

Big Waves and Rip Tides ---

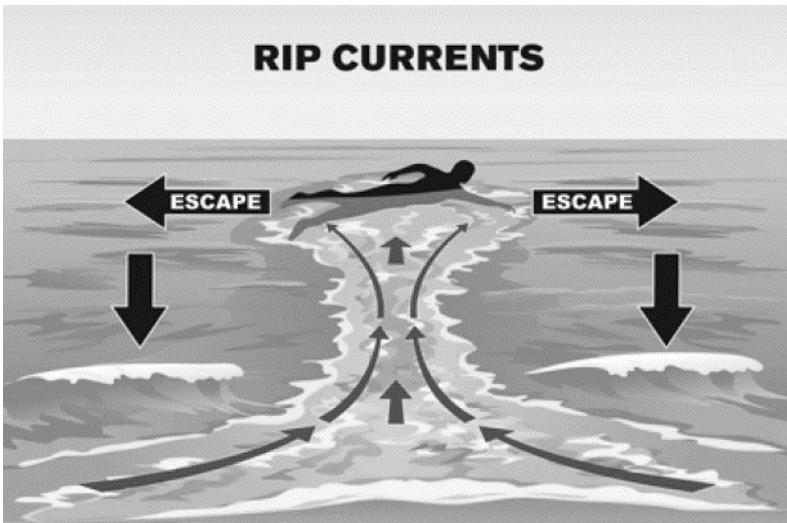
In life, we are constantly facing two types of challenges: **problems to solve** and **tensions to manage**. Getting the two confused or not knowing the difference can be deadly—to our work, our leadership, and our relationships. However, knowing the difference and dealing with each type of challenge appropriately will allow us to thrive. Let me explain.



Ten years after university graduation, my dormmates reunited in Carlsbad, California for a week of surf school. We were told—guaranteed!—that by the end of the week, we’d all be surfing. Based on this guarantee, I had a picture in mind of how this would look: I’d be standing confidently on my surfboard, conquering 10-foot waves that curled over my head. The real picture of how my surfing looked at the end of the week was quite different (and a little bit embarrassing), but I had a ton of fun and left with a lot of new knowledge.

The Power of Healthy Tension

Probably the most interesting thing I learned was just how the ocean works. On our first day of surf school, our instructor had us stand on the beach and stare at the incoming waves. He said, “Everyone thinks they know how the ocean works—that the waves are out there and they come into the shore, so we just need to paddle out and ride the waves to the beach.” But then he said, “Have you ever thought about where that water goes? When all these waves come in, where does the water go to—how does it get back out to the ocean?” Although I had been born and raised near the Great Lakes, I realized that I had very little ocean insight and was quite interested in where he was going with the conversation. He then explained to us how it worked. Yes, all the water comes to shore through the waves, but then this water eddies along the shore, forming what is like a river that flows perpendicular to the shore, taking the water back out into the ocean. This river is called a rip tide or a rip current. Rip tides are not easily visible unless you are looking for them, but if you stand on the shore you can identify them and see them in action.



And it wasn't just interesting trivia, either. Our instructor said that people come to surf school assuming that the greatest danger in the water is sharks, but what they don't realize is that the real danger is in how you respond to rip tides. These unexpected currents take people by surprise, and at times end up taking lives.

Getting caught in a rip tide happened to me. I was paddling out on my surf board, trying to get out to some good waves, when I suddenly looked up and realized that I was out *way* farther from shore than I expected (or wanted) to be. I had been carried out by a rip tide. What the instructor had said was true: everything in my gut desperately wanted to swim toward shore as hard as I could. It was all I could do to fight this instinct.

That is why my instructor started the week out by teaching us about rip tides, because if you go with your gut and just swim toward shore, you can die. You cannot swim against a rip tide because it is too strong. Despite your intention and hard work, you will end up drifting farther and farther away from where you want to be. Eventually you will get exhausted and drown. Instead, you have to go against your natural instinct to swim for shore and turn and swim parallel to shore just for a while, and all of a sudden you will find yourself out of the rip tide. You can then ride the waves safely back into shore.

When I found myself drifting out deep into the ocean, it took everything I had to fight my drive to swim to shore and, instead, force myself to deliberately turn. But I did this and started swimming parallel to shore and within no time, I realized that I was out of the dangerous current and that the waves were helping me get back to shore. It was an experience I will never forget.

What was fascinating to me had to do with the real surfers—the good ones like those in the picture on page 9. The first thing they do when they arrive at the beach is take some time to study the shoreline and look for the riptides. They do this because they know that riding these currents out to the big waves will save them a ton of time and energy. In the same time that it took for me to splash

The Power of Healthy Tension

and flail my way out to one good wave, by leveraging the riptides these real surfers had often ridden five or six of them. They take something that can hurt somebody, and instead of fearing it, they embrace it and leverage its unique power for their fun and advantage.

I tell you this story because I think it is a great metaphor for what you are about to read. In our lives, our relationships, and our work, it's easy to size up every challenge that we face as a **problem to solve**, and to take a right or wrong, good or bad, either/or approach. Often, we are correct in using this approach because we are faced with lots of problems to solve each and every day. They are like the non-stop waves that come into the shore.

But sometimes we encounter a different kind of situation in our lives, a **tension to manage**, in which traditional problem solving will no longer work for us. It's similar to a riptide, where if we treat this type of situation with the conventional wisdom of problem solving, the harder we try, the further away we find ourselves from the exact place we want to go. I have seen this divide teams; I have seen it derail leaders; I have seen it devastate families; and I have seen it blow up organizations.

Yet when you look at really effective leaders and organizations that are thriving, they are much like the pro surfers. They understand and hold onto the wisdom of problem solving, using this either/or approach when it serves them well. However, they also realize that problem solving is not enough—that there is another undercurrent at play at work and in life; situations that require them to hold conflicting values in tension with a both/and approach. They embrace situations that others find exhausting and dangerous, and leverage the energy to their advantage. When you see these people, they stand out. These are the kind of people who have the ability to change the world in a positive and powerful way. They have tapped into the power of healthy tension.

Healthy Tension

Let's start with what *we are not* going to focus on too much in this book: problem solving. A situation is a problem to be solved when there is a) one right answer, or b) two or more right answers, but you can still choose only one option and solve the problem completely. I am thinking of things like policies, procedures, formulas, history, and situations where there is a superior alternative. Problem solving requires an either/or approach, meaning that you choose *either* one answer *or* the other.

Effective problem solving is critical for survival at work and at home. I want to be absolutely clear that in my enthusiasm for healthy tension, I am not belittling, undermining, or rejecting problem solving and either/or thinking.

There are two reasons we are not going to focus much on problem solving. The first reason is that you do not need my help. We develop our problem-solving skills very early in life, and are continually respected and rewarded for solving problems well, so you are probably already quite good at it.

The second reason is that our society already has a bit of an obsession with problem solving.

Problem solving dominates our approach to education, religion, and politics, which makes it easy for us to see *everything* as either/or, good or bad, and wrong or right. My hope is that this book offers a new perspective, an approach that supplements your ability to solve problems, and as a result, allows you to thrive in a new way at work and at home. This fresh approach allows you to embrace conflicting values and harmonize diverse points of view. It is called Healthy Tension.

The good news is that while the expression Healthy Tension might be new to you, in reality it is something you have been engaged in your entire life. What we are going to do throughout the book is take some time to make it a bit more conscious and much more deliberate.

The bad news is that because of society's obsession with problem solving, we often treat every challenge we face as a problem to solve, and end up frustrated, confused and overwhelmed. Let me show you what this looks like.

My Parenting Dilemma

A few years ago, when my wife Becky was expecting our first child, we realized that since both of us had been the baby in our families, neither of us had ever really had much experience with kids. We felt really ill-equipped for this huge responsibility of raising children of our own.

People often give expectant parents advice—whether they want it or not. In our case, we wanted it! And in the months that followed the announcement that we were expecting, we were completely blown away by the amount of unsolicited parenting advice people gave us. People offered us books and referred us to websites and YouTube videos they said we had to check out. They told us personal stories from their experiences. They handed us medical research. They gave us everything we needed to become great parents. And we were like sponges, soaking it all in.

But eventually it started to be not so fun, because we realized we were faced with a dilemma and were going to have to make a decision.

EFFECTIVE PARENTING

Flexibility vs. Structure

You see, there seemed to be two camps of parenting. On one hand, there were people handing us books, stories and statistics who believed that effective parenting comes down to **structure**. They talked about the Ferber Sleep Method and how ultimately, the consistency and routines you put in place from day one are what

dictate how well-adjusted your child is as a toddler, child, and even young adult. We listened and said, okay, we can do that. **Structure** it is!

This parenting “solution” felt great until we talked to the next person, who was in the other camp, the one that says that the most current research shows that effective parenting really comes down to **flexibility**. These parents talked about *attachment parenting* and how our #1 job is to figure out what we can do to flex our lifestyle around our child’s needs, and to be as responsive and attached to the child as possible—especially in the first few months. They, too, would back up their ideas with research, books, medical opinions, and testimonials.

Around the six-month marker in the pregnancy, we were pretty much done with unsolicited advice. It was no longer encouraging. We did not know what side to choose. It had also become clear that Becky and I had different points of view, which made the situation all the more frustrating.

We ultimately decided that we would stop reading the books, would ignore the websites, and would even learn how to politely decline unsolicited advice. Instead, for the next three months, we would try to identify some parents we really admired and hang out with them as much as possible. They would be our teachers!

We each made an independent “awesome parents” list, compared them, exercised a few vetoes, had a few arguments, and finally came up with three sets of people whose parenting we admired. Then we decided to invite them all over for dinner the next weekend.

At first, when they arrived it was somewhat awkward. They didn’t all know each other and we had not told them about our plan for the evening. But we quickly introduced them, explained our dilemma, and told them we had specifically invited them because we liked what we saw in their parenting and we wanted to learn from them. We asked that for the rest of the night, they would simply share their best-case scenario parenting stories, times

The Power of Healthy Tension

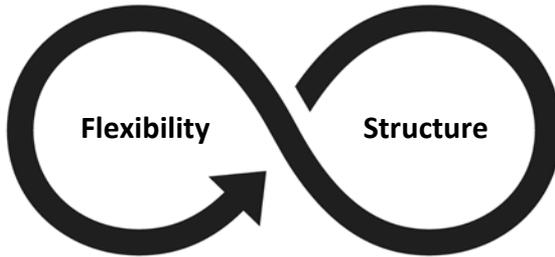
when they felt like somehow, they were doing it right—whether for a moment, a day, or a season.

After a slow start (and a bit of wine), the stories came fast and furious, and we talked until one o'clock in the morning. What was fascinating to me, though, was that when the last car drove away and Becky and I spent hours debriefing the experience, we realized that in the countless stories we had heard, no one had mentioned a specific theory or model. No one said we had to read this book or that study. All the stories were completely unique—yet every couple generally said the same thing: “We’ve been our best as parents when on the one hand we’re incredibly **structured**—having lots of routine and consistency. And at the same time, we do this in a totally **flexible**, day-by-day way.” (And then they would add that when you’ve got it all figured out, the “solution” rarely works with the next kid!)

On the one hand, we were a bit discouraged because we did not get the perfect theory or list of “seven steps to effective parenting” that we had hoped for, but at the same time, we felt like we had had a bit of an epiphany.

We realized that effective parenting was not going to be a problem that we solved with an either/or approach. Instead, it would require a both/and mindset. Parents were at their best when they were able to embrace *both structure and flexibility* over time. This dilemma was not a problem that we could ever solve. Instead, it was a tension that we needed to accept and embrace. The more comfortable we became with the dance of **structure** and **flexibility**, the more we would move toward our ultimate goal (or Higher Purpose) of being **effective parents**.

EFFECTIVE PARENTING

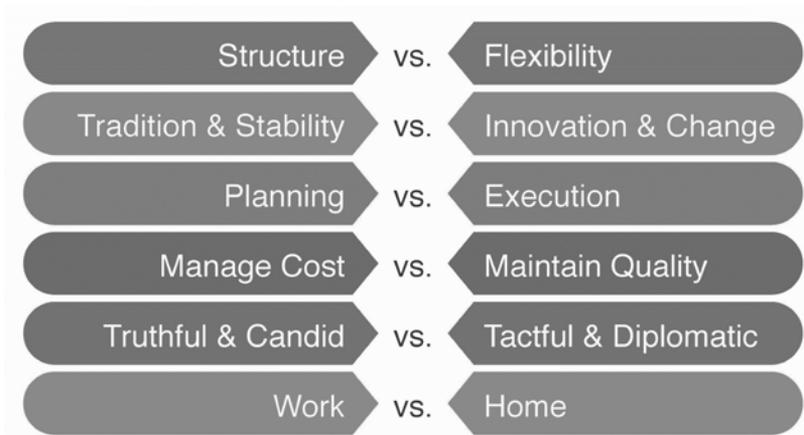


This isn't just true for parenting. In our lives—both at work and at home—we are constantly facing situations similar to flexibility vs. structure. Situations where there will be no *one* solution, no fix, no perfect way. For the remainder of this book, I will refer to these conflicting values, such as flexibility vs. structure, as **polarities**. Our goal is to be able to identify the important polarities in our lives; for example, Work vs. Home or Planning vs. Action, and ensure that we are achieving *healthy tension* between the conflicting values.

Polarity:

- A situation in which two ideas, opinions, etc., are completely opposite from each other, yet equally valid and true.
- A situation in which two opposing ideas exist in seemingly impossible tension.

COMMON POLARITIES



The good news is that we can learn the type of thinking that helps us manage these polarities in a healthy way. Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great*, explained this by using the term, “The Genius of the AND”. My mentor and friend, Dr. Barry Johnson, refers to this as Polarity Thinking™. Throughout this book, I will refer to it simply as *healthy tension*. Let me show you what I mean using a simple but powerful metaphor: breathing.

Just Breathe!

It is interesting: we breathe about 25,000 times a day and, for the most part, we do not even think about it. Breathing is one of the automatic processes in our body, like digestion. It just happens, even when we are asleep. And yet if our natural breathing pattern is off or disturbed, we quickly end up in trouble.

When I was in university, I had a part time job as a rock-climbing instructor. When I was being trained as a guide, I learned that when someone is climbing, it is very common for them to hit what we referred to as the “freak-out zone”. A person might only be a foot off the ground or they might be a hundred feet up the climbing wall, but all of a sudden fear gets the best of them and they cannot

go up and they cannot come down. They are frozen in a kind of trance.

What is interesting is that when someone is in the freak-out zone, it is useless to give them more climbing instruction or a motivational speech. The best thing to do is to have them look you in the eye and tell them to simply breathe. Just breathe. For whatever reason, they have lost touch with the healthy breathing pattern they normally take for granted. What is amazing is that as soon as they start to regain the healthy rhythm between inhaling and exhaling, everything starts to change. They may or may not climb any higher, but they always start to think more clearly and can make informed decisions. Ironically, they become more grounded.

I previously mentioned in the Introduction that I provide leadership to a 40-bed homeless shelter. Every Tuesday night, people from our shelter—a 50/50 mix of street-involved people and volunteers—go indoor rock climbing and have a great time together. Almost every week at least one or two people find themselves in the freak-out zone, and we see again and again the power that comes from telling a person to just breathe.

Personal Challenge—Breathing

I want you to take a minute and breathe with me. Let's take a few good deep breaths. *Inhale* for a count of three and then *exhale* for a count of three. Do it again. And one more time. Think about how with every breath you are inhaling the oxygen your body needs, and then as you exhale you are ridding the body of the built-up carbon dioxide.

Now, just for fun, let's pretend that we have decided that taking in oxygen is our biggest priority. Oxygen gives us energy, helps us think straight, keeps us active—who wouldn't want oxygen? So let's say we want to get all the oxygen we can—that we are just going to *inhale* for the rest of the day. We are taking an either/or

The Power of Healthy Tension

approach and feeling that oxygen is the best solution to the breathing *problem*. Now, I want you to take a really deep breath and hold it for as long as you can.

You are feeling what happens, aren't you? Something does not feel right. Your body tells you that you need to exhale. Now!

If you decided that this whole inhaling thing was a really bad decision, that what you *really* needed to do to feel good was to *exhale* for the rest of the day, as you would expect, that wouldn't work too well either.

I'm going to suggest that breathing is a great metaphor for healthy tension. If I treat breathing like a problem to solve and choose to *either* inhale *or* exhale as my "solution", I am guaranteed to end up in trouble. It might work for a little while, but before too long I will lose everything I set out to achieve...no question! I will end up blue in the face. However, if I can find a *healthy tension* between the *polarity* of **both inhaling** and **exhaling**, my body stays happy and healthy. That has us embracing the situation as a *polarity to manage* rather than a *problem to be solved*. And that makes all the difference.

HEALTHY BREATHING

