name a few (many more become apparent during the course). Instead of regretting and complaining about the paradoxical nature of life, dilemma theory presents a logic of dilemma resolution in which both one value and its opposite are integrated, or reconciled, to create synergy.

Steps Towards Reconciling Dilemmas

With the above in mind, balancing opposing values and/or propositions becomes crucial. Philosopher E.F. Schumacher once wrote: “Some people always tend to clamour for a final solution, as if in life there could ever be a final solution other than death. For constructive work, the principal task is always the restoration of some kind of balance.” Hampden-Turner, the father of Dilemma Theory, likes to quote F. Scott Fitzgerald: “The test of a first rate intelligence is to hold two opposed ideas in your mind at the same time and still retain your capacity to function. You must, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and still be determined to make them otherwise.”

Throughout his work, Hampden-Turner uses cartoons, as well as simple value templates, to illuminate the issues in question, one of which is illustrated below. They both serve a serious purpose albeit in a humorous way. The cartoons often reflect cultural stereotypes, polarising values.
- a human tendency of which we are all well aware, and guilty. Thankfully, the realities frequently lie in the ground between. In the figure below, opposing values are represented by A and Z. One can be top-heavy (position 10/1) in preferring value A, or lop-sided (position 1/10) in preferring value Z. It is also possible to compromise (5/5), with mutual frustration, or achieve synergy (at 10/10). The numbers are purely for convenience, because one never “arrives,” or concludes, but tries continuously to improve and to learn. It probably goes without saying that evolving from compromise to higher levels of integrity, or what Hampden-Turner calls reconciled value, is not the easiest of tasks. This requires creativity, free association and spontaneity, and it can be learned.

Traffic lights present us with an excellent example. In itself, a light stuck on red (e.g. 1/10) or green (e.g. 10/1) is not just useless, but down-right dangerous. The yellow light, again, displays a compromise but does not offer a viable solution. What regulates traffic and saves millions of lives is the difference between “stop,” “be careful” and “go,” red, yellow, and green, and the constant movement between these. Those who are obsessed by either extreme will perish. Compromising may prove to be helpful for a while, but not in the long-run.

If we speak of the two “horns” of the dilemma, it is important to understand that each horn always contains the other horn in the latent form. Thus even dichotomies such as good versus bad should be seen as virtuous clashes because we frequently learn (good) best from our mistakes (bad). Once
again, it is in the space between opposing positions that movement and dialogue can take place, and communication, empathy and creativity can be fostered. Graphically this movement can be depicted with the help of a helix making its sequential progress toward the “top-right” corner and upon both axes of the dilemma.

**Conclusion and Further Reading**

- Dilemma stands for “two propositions” which appear seemingly in conflict;
- Dilemmas can be framed / charted so that polarities are indicated on two axes;
- Dilemmas should be reconciled (win-win) rather than compromised (lose-lose) to achieve synergy (Greek for syn-ergo, “to work together”);
- Dilemmas should be seen as wave-forms whereby the movement (which is depicted with a helix) between the two polarities becomes the crucial issue.


**Other sources**


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