LEADERSHIP

When Either-or Is Neither-nor:
Finding the Third Option

B. Kim Barnes
THE INFLUENCE GURU

Framing a decision as a binary choice simplifies it, and limits it. There is almost always a third option called "What could I do instead?"

We are often faced with a dilemma regarding choice. Should we go left or right? Choose a salad or a dessert with a meal? Accept or refuse a party invitation? Often, things are framed for us (or by us) as a binary choice. Yes or no. Forward or back. True or false.

That binary choice simplifies our decision-making, but it also limits our possibilities. Do we give up everything we like about B in order to choose A? Do we accept that there are only two options for this decision? And what if we don't like either of them?

Sometimes there are realistic limits; there are only two candidates with a chance of winning an office – and we don't want to throw away our vote. We may not like either of the options, but we will support the one our colleagues, family, friends, "tribe" are all in for and we don't actually hate.

But most of the time, framing something as an either/or choice may be appealing, given the busyness of our lives or even a certain intellectual laziness. We may like being part of the decision-making process but haven't explored the full range of options. When we aren't enthusiastic about either one, we will choose "the lesser of two evils." We don't want to be seen as the one who complicates a simple process.

There are two basic ways to resolve this dilemma. We can refuse to choose and consciously step away from the issue or situation – or we can generate alternatives. Opting out means giving up the chance to influence decisions and choices that may be important in our own lives and those of our family, or our close friends or colleagues. Generating alternatives means taking the risk of alienating or angering people with a stake in one or both alternatives or in a quick result. It means speaking up when it might be easier to stay silent.

When it comes to opting out, the only way to do so with few or no regrets is to believe that you can accept whatever result that others choose. In other words, knowing that this is something we don't actually care much about or something we are open to others deciding. And there are certainly going to be many instances where that is true. Making a conscious choice not to participate in a decision may be wise – for example, managers may wish to step away from certain decisions

that their employees will have the responsibility for carrying out. This can happen when we trust those we are deferring to – either because we believe that they will make a wise decision, or because they have earned our vote of confidence.

But when we want to be and ought to be part of the process, we don't have to limit ourselves to the options that are presented to us. When you are part of a group or team working on an important decision and you think the group is moving too quickly toward one of a very few options, you can say, "Thanks," followed by:

QUESTIONS THAT OPEN UP OPTIONS

- "What other options do we have?"
- "What else might work?"
- "How will this choice affect our future options?"
- "Let's come up with 10 possibilities and then narrow them down."
- "What if that won't work? What else could we try?"
- "How can we combine some of the aspects of ideas we like?"
- "How about this alternative?"
- "What are we not considering?"
- "Before we decide, let's take a break and come back with more ideas…"
- "Let's give your proposal a try and keep in close touch to see how it goes."

In your personal life, notice when you have narrowed down your choices to a very few options. Should we buy this house or that one? Should I accept this job or not? Which of these two people should I choose as my "plus one" for this event? It's obvious, when you stop to consider it, that in each case, there is a third option called "What could I do instead?" The questions above can help.

What might stop you from considering that third possibility? Often, it's a matter of time and/or habit. We may only focus on two or three options so we can check the box and move on, even though there may be better choices out there. At times, we simply accept the way the decision is framed and don't move beyond that. At other times, we may not be aware that we have the power to reframe the choice. You may be concerned about upsetting others you are close to by making a choice that is new or unusual for you or by moving beyond boundaries of what is considered "normal" or acceptable among your peers or reference group.

Accepting the responsibility – and the privilege – of expanding options, whether as part of a group or independently – means growing as an influencer, a leader, a serious and responsible person. Make these questions part of your normal decision-making process.

There is a third option called "What could I do instead?"

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B. Kim Barnes

Founder of **The Influence Guru**, Kim Barnes is a coach, facilitator, and author with more than forty years of experience in leadership, influence, and organization development. She was a founder and, for many years, CEO of Barnes & Conti Associates, and developed or co-developed programs including *Exercising Influence*, *Inspirational Leadership*, *Intelligent Risk-Taking*, *Consulting on the Inside*, and *Managing Innovation*. She is the author of six books, including *Exercising Influence* (Wiley) and *Building Better Ideas* (Berrett-Koehler). She works with enterprise companies, government agencies, small businesses, and individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area.

bkimbarnesconsulting.com · hello@bkimbarnesconsulting.com · linkedin.com/in/bkimbarnes

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