

Jacob Morgan 00:00

Sue is a professor at University of Delaware and co founder and co director of learner Women's Leadership Initiative, and author of both and in thinking embracing creative tension to solve your toughest problems. That work for you. Yes, I'm just Yes. Okay, cool. And then just to give you an idea, usually the last 1520 minutes of the shows when I like to focus on like the specific action items. So for example, that's when I'll ask you questions about your, the tools that you have to navigate paradoxes, the paradox system, zones of navigation, and navigating paradoxes, the resolving, engaging, avoiding anticipating, so all that sort of stuff, I'm going to ask you towards the end, because it's like, a specific stuff on what to do. And usually the first part of the podcast is really just kind of, you know, educational stuff, and action stuff is later. Great. But it's not like a strict rule. I mean, obviously, if, if something comes out, it's not the end of the world. Alright, let me push record on my little backup camera here. And then unless you have any other questions,

wendy smith 01:03

I'm gonna put out some lip gloss if you're gonna record the video, okay? Don't go lip glass or to get us.

Jacob Morgan 01:10

I don't have any otherwise I put it on to share it, but it's COVID. Alright, cool. You want me to jump right in? Okay. Hey, everyone. Welcome to another episode of leading the future of work. My guest today is Wendy Smith. She is a professor at the University of Delaware. She is also the co founder and co director of the learner Women's Leadership Initiative, and author of what I think is a pretty cool new book called both and thinking, embracing creative tensions to solve your toughest problems. Wendy, thank you for joining me,

wendy smith 01:45

Jacob. Thanks for having me. I'm excited to be here. Yeah. Well,

Jacob Morgan 01:48

lots of fun stuff to talk about. Why don't we start very high level with why you felt the need to write this book.

wendy smith 01:56

I love it well. So my co author, Marianne Lewis, and I wrote this book because we've been studying the idea of paradox and both ANDing for 25 years, because we've seen this language increasingly used in the media used in politics used and not in consulting used in leadership. And because we wanted to help people go beyond the labels of both and to think about, well, what does this really mean? So that's why we wrote the book.

Jacob Morgan 02:25

And so what, so when you talk about paradoxes, I guess, what do you mean, when you say paradox is

wendy smith 02:33

such a good question. You know, some people when they hear the word Paradox are all in, tell me more, some people run away. So it's kind of a big word. And I love starting by unpacking it. You know,

one way you can unpack the word paradox is this classic paradox, the liars paradox. And so this is a classic philosophical paradox. And it boils down to the idea, I am lying. And so this comes from Greek philosophy 1000s of years ago. And the idea is, if I'm lying, and I say I'm lying, I'm telling the truth. And if I'm telling the truth, and I say, I'm lying, I'm lying. So you are stuck in this cyclical cycle between truth and lying, and you can't really get out of it. Okay, so that is enough to get your mind.

Jacob Morgan 03:20

Yeah, I'm I'm trying to think I remember I heard once like a similar version of like, you're walking down a path and there's a fork in the road. And or I'm gonna totally butcher this, but it's like, you know that the person on the left tells the truth. And you know, the person on the right is a liar or something like that. I don't remember exactly how it goes. But it's one of those like, weird, weird, weird mind games.

wendy smith 03:46

Totally. Well, here's another one, if we want to just play mind games. There's the paradox of Theseus is ship. So if Theseus replaces every single part of their ship, every plank, and has a different ship is the ship the same ship or a different ship? And that's like enough to get your mind kind of going. So we can play those mind games. And I do that with my kids, for sure. We take this idea and think about, well, how does it affect our lives? And what we argue is that we are what we experience, what we find is, you know, we all experience a lot of dilemmas, trade offs, competing demands in our lives. And it could be anything from, you know, do I focus on my current career? Or do I learn something new and do something new for tomorrow? It could be leaders thinking about, do I manage for today or tomorrow? Do I manage people and their story? Do I manage from my bottom line on my profits? Or do I think about people in the planet all these competing ideas? And what we argue is that these kinds of paradoxes underlie those competing ideas and we can unpack this for sure. But these interdependent contradictions underlie these competing ideas and if we can kind of Look beyond the competing ideas and see the paradoxes we can make better decision. Or I'll just say something a little more simple because this might be a better way to get into it. We tend to think about decisions as an either or. And oftentimes, it's a both and, and both ANDing lets us do better lets us make better decisions.

Jacob Morgan 05:20

Okay. Well, just hearing you talk. I mean, one paradox, at least for leaders that popped into my mind is like, we asked leaders to be authentic and transparent. But oftentimes, when leaders take a stance on certain issues that we don't agree with, we then come at them with pitchforks. So absolutely, as a leader, you're probably like, well, I want to be authentic. And I want to take a stance. But I know if I take a stance, people might get upset with me for disagreeing. So do I take the stance? Or do I just keep it to myself and not be authentic? And I know that a lot of leaders struggle with that.

wendy smith 05:52

It's such a good one. And, you know, the and the invitation here, the invitation of so this is a book of about a big idea. And it's a big idea that can apply across to our individual, our individual selves. And so the invitation here is to say, Okay, well, do I take a stand and be authentic? Or do I sort of lead in a more global way that I'm not offending people, right? The invitation in both and thinking is to say, Okay, well, how do I both take a stand and be authentic? And at the same time, not offend people? How do I do both of those at the same time? That's what we're trying to explore.

Jacob Morgan 06:28

Okay. So let's start with our traditional thinking. So the either or is kind of what you are used, like the outdated way, we should move away from that. And the either or is kind of like you pick one or the other, right? Do I be authentic and offend people? Or am I not authentic? And I don't take a stance, and you basically can only pick one. Yeah, okay. Yeah. Yeah. And so the both and which is interesting. I mean, obviously, of course, everybody would love to be able to do both. And, you know, not offend everybody and do all that sort of stuff. Easier said than done. But I suppose before we start talking about some of the solutions, one of the things that you talked about earlier on in your book are these tensions? And it seems like the tensions would you say they're the causes of these paradoxes that we're stuck with?

wendy smith 07:16

Well, I think what we would argue is these paradoxes exist in the world. So we're stuck with them. The tensions or the dilemmas that we face are the moments where they sort of pop up into our lives. So so the invitation that I would make is to people listening, think about something that you're struggling with, at the moment, think about a conflicting issue that you're and it could be anything from your parenting, how do you parent in a way that you both discipline your kids, but give them a whole lot of autonomy? It could be partnering? How do you work with your partner in a way that you both are independent, and yet you are working together collaboratively in a more collaborative way? It could be in work, right? How do you deal with hybridity of work both at home and at work? So there's lots of these these competing ideas. And in fact, maybe I'll just take a step back and tell you that the way that I got into this was really because I was trying to figure out all kinds of career decisions. And I ended up doing all kinds of either oaring in my own career decision. So I was trying to make a decision, do I immediately take a job as a consultant right out of undergrad? Or do I give up that job? And you know, put it on hold, give it up and go live overseas for two years? Do I, you know, when I came back, and I was then went into consulting? Do I become an academic who studies ideas? Or do I become in the language of academics, a practitioner, a leader, someone who implements ideas, right, those are like a lot of oars? And again, I think that what we what we suggest is that if you step back, if you start with those dilemmas, and then say, Okay, what's underlying that? Right, so in the question of, Do I do I think about, you know, going overseas, or do I stay? You know, do I do I start jump right into consulting? Well, there's like a real sense of, do I focus on career and what I'm going to accomplish? Or do I kind of live life, right? That's an ongoing tension, people are always feeling and as an academic or practitioner, like, do I think about ideas? Or do I implement ideas? Well, that's an ongoing tension. That's the paradox because if you look about it, look at the idea of thinking about ideas versus practicing ideas, it feels like those are in conflict, because which which I am, I spending my time on, where am I allocating my resources? But actually, those reinforce one another. The more that I think about ideas, the more effectively I can implement it, the more that I implement ideas the more effectively than I raise new questions and new curiosities to think about it. And that's where you see that interdependent relations.

Jacob Morgan 09:47

Okay, so the paradoxes are always there and kind of attentions are the things that bring them to light so to speak. Okay, so when you experience those tensions, and then those paradoxes kind of manifest themselves,

wendy smith 09:58

then the question is, what's the paradox that's lying underneath. Yeah, yeah. Okay.

Jacob Morgan 10:01

And so in your book, you talked about four types of paradoxes, performing learning, organizing and belonging. So I thought maybe we could just spend a couple of minutes on each one of those to explain like, what are what is that particular paradox? Like? How do you identify it and spot it? And if you have any examples of what that actually looks like, in a typical person's life?

wendy smith 10:24

Yeah, totally. And, you know, I wanted to say something important about this, which is that we partially point out these different paradoxes to show just how universal these experiences are. They range across our lives, whether you label your paradox, specifically in the right bucket seems less important. And in fact, if we get really more complex, these paradoxes reinforce one another. So here's a couple of examples. So performing paradoxes are the tensions that emerge, because we have these competing outcome demands, these competing pressures for our outcomes and pressures for metrics. So in our own lives performing paradoxes might look like do I focus on again, career, my career and outcomes for professional demands? Or do I focus on being a great mom and a great wife and, you know, great family person,

Jacob Morgan 11:15

all the time.

wendy smith 11:19

They show up for us in all kinds of ways. And by the way, the pandemic just exacerbated. We can talk about, you know, the ways in which the pandemic us asked us questions about outcomes of, are we focused on our economic health as a country are our social health? Well, both? Right, right. It's sorry, not our social health, our economic health or our physical health? Well, but both and they reinforce each other. So these are the performing paradoxes.

Jacob Morgan 11:42

Okay. And these are probably, I think a lot of people can relate to this, right. And you touched on some very common ones. And as I was saying, I'm in the middle of one of these two, because I'm working on a new book that's going to come out towards the second half of next year. And it's kind of like, well, you know, I have time in the evening, should I spend time writing? Or should I spend time hanging out with my kids? Should I use my Saturday to write or should I use my Saturday to take my kids to the beach? And it's like, you have this deadline? And like, how do you balance that? And it's, it's not easy. And I'm assuming anybody with a job or anybody that has to balance like these two things of work, and home work, and like everyone's got to everyone can relate to that one.

wendy smith 12:24

Well, first of all, congratulations on working on the book. That I can't wait for that. Exactly. I just want to say exactly. And I think that so just to take a step back, what do we mean by paradox, we mean that it's

these dualities, that come in conflict with each other are contradictory. But they're also interdependence. And they don't go away, they persist over time. So if I think about the example that you just gave, right, there's these ongoing tensions of how we spend our time because our time feels like a scarce resource. So am I spending my time here and having this conversation right now? Or am I helping my kids do their homework at exactly your point? Am I working on the book and putting another hour there? Or am I working on, you know, focusing on my kids. And yet, over time, what we know is that, even though they feel like they are in this short term conflict with one another, we know that they reinforce each other that over time, the more that you feel good about the work that you're doing on the book, and that you're energized by it and energized by the idea, the more energy you have for your kids, the more that you feel like you're doing a good job as a parent, the more energy you have to put toward the book. So there's this reinforcing piece to it, too.

Jacob Morgan 13:36

Yeah, no, that makes a lot of sense. Okay, so that that paradox, I think everybody can wrap their minds around. What about the learning paradoxes?

wendy smith 13:46

Yeah, and, you know, we can probably use your book to point to that how paranoid that each of the paradox reflect that learning paradoxes are these tensions between the short term in the long term or, you know, in what we do for today, and what we do for tomorrow. And these show up, you know, they show up in our personal lives. And so your book is a great example that we're underneath that tension is the short term and the long term, how we perform for right now and how we think about investing in the future. These also show up really profoundly for organizations. So Oregon in organizations as they're navigating, change, and innovation, how do they think about continuing to do what they've always done today, and at the same time changing for tomorrow. And this is actually how I got started researching this. I was studying IBM and how their top management teams were navigating innovation and change and how they dealt with this tension of trying to continue managing \$2 million businesses and at the same time, this is back in the early 2000s innovate to get into the technological world that we now know is cloud based computing. So how did they deal with both of those, and in you know, consulting Speak, we talked about it as managing the Corps and the Explorer businesses. But in our own lives, it's the same thing managing what we do well today and thinking about how we effectively learn and change for tomorrow.

Jacob Morgan 15:11

Yeah, I think that's a very common one, right? How do we focus on the future and transformation? But at the same time, how do we make sure that we're still getting business today and that the, you know, we're operating, but at the same time planning for the future? Or focusing on the micro, but at the same time focusing on the macro or? Ai? i It's, it's a very, very common one. Okay.

wendy smith 15:33

Yeah. And again, I want to just point out to get our minds around this, these things come in conflict, because they conflict for our time, they conflict in companies for resources and allocating, but and they also reinforce each other, right? The more effective that you are today, the more resources you have to

build for the future and innovate for the future, the more that you do in terms of the future, the more energy you have to continue to do what you do today. So it's this reinforcing cycle.

Jacob Morgan 15:59

Okay, next paradox we have is organizing paradoxes.

wendy smith 16:03

Yeah. So these are all the paradoxes of how we get things done. And it's everything from? Do I work collaboratively with other people? Or do I compete with them at the end? Or are organizations doing a study now in the Canadian oil sands? How do they think about? Yeah, so it's a really profound study about how they have thought about being a really dirty oil industry, really environmentally challenging industry? Can they implement environmental, new environmental technology, new environmental innovation? Well, in order to do that, they have to collaborate across a really highly competitive commodity industry? How do they think about bringing these huge companies together that are highly competitive to collaborate with one another? So that tension between collaborating and competing in our personal lives, this might show up as the tension of giving and taking? Do I give more to others? Or do I take more kind of has that collaboration, competition feel to it can also be might also be by the way, here's another one that I think comes up a lot? Do I plan? And I think this might align with some of the things you do, right? Do I plan for the future in a way that is more planful? Strategic, thoughtful? I, you know, or do I let things be emergent and shifting and changing and agile over time? So how do I deal with this tension between planning out and having a strategic thought about where I'm gonna go in the future? And again, this could be our own personal experiences it or organization? Or do I think about being spontaneous. And you know, that's sort of something that builds up in our organization are how we organize

Jacob Morgan 17:46

can also be about competing projects. So I have two different projects that can be working on. And they're both competing for my time and attention, and I got to pick one. Totally, yeah. Okay. Yeah. And then the last one is an interesting one. So it seems like a lot of the other paradoxes are, I guess you could say there, there's more work component involved. But the last paradox feels very, I don't know, more human of a paradox in some way that the belonging paradox.

wendy smith 18:14

Yeah, you know, this one, I think, is the one that keeps us stuck most often. And yet, it's the one that's most slippery for us to think about. So. And the way I often think about it is, and again, we'll bring it back to work life, I remember when my kids were born, and a bunch of my friends were having kids at the same time, and we were really having this conversation about career versus, you know, parenting and where we spend our time. But at the core of that there was a lot of discourse that we weren't saying about our own identities, like, who am I am, am I the kind of person that is going to be a family person who's really going to be there for my kids? Or am I the kind of person who is going to be career oriented and achieve in my career, and, and that identity really kept people stuck in making an either or decision, oftentimes, we get stuck in this either or, because that's who we think of ourselves as we don't let ourselves grow and develop and and or we don't let ourselves be multiple things and be a bit inconsistent about those. And by the way, like, that might show up these days. I mean, this is kind of,

you know, this may be challenging, but I think one of the ways that we see paradoxes show up is in the conflicts that we're seeing at a national level around political polarization. And the tensions that we see between the left and the right more conservative and more liberal. And oftentimes, this identity paradox gets in the way because it prevents us from going beyond the identity politics and doing a deeper dive into what's the real issues here, and how can I see the different ways that people are thinking about things?

Jacob Morgan 19:53

So the belonging paradox is kind of the more I guess it's exactly what it sounds like. viewing. I don't know, for fulfilment, Feeling connection, feeling a part of something bigger than yourself.

wendy smith 20:09

I think it's it's that but also being restricted by it feeling like you have to be consistent around that, right? So the identity paradox is, look, there's these competing ideas of who I am, or what groups I'm part of. And sometimes those groups conflict, and I feel like I need to be consistent. I feel like I need to have a sense of being who I am consistently. So if I'm going to affiliate with liberal politics, I feel like I have to be consistent in all the ways that I do that. Or if I'm going to affiliate with conservative politics, I have to be more consistent in all the ways that I do that. The in part, because well, let me I'll just say it differently. The identity the belonging paradox is that I belong to different groups, and it feels like they conflict. The problem there is that I feel like I need to be consistent in the way that I identify because we have psychology will say, we like other people being consistent. We like consistency, right? And so that's why it becomes a problem.

Jacob Morgan 21:04

Why is either or thinking a problem? Like, Why is that bad? I mean, if somebody's listening to this, and they're thinking like, okay, paradox is like, I'm confused, like, I'm good with my either or thinking, whatever, we need to change that.

wendy smith 21:16

Right. And there are lots of people who are saying, I'm good with my either or thinking and I want to go back and maybe just tweak something that you said earlier, we are not at all advocating for throwing out either or thinking, what we're suggesting is that it's it's valuable in the short term. And actually, it's kind of valuable to get you to the both end. But the language we say that what we say is, look, this kind of thinking is limited at best, and detrimental at worst. Okay, so limited at best is that, that what, what it gets us into is some ruts. And I can sort of talk through these vicious cycles, but limited at best is that both and thinking offers up more creative possibilities, and so detrimental is that we say look like there's these different patterns that either or thinking leads us down that become these these detrimental, we talk about the most vicious cycles, because we just keep cycling downward. And there's, so there's three of them. And I'll just talk about them briefly to say why this is so problematic. The first vicious cycle is that we just get stuck in one point of view. And we talk about it as intensification. Because we get stuck, we continue to do the things that we've always done, we intensify what we've always done. And then when the world changes around us, we're stuck. And we're like we can't get out of it. And so we talked about that as like falling down a rabbit hole. And so that might be you know, the fact that we some people might get stuck in the job that they're currently in because they're not willing to learn

something new simultaneously, they're performing really well. They don't want to pause, they don't want to stop what they're doing. And yet, what we know is that that performance is eventually going to be no longer valuable to the company. So how do they shift to learn, right? So that's the problem with this kind of intensification or rabbit hole, then what might happen is that if you are stuck in your current job, you're performing really well, you're not willing to learn something new to grow, to change to try something new and live in this sort of today, tomorrow, tension, the world changes around you. And the next thing you know you have to change and you have to change quickly. And sometimes what happens often what happens is that as a result of that need to change, you almost swing to the opposite side, the alternative approach, right? And so we talked about this as overcorrecting, right, you go from one side, and it goes straight to the opposite side and the image we use as a wrecking ball because essentially you kill all the good with the bad, right, so. So an example that that we use, that sometimes resonates with people is when dieters sort of are navigating dieting, they might understand this kind of yo yoing when you're incredibly disciplined, and you're really focused, and you can really discipline until you lose it. And then you just sort of give it all up, right and you swing completely to the other side where like you've every everything goes and then you're like No, no, no, I gotta get disciplined again, as opposed to dieting when you're gonna die it along the way, you're gonna have some discipline, but you know what, every once in a while you need a chocolate chip cookie, or whatever else the possibility, nothing wrong with a cookie. Nothing wrong with the cookies, right? So I think there's that, that sense of like swinging back and forth. And then I'll just say one more thing, because I think this is actually the most pernicious, which is, you know, when we get stuck in our ruts, and in our own identities and in our own focus. One of the problems is, is that there's other people who have a different point of view, and we get into conflict and this is where we get into the right wrong either or kind of thinking. And, you know, we talked about this as polarization like we see this at a national level as polarization but we also see this in our own families, right. I take one stance So somebody else is going to take another stance with the right versus wrong, right? Or I have twins. I mean, I saw a lot of like, I'm right, you're wrong. And the and if I'm right, you can't also be right, you must be wrong. And we talk about that kind of conflict as trench warfare. And the reason we use this we use that image is because, you know, if you imagine like people digging a trench where they're digging deeper and deeper into their own positions, and they're, you know, shooting out at the other side without really knowing what the other side has to offer. And those are the cases where these different poles of paradox reside in different groups, and the groups or individuals are different individuals, and they're not willing to work together to surface their differences to point to the, the kind of competing ideas, competing identities they have, and be able to sort of understand those and use those to get to a better solution. Okay. So that's why we see these things really can lead us down some detrimental paths.

Jacob Morgan 26:02

So it sounds like what you're saying is, instead of saying, Okay, pick the left or the right, you can pick both. And so for a lot of people, it's kind of like, well, wait a minute, I can't like I have to pick a project, I have to pick either project A or project B, I can't do both. It's too much work. Right? So I'm assuming a lot of people listening and watching this might be saying, well, that sounds too good to be true. Like, how do you? Yeah, how do you go about doing that? So I guess the first thing before we jump into that is, is it important for you like, as an individual, you supposed to identify the paradox that you are being

faced with? Like, do you take a step back and say, okay, which paradox is this? What are the tensions that are being faced with? Are you supposed to think through that?

wendy smith 26:43

I mean, I think there's a way of getting I think that's paradox, like the second level of paradox. You know, I think there's a way of getting into this thinking that's a little bit easier. Okay. Right. So, so, in some ways, the easier way to get into this thinking, is that when someone offers you an either or you change the question, and here's why. So, you know, we like to make this analogy to meditating, right? The meditating has this long term goal, this long term possibility, that you're always practicing it, it's not easy. So this is the same with navigating both and or navigating paradox. It's not easy, it's emotional. You're always engaging with it. But when you're meditating, the first step into meditating is just notice your breath. Yeah. Alright. So for the folks who are saying, Gosh, I don't get it. And like, this is really hard. The first step really is to, before you're starting to notice all your paradoxes and be able to identify them and then type them and it's just to change the question. Right, so, so if the question, you know, if we go back to your question, Should I work on my book? Or should I, you know, be there with my kids? As soon as you hear this or question, then the question can become, how can I work on my book and engage with my kids? Now, that opens up all kinds of new possibilities of how you start thinking about it now, at any at any particular moment you met? You're probably not working on your book and engaging with your kids at the exact same moment. But the change of the question starts opening new possibilities. How can we, as a society think about in the pandemic, economic health and physical health? How can we embed some of our both more liberal ideas and more conservative ideas? What does it look like? How can we think about performing incredibly well in what I'm doing today, and think about what it means to try new things and learn for tomorrow? And so that's the first stop because it sort of shifts our mindset to say, Okay, there's something going on here. What's possible?

Jacob Morgan 28:47

It seems like the basic step is just kind of briefing the question. When, when you when it's I guess, when the paradox first comes up, you just tried to reframe the paradox in a way that doesn't make it in a way where you have to pick between one or the other. And instead, it helps you find a solution for why you can have both.

wendy smith 29:04

Right, exactly. And you know, it's funny, I work with you, as you said, I have this team and this women's leadership team. And increasingly now, as we start navigating questions, my colleagues say, oh, right, Wendy, this is a both and this doesn't have to be an either or, or, and my kids do that too, by the way, but they do. And they roll their eyes at the same time, right. But as soon as these either or start coming up, you know, my my colleague, Mary Ann Lewis, and I, my co author, we have this kind of professional hazard that you ask us an either or it's like, Well, how could it be both right? How can you accommodate both and live in this ebb and flow of these competing ideas?

Jacob Morgan 29:41

Yeah. It's interesting. I like that way of just being able to kind of reframe the question a little bit, which seems like a very easy place to start with. One of the things I think you also talked about in the book

you have a I think they're, I think you called them traps, right? The cognitive emotional behavioral. Yeah. Was there another one? Or were those three?

wendy smith 30:07

Yeah. Behavioral cognitive.

Jacob Morgan 30:09

Yeah. The three traps? Yeah. So let's talk a little bit about what those traps are. And how do they manifest? Like what when you say traps? What exactly are you talking about?

wendy smith 30:20

Yeah. And so Jacob, I'm not going to go back to your other question for just a second and put this on pause. Because I don't want to leave people in thinking that just reframing the question is the only way to get there. Alright, I want to just go down for one second to say that actually, once you reframe the question, the next part of the question, or the next part of thinking about these paradoxical tensions, then the next step is to do what we call separating and connecting. And so here's what that means. Separating means pulling apart the opposing ideas to understand each one, and doing a deeper dive to really get into what each one is about in order to find synergies, connections and linkages. Right? So what we mean by that is to say, look like you're not going to, at any moment, be writing your book and being with your kids, I'm not going to at any moment be, you know, I have to pick a career between being an academic or being a leader, practitioner manager, you know, out there in the real world. But the issue is, Can I do a deeper dive, for example, in my own career decision to say, what is it that I love about academia? What is it that I love about being a scholar? What is it that I love about being a practitioner leader? What's great about that? And what are the ways that I can engage in both of those pieces over time, so that they reinforce each other and do better? So, you know, just to be clear, if people are walking away thinking, Okay, that's all nice and good. But at any moment, I have to make a decision. Yes. Like, I have to make a decision, was I going to go back to grad school and get a PhD or not? So yes, you have, you know, are you going to spend that hour writing or not? Yes. And over time, over the long term, how can you think about accommodating both? Well, the way is to start by breaking them down and separating them from one another. So I wanted to just pause there and just say that maybe we can go down that road. Or we can go back to traps if you want. Yeah, let's

Jacob Morgan 32:11

talk about the the traps for a few minutes. And then right after we go through the traps, I think we can spend the next like 1520 minutes really diving into the action items and the steps that people can take. But I I love traps. I'm a big fan of traps, I play a lot of chess and traps are a big part of that. So I'm really, really curious about the traps when it comes to these paradoxes and tensions.

wendy smith 32:31

I love that. Yeah. So this goes back to the conversation that we were having about vicious cycles, and why either or thinking gets us stuck. And so what we did was we we said, look, there's a whole lot of psychology and research that points to why it is that we end up getting really stuck in one pattern, one way of thinking one way of, of engaging, and part of that is the way that we think, right is our cognition. And the way that we think is that we like to have things that are consistent as we were saying there's a

bunch of research that we like things that are consistent, and that the way that we think is that we tend to find we want to be right. So there's a bit of the ego in our thinking, and that we then end up finding other people, there's this issue that we talked about the confirmation bias, we surround ourselves by other people that legitamate how we think right? So how we think sort of keeps us trapped in focusing on one side of an argument or one side of an issue without considering and engaging with the other side, as well, right? There's emotional traps, we get really egotistical and defensive, if somebody tells us that we're wrong. So we just double down on why we're right about something because we want to assuage our ego. And it's kind of things you know, so part of navigating paradoxes, keeping things open being a little, it's a little, you know, as we started out with the liars paradox, like it's a little bit mind boggling, and it feels uncomfortable, it feels uncertain, it sometimes feels really anxious to keep things open. Again, I keep going back to the pandemic, but I think the pandemic has reinforced that for us, which is that we you know, this uncertainty, what we want is certainty. So part of our emotions lead us to want to do things that are certain. And then and we know this to be true. Once we get into habits and routines. And this is the behavioral traps, we reinforce and continue to do the things that we've always done. So, you know, all of these things converge. They, they, they reinforce each other, they converge to keep us doing the things that we've always done on an ongoing basis. Yeah,

Jacob Morgan 34:40

I think one of the big traps I always want to I think you mentioned being right. Yeah, is I struggle with that one a lot.

wendy smith 34:50

You are not alone in the world.

Jacob Morgan 34:51

Yeah. I mean, I guess it's kind of funny because you know, you're doing it, but you're kind of like, it's almost like quicksand where you know you're doing it because you You're kind of like, why I can't get out of it i? And you know, the other person will point it out and say, Are you really just trying to be right here and win this argument? Or are you like trying to find a solution? And you know, everything that's going on? And you're like, Yeah, you just, you don't you don't

wendy smith 35:15

know. I'll give you an example. When I do workshops for organizations, what I will often do is, is I will have them arm wrestle, oh, my God. So I don't know if you've ever, you know, and this is not mine. I've taken this from others that talk about conflict, but I think it's a great illustration. So I get people to arm wrestle. And I say to them, okay, what's the rules of arm wrestling? Or what's the goal of arm wrestling. So the goal of arm wrestling, is that you want to get the other person's hand down, right? And so what people will do is that they'll pause and they'll, you know, they'll, they'll fight against it to get the other person's hand down. And so I say, so I say to them, okay, your job is to arm wrestle for a minute. And it's not just can you get the other person's hand down, it's how many times can you get the other person's hand down, the person who gets the other person's hands down, the most out of the whole group wins, right. And so people go straight into the mentality of, okay, the way to arm wrestle, is that I get the other person's hand down, but I have to fight them from trying to, I get my hands down, but I have to fight them from trying to get their hand down. And they get into this defensive competitive

stance. And somewhere along the line, someone will realize, oh, wait, if we collaborate as a team, we can get so much further. And then they'll stop fighting. And then they'll just go back and forth, and back and forth, and back and forth. So in a minute, they can get each other's hands down, like 100 times. And the important idea here is to remind ourselves, like how stuck we get in the rules that if I win, you know, the only way for me to win is for you to lose, the only you know, the only way for me to be right is for you to be wrong. And we all fall right into that. And it's really important to or it's valuable, I would say to remind ourselves just how poignant that is, and how important it is, or valuable it is to move from.

Jacob Morgan 37:05

How do you spot these things? Because it seems like if you don't, if you're not aware of the tensions of the paradox of the traps, you're not going to take a step back and realize that you should be doing anything as a result. So before we talk about the solutions, let's talk about how do you how do you spot these things? And then know that you should be coming up with a solution or there are some signs to pay attention to?

wendy smith 37:30

Well, Jacob, this is why everybody should buy our book. I mean, I you know, again, I think that there are some ways, you know, I think that when we start to so a couple of things would come to mind again, the first is that when we hear this language of either or, or we see people getting into conflict with one another in which they're not listening or engaging with one another. There's not a lot of both ANDing going on there. When we see two sides of an argument, there's not a lot of both ANDing going on there. Right. So and sometimes it's, it's that you are getting into this conversation. Certainly my husband and I do this all the time, both of us are quite stubborn. We both like to be right. And oftentimes, we'll have to say to each other, okay, we're both trying to be right here. But we have to pause the conversation and come back to it later. Because we're so emotionally invested in being right, we can't even move to the point of listening to the other person. You know, I think it's one of these situations where, if you're talking so much more than you're listening, you're really trying to defend yourself and not being curious about what the other person has to say. Yeah,

Jacob Morgan 38:34

I think it makes a lot of sense. So, so that's kind of one telltale sign. What if it's just you? Yeah. Are you? You know, is there something that you should be just looking out for for yourself?

wendy smith 38:48

Yeah, I'm so glad you asked that, you know, I had a colleague who was really stuck in a career decision for years and years and years, not sure what they were going to do constantly. What, like those kinds of sense of like, stuck where you are, over time really is what is might say, maybe there is something here that you're not looking at an alternative perspective and being open to it. Now, I want to I want to be clear here. This is not easy. This is not for the faint of heart, right? Like it's easy to get into meditating and start there. But it's hard to get to Nirvana, it's easy to kind of start by reframing the question. This is hard, because it's emotional. And you know, it's not easy to do. And one of the interesting things that we found in again, some of the workshops that we've done is that we've asked people to think about their tensions. We've walked them through what a process for both ending their tensions, and then we add both adding tensions but dealing with somebody else's tension. And then we

ask them to go back to their own tension and find their own both and, and we were finding that people were so engaged in thinking about the both and in a more generic situation, but they were finding it really hard to think about the both and in their own experience. And so what we started to do was we started to say okay, I, you know, instead of thinking about your own both and get into pairs, share your attention with someone else and ask them to come up with the both and for you. And I think there's some wisdom in, you know, it's hard to do this in our own lives again, because we're stuck, you know, cognitively, we're stuck. Behaviorally, we're stuck. We're stuck in a particular identity, it's hard to sort of see beyond our own stuckness. No, you know, there was a leader that we worked with who always says, like a fish doesn't really know what's in water. Yeah. Right. So like, when we're sort of swimming in our own commitments to a particular point of view, it's kind of hard to realize that we're doing that unless somebody else helps us. And by the way, it's hard for somebody else to help us unless we're willing to ask them for help. So you're kind of in a tension right there, you're in a paradox right there. And yet, you know, that's what it means to sort of stay curious and stay, stay open to other people's perspectives.

Jacob Morgan 40:54

Well, let's talk a little bit about some action items and things that we can do. So you have a framework in the book, I think it's called The Paradox system where you talk about boundaries, comfort dynamics, and assumptions. And I thought it was kind of like a cool way to, to visualize like, how to how to think of all this together. I don't know if it's even possible to go over it without people seeing that framework. But can you kind of like, explain what you do, and maybe some action items? And if you're able to, I don't know, talk through that framework, that would be super helpful.

wendy smith 41:30

Yeah, so I'll just in the big picture, we spent a lot of time thinking about, again, you ask this great question upfront, like, why write this book? And why now, you know, and again, why now is because we're seeing these paradoxes all over the place, we're seeing these, they're bubbling up even more. And we want it to give people tools. And we see people using the language of both and and paradox, we want to give people tools for how to do so. Okay. And we are, you know, very privileged to be enmeshed in a community of amazing colleagues and scholars who've been studying paradox. So the question we asked ourselves is, how can we bucket the insights about how to do this better do this both ANDing better? How can we bucket it into different categories that would help people to think about ways that they can implement this, okay, so we have these four sets of tools. And the important thing is that these tools, again, it's not one or the other, it's about applying all of them. And Jacob, I'll just tell you, it took us a long time, until we came to the labels, because we ended with a set of labels that are ABCD to help try and help people remember them. I don't know if it's gonna work, but But it's assumptions, boundaries, comfort and dynamics. And just to walk through them a little bit. So the assumptions have to do with our mindsets, our cognitions, and the way we think, and the assumptions that we make about things. So am I assuming that that there's a truth in the world? And if I'm right, you're wrong? Or am I assuming that truth is actually multiple? There's multiplicity to truth? And if I'm right, you're you can be right as well. Right? So what are my assumptions that I'm making? What's the mindset I bring? What's the condition? I'm going to jump over? Because the sea is comfort, which is our emotions. So how am I so we've talked a little bit about this, how am I feeling? Man, these paradoxes are uncomfortable, as we've said, they lead us to a lot of discomfort, they lead us to be defensive and

feel a little anxious, like this, this sense of a like a feeling of a tug of war when we're trying to make these decisions and, and leave them open. And we say that, you know, importantly, to manage paradox, it's not that you're gonna get rid of the discomfort that you feel when I'm right, you're wrong, or the discomfort you feel in this tug of war conflict that you feel, it's that you have to find comfort in the discomfort, be able to accept the discomfort and find comfort in them. And so this A and C and again, you know, it's helpful to have the visual there on one axis, and they both talk about how we navigate paradoxes, individually, sort of our own response, or our individual experience of them. And then we have the, the boundaries and the dynamics. And I'll just quickly say, we can delve into any, you know, dive into any of these in more depth. Boundaries are about the structures or the scaffolding that we have around paradox in our context. So it's nice to change our mindsets. But it's, you know, we'll go straight back to the way we're thinking if everything around us reinforces either or thinking. So do we have a context and a structure around us that helps to reinforce both and thinking, and that could start with, you know, one of the things we point to is the importance of thinking about a higher purpose or an overarching vision, vision as a structural tool to remind you that actually, you're engaging in these competing ideas, both family and life in service of a bigger vision, which is that I want to have a productive happy life or whatever your vision And might be, and then dynamics have to do with Well, part of engaging with these ideas is that paradoxes are ongoing shifting over time. Dynamics is saying, You've got to be experimental, you've got to change, you've got to be agile, you've got to be flexible. And I'm happy to unpack that a little more. But those are sort of the components of the of the task itself, or how you navigate the task, not just your individual self.

Jacob Morgan 45:25

Okay? So when when, you know, this is happening, like, what do you do? So I mean, let's say I'm, I'm inside of an organization, and, and I know this is happening, and I flipped the question around, like, how do I? How do I really start to embrace the both and thinking how do I do project A and project B? How do I write the book and spend time with my kids? Are there some specific steps that people can take?

wendy smith 45:51

Yeah, absolutely. So you know, the example that I think about is a couple years back, my university was thinking about going into online teaching. So a whole new world and my department, you know, as opposed to teaching in person, this is pre pandemic, before the pandemic forced us online, right. So this was, you know, like, maybe eight or nine years ago, and my department was having this conversation, which was very much okay, what are the ways in which if we go online, it's going to cannibalize our existing program? How is the teaching going to be different? And it really got into this either or, you know, this idea that if we go online, it's going to just take away the existing program, and we're going to be fully online, and it's going to be problematic for our existing world? And I remember thinking at that moment, like, yeah, I was like, sort of getting getting set with Okay, which argument am I going to stick with? Do we stick? Do we engage in online teaching? Or do we not? And, you know, so this is where that first part of changing the question or reframing the question, I was, like, oh, wait, here, we are enmeshed in this kind of conflict, where let's just pause and shift the question, and I piped up in my department meeting and said, Hey, guys, what would it look like for us to both be online? And in person? How could those enable each other? What would that be like? So? So that's where the change of the question comes in? So again, you know, you've got two projects, and you're saying, Should I focus on Project A? Or should I focus on Project B? Again, the change of the question comes in, how

can I do project A and project B? At the same time, I just had this conversation with a colleague earlier today. And we were having this conversation, in part about how do we how do we think about next steps of our book promotion? Do we focus on big media? Do we focus on having small conversations one on one around? Like, how can we? How can we do both? Right? So that's the first piece?

Jacob Morgan 47:41

Well, one one question about that. What happens if you ask that question, and you realize that you can't? So what happens if you flip the question around? And instead of saying, Well, should I write the book? Or should I spend time with my kids? So I flip the question around, and I say, Well, how can I spend time with my kids and write the book? And my response to myself comes back to? I can't?

wendy smith 48:02

Great, great. I think an important component here is that. And so maybe I'll take a step back, one of the things that we talk about in navigating these kinds of tensions, is how we think about them over time. And so let me just give you so so part of we talk about these two different patterns of managing paradox. The first pattern is, I think, what people are classically looking for in these both ends, which is that there is this ideal Win Win at the moment where you can, you know, like, it's like, your kids are writing the book with you, or, you know, you're writing the book while at the park. And you're, you know, and your kids are so excited, because you're reading them the book while you're writing, but like, that doesn't often happen, you know, so So in writing the book, you probably don't want to be with your kids at the park at that same moment, you probably want your own focus time and then doing something different, you know, or the example that I you know, well, let me just pause and say, we talked about this when, when as a mule, because it's the mule is this. So for people that are more metaphorically driven, right? The Mule is this ideal hybrid. It's, it's smarter than a donkey stronger than a horse, you bring them together, you've got the mu, right. And so it's this ideal Win Win heart, you know, both strong and smart animal. And when we talk about paradox, like people think about that ideal both and, you know, the idea I'm sorry, when, when, and, and those happen sometimes, right? So there's this classic example where Einstein came up with the theory of relativity by saying, How can an object be both at motion and at rest in motion and at rest at the same time, and puzzling over that is what led him to the theory of relativity to think about a universal way for these things to both happen synergistically those things how Ever. And that's what people I think idealize when they think about paradox. Those things, however, are rare. Those things don't happen all the time. And in fact, this first study that I did at IBM was actually the one that that reinforced for me, I was expecting lots of win wins of how they were going to manage their existing product and their innovation at the same time and find ways that they're gonna, like come together beautifully. And that happened really rarely. And so instead, the other way of thinking about paradox, we talk about it as the tightrope walker, we talk about it as being consistently inconsistent. And what we mean by that is that, that over time, over some time horizon, you're trying to accommodate these two competing ideas. But in order to get there, you're constantly making these micro shifts back and forth. Right. So if you if you use the image of the tightrope walker, they're focused out at the horizon, or the you know, the point the goal they're trying to get to, they're never fully balanced in this like ideal when when we've got the, you know, perfect balance, they're always balancing. And so the balancing is like, they're constantly making these micro shifts left and right, which would equate to the way that we think for example, I think this is the perfect example for our work life tensions, right? There's very few of these like, ideal when when bring your kids to work, and

everybody's, you know, happy kind of moment. But more of the time, when we think about our time, we're kind of balancing work sort of making these micro shifts between I'm going to spend this hour getting some work done, and then put it aside and go spend the next you know, the next hour with my kids. And, and the important part of that. And by the way, this is where you're making these micro either or choices in service of the bigger both. And the important part. And the important part here is that you're not over emphasizing one side, or over emphasizing the other side until and completely ignore over emphasizing one side and then completely ignoring the other side. So the tightrope walker isn't going so far to the left, that they fall over so far to the right that they fall over. You know, and you know, so to with our work and our family, when we over emphasize the work and our family is, you know, are our lives, broader life doesn't have to be family, but like our broader lives are taking a hit, we hit burnout. And if we oh, you know, for people that are over emphasizing life, and you know, like, maybe they're financially stable, and like don't have to worry about income or don't have to, but they might just get bored, right? There's something about work that could be creative. Now, everybody navigates this challenge a little bit differently. But the point is, is that is that for those of us that are in this tension between work and the rest of our lives, it is this more tightrope walking experience. And you're managing the both and over time. Now, and so I'll just say one more thing, because again, like if we bring it back to our political world, what we see in our political world is that if we overemphasize one type of politics, and we see the other side, you know, come swoop in and just like, completely destroy what that has accomplished, like effective politics is actually sort of this tightrope walking between different perspectives that can, over time come up to, you know, allow us to live in and come up with more creative solution.

Jacob Morgan 53:24

Okay. So I know we only have a couple of minutes left, I'm just trying to think if there's anything else in terms of action items, or tips or things that you recommend people do. I know one of the other things that you talked about on the book or zones of navigating paradoxes, and you had resolving, engaging, avoiding and anticipating, maybe we can go through those just like one minute on each one and try to like, identify those zones. And if there's anything people should do, based on those zones, then we can wrap up from there.

wendy smith 53:53

Yeah, absolutely. My so along with my colleagues with my co author Marianne Lewis, and our colleagues, Ella Marrone, specter and Josh Keller and Amy Ingram, we asked ourselves, you know, how do we understand if somebody is thinking paradoxically or not? And what does that really mean? And so we did some research around the world with about 3000 people to explore what are the dimensions of paradoxical thinking, and what are the impacts of what they do? And what we found was that paradoxical thinking paradoxical mindsets depend on two things. The first is, to what extent are you actually willing to see surface experience the tensions, right? So either you're in a space where there's no tensions, and it's no big deal? Or you're in a space where there's lots of tensions, and you do what many of us do, which is just kind of like, shove them under the rug and ignore them. So to what extent are you willing to do experience tensions? And then to what extent are once you experience tensions, do you think of them as an either or conflict between the two of them or do You think about them as being able to be in the both and, and it's these two dimensions that lead to these different zones. You know, ideally your your are real engaging with paradox thinking is that you're actually experiencing

tensions and you're bringing the both and to them. That's, that's sort of the engaging zone. Okay. And, you know, one thing we have we have this paradox mindset up online for free, anybody could just jump in and take it and sort of take a look at it. And, and, you know, I think it's just instructive of to what extent Am I willing to go to this space?

Jacob Morgan 55:31

Yeah. Yeah. Which, you know, depending on your comfort level, you might not be interested in going. Sometimes I struggled, deciding? Yeah, absolutely. It's not easy. Yeah. So identifying those those zones, it seems like is an important, important step for you as well. And I know you have a lot of other action items and tips and things that people can do. Why don't you let people know where they can go to grab a copy of your book, learn more about you? I mean, anything that you want to mention for people to check out?

wendy smith 56:04

Yes, well, first of all, thank you. It's so fun to talk about these ideas to explore real applications of them. So thank you. This is really delightful. We, anybody can learn more about the book at both and thinking.net. So both and thinking.net. We have more information about the book, we have more information about pieces that we've written, where we've looked at different types of paradoxes. We've talked about workplace hybridity, we've talked about how we navigate polarization in our personal lives. We've talked about the paradoxes of leadership, we've talked about the paradoxes of innovation. So all up there, the it, there's a link to this paradox mindset, if anybody's interested. So that would be the first stop. And that's where you can, if you're interested in linking to the book and finding the book, you can find it there too.

Jacob Morgan 56:56

Very cool. Well, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to share your insights. I love this concept. I'm gonna work on moving from either or to both and thinking and see how learning the question Yeah, I'm gonna want to work on that and see how I can implement that in working in life. But thank you again for taking time out of your day. I really appreciate it.

wendy smith 57:19

It's really fun to have this conversation. So thank you,

Jacob Morgan 57:21

of course and thanks everyone for tuning in my guest again, Wendy Smith. Make sure to check out her book both and thinking and I will see all of you next week.