



## TOOL | THE HORNS OF THE DILEMMA

Complex issues often involve entangled challenges and possibilities that are not intuitively obvious and involve paradoxical-yet-complementary forces. When we frame these possibilities as “either-or” choices we unintentionally contribute to their intractability.

### OVERVIEW

The “Horns of the Dilemma” tool helps to reframe – and recognize – the competing dimensions of a complex issue so we can work to reconcile them. When groups are able to do this, they open up space for creativity, innovation and new ideas. When we intentionally articulate the “good” or benefit of each element of our shared dilemma, we are better able to find a path forward that honours and attempts to reconcile the value of both “horns.” Our challenge is often posed as a “wicked question.” A question is ‘wicked’ if it articulates the embedded and often contradictory assumptions we hold about an issue, context or organization. Wicked Questions make it possible to expose safely the tension between espoused strategies and on-the-ground circumstances and to discover the valuable strategies that lie deeply hidden in paradoxical waters.

### HOW-TO

**Step 1** – Individually, , and then in small groups, generate opposites or paradoxes that are present in your work using the following format:

*“How can we accomplish \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ simultaneously?”*

**Step 2** – Share the small group questions with the whole and choose the most powerful ones to refine

*“If I had 60 minutes to solve a problem and my life depended on it, I’d spend 55 minutes determining the right question to ask. Once I got the right question, I could easily answer it in 5 minutes.”*

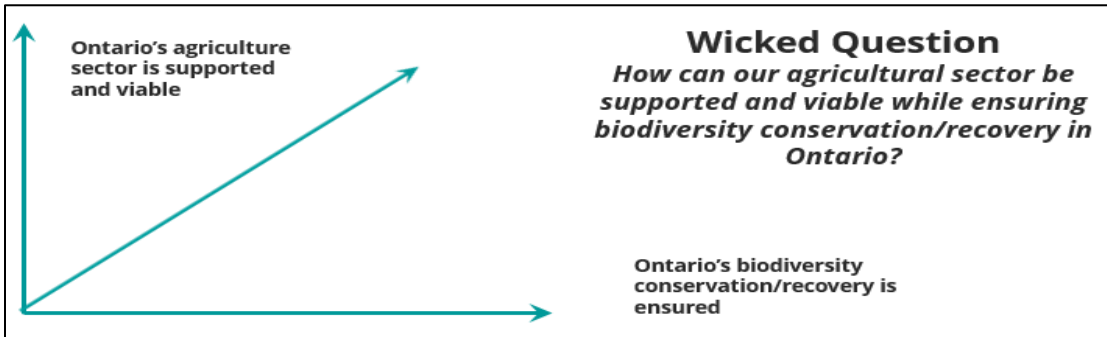
*- Albert Einstein*

### TIPS & TRAPS:

- Make sure that participants express both sides of the paradox in an appreciative form: “How is it that we are \_\_\_\_ and we are \_\_\_\_ simultaneously?” and not in opposition of each other
- Avoid nasty questions that appoint blame or are unbalanced on one side. Here is an example of a nasty question: “How can we focus on our customers when we are forced to spend more and more time on the headquarters’ bureaucracy?”
- Avoid data questions that can be answered with more analysis
- Draw on field experience; ask, “When have you noticed these two things to be true at the same time?”

**Source:** Dr. Frances Westley

Sample “Wicked Question” that emerges from articulating each “horn” of our dilemma as a good:



Explore the “Horns” of Your Dilemma to Craft Your “Wicked Question”

**HORN #1**  
*Articulate this as a positive goal or aspiration*

**ARTICULATE YOUR “WICKED QUESTION”**  
*“How can we accomplish \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ simultaneously?”*

