Editor’s Note: Bob Johansen’s new book Get There Early: Sensing the future to compete in the present (Berrett-Koehler, 2007), is a sort of Baedeker’s to the future for corporate executives. Dee Hock’s “Chaordic Age” has entered the common idiom: the future will be a mixture of chaos and order, though it often seems the order seldom peeks through the clouds. At this point, we all agree that everything we have ever known is in a Waring blender set to “Puree.” That knowledge scarcely helps when we have to plan for the future, and set up organizations to adapt to the unknown.

Certainly, the book is highly practical. To brace for the future, it tells you whom to hire, how to structure your organization, and so on. The how-to’s contained therein do not lend themselves to the Viewpoint format, and so this edition excerpts from Chapter 4, and deals with the crucial difference between “dilemmas” and “problems” in the context of future planning.

Know these two key points before proceeding:

1. **VUCA**: The acronym for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (think Iraq) as taught at the Army War College, applies to business and describes its future dilemmas.

2. **Foresight to Insight to Action**: These three processes, in series, are essential to developing forecasts. Foresight is heavily dependent on sensing and intuition. Insight makes sense of foresight. Action is the desired result. You must hit all three steps, in that order.

Yesterday’s executives were Men of Action. See a problem and shoot it. Tomorrow’s leaders face something much different—dilemmas, not common problems—and they must go slow to go fast.
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. It is debatable whether we have more dilemmas now than we used to (each generation seems to feel that it has the most complex and challenging of times), but there is no debate that there are many dilemmas now. 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 dilemmas.

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. An expectation of solution can lead to frustration and false urgency when a 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. Many of today's senior leaders must step back and learn another approach—if they have the discipline and humility to do so. Getting there early buys you the time to look around, to sense what's going on.

The language of problem solving inhibits problem solvers, who tend to assume either/or. 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. It is so tempting to “know too soon,” to assume that the comforting words and methodologies of problem solving will get us through. They won’t.

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 shoot from the hip because they get there late and don't have the time to do anything else.
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 become mired in it. Decisions still must be made in the world of dilemmas.

High-performing successful baby boomers are often exquisite problem solvers. Indeed, it was a baby boom leader who came up with the slogan “You’re either part of the solution or you’re part of the problem.” [Editor’s note: Eldridge Cleaver, 1968]. But what if there are no solutions? What if the “problems” don’t go away?

When Martin Luther King was a student at Crozer Theological Seminary [Editor’s note: author Bob Johansen attended the same school], race relations in the United States were deeply polarized. 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.

Looking back at the civil rights movement that Dr. King inspired, we can see that polarization was everywhere (on all sides), and there were milestone moments where a single act or event—that could change the course of events. 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. Dr. King listened, reflected, and prayed in order to gain a deep understanding of the situation. Racial relations was not just a problem to be solved for Dr. King, it was a complex series of dilemmas that required great discipline, a clear vision, and a strategy for moving forward. He had to avoid knowing too soon, but he still had incredible courage to act at critical moments.

For me, going to Crozer was a changing point in my life. 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. The evangelists who tried to convert me in college were religious problem solvers, probably with the best of intentions but with little understanding of the complexities of the world.
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 “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. The Wikipedia definition of dilemma questions the traditional definition with its focus on two equally bad choices: “Many modern dictionaries consider this restriction needless and allow the word to be used colloquially to refer to a difficult situation with any number of choices.”

Based on our experience with leaders in corporations, government, and non-profits, 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 oxymorons things that don’t seem to go together. I have a vivid memory of my first morning in China, reading a local newspaper that referred to the Chinese “socialist market economy.” The words jumped off the page at me. In the United States, we tend to think of either socialist or market economies. The Chinese, however, say “socialist market economy,” and they really mean both, not either/or. The Chinese socialist market economy is becoming much more relevant to companies from the United States and other parts of the world as they become engaged in China. In the West, we think either/or, but in China it is perfectly normal to think with ambiguity about the socialist and market forces. Sometimes one must be satisfied with partial or ambiguous answers.

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 together 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 relentless search for an absolute answer can paralyze a leader, delay a decision, or even lead an organization in entirely the wrong direction.

The difference between problems and dilemmas is not just a language thing, although language certainly plays a role and language does embody assumptions. Problems and dilemmas require different kinds of engagement processes. Table 1 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. As we’re taught by dictionaries and our modern culture, problems feel like they “need to be solved.”

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 problem-solve—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. “Organization man” was an ideal: the human who learned to live and problem-solve within clear linear organizational structures.

The ideal manager today, 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 (which used to work in most organizations and still works in the more operational or mature parts of some), 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 problem-solve, how hard they try, and how fast they run.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>Problem Solving</th>
<th>Dilemma Sensemaking</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Operational, with an emphasis on analytics in search of certainty</td>
<td>Strategic, with an emphasis on foresight and stories in a context of uncertainty</td>
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<tr>
<td>Initial Goal</td>
<td>Respond</td>
<td>Reframe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consider options, but quickly reduce them to the two best possibilities</td>
<td>Consider options, but reframe to explore and hold complexity in your mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision Orientation</td>
<td>Decide—the faster the better—on the best possible solution</td>
<td>Decide with cognizance that there is no solution, but figure out how you can win anyway</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Reverence for speed</td>
<td>Reverence for reflection, but you still need the courage to act</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time Orientation</td>
<td>Oriented toward short-term relief</td>
<td>Oriented toward long-term success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Go fast</td>
<td>Go slow initially, so you can go fast later</td>
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Process
- 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

Belief Orientation
- 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

Best Organization Structure
- Chain of command with consistent problem-solving methodologies
- Decentralized network for flexibility within a structure of strategic intent

Best Way to Learn
- Learn by way of rule-based training in problem-solving methodologies
- Learn by way of immersive experiences and principles-based simulation gaming

Academic Roots
- Engineering and psychology
- Life sciences, anthropology, and comparative religions

Downside Risk
- Judging too soon
- Deciding too late

To be concluded next week.

About the Author:
Robert Johansen has worked for more than 30 years as a forecaster. Focusing on the human side of new technologies, he was one of the first social scientists to study the human and organizational aspects of the Internet. He also has a deep interest in the future of religion and values.

Dr. Johansen served as Institute For The Future’s president from 1996 to 2004. Still on IFTF’s board, he now spends most of his time with IFTF’s sponsors, engaged in writing, public speaking, and facilitating top-executive workshops across a wide range of industries.

He is the author of six previous books. A social scientist with an interdisciplinary background, Dr. Johansen holds a B.S. degree from the University of Illinois, which he attended on a basketball scholarship, and a Ph.D. from Northwestern University. Also, he has a divinity school degree from what is now called Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, where he studied comparative religions.
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