

Leaders and paradoxes

Paradox in leadership development as a pathway to spirituality - a case study

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Abstract

This paper explores paradox as a gateway to spirituality in the training of future leaders. It is precisely the irresolvable duality and the associated dichotomy of paradox that require leaders to tap into deeper levels of understanding.

The paper starts by describing the concept of spirit in organisations and leadership, the vital strength and life force of an organisation. The author points to paradox as a vital source of spirit in an organisation. Organisations that welcome contradictory forces, wrestle with them and find pathways that are not obvious, appeal to the vitality of their co-workers. They call for creativity and commitment. It is in such places that the wisdom and experience of all people are called upon.

The author distinguishes it from dilemma and polarities and sketches the implications of paradoxical thinking for leadership and leadership training. The author illustrates the use of paradox in a major leadership programme. Through training leaders learn to deal with the complexity in and around their organisation and develop an awareness of unity at a deep level, which allows them to lead their organisation from wholeness.

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Introduction

Several management publications (Handy 1995, Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars 2000, Blackmore 2000, Quinn 2004, Lips-Wiersma 2004, De Wit & Meyer 2005, Trompenaars 2008) have described leadership challenges as conflicting demands, requiring contradictory skills. For example, while change is inherent in organisations, too much change is detrimental to the innovative power of the organisation. We expect leaders to guide people from a compelling vision, yet they must be servant, empowering others.

This relatively new focus in management literature on paradoxical aspects of leadership indicates that a new perspective is emerging. The quest for 'the right approach' is making way for connecting opposites, reconciliation and wholeness.

In his study of soul in the workplace Alan Briskin relates the spirit of an organisation to the existence of paradoxes: "What kills the soul in organisations is the wish to cleave the paradox in two, to ignore one of the two sides or to ignore the tension between the two sides."¹ In grappling with contradictions, the soul is stirred into being. The soul is paradoxical in its essence and resides in the tension between apparent opposites. To access an organisation's spirit, contrasts and opposites should not be banished, but cherished and reconciled. One-sidedness or simple harmony may kill the spirit in an organisation, as does replacing one management style with another. The challenge is to do both/and: run a profitable business and maintain spiritual integrity, globalise and localise, encourage diversity and unity, be both idealistic and pragmatic.

This paper will explore paradox as a gateway to spirituality in the training of future leaders. I will start by describing the concept of spirit in organisations and leadership. Wherein lies the organisation's vital strength and how do co-workers experience this? What can managers do to acknowledge and strengthen that spirit?

I will then focus on paradox as a vital source of spirit in an organisation. I will distinguish it from dilemma and polarities and sketch the implications of paradoxical thinking for leadership and leadership training. How do we train future leaders to reconcile apparent contradictions? Finally I will illustrate the use of paradox as a didactical approach to a leadership programme. This paper is based on several studies I conducted on spirit, leadership, paradoxes and organisations², and on ten years of experience, (co-)leading the programme.

Spirit

The Hebrew concept of '*ruach*' is one of the etymological origins of the word spirituality later translated into Latin as *spiritus*. The meaning of the word '*ruach*' is 'breath', soul, life force, spirit. It is also one of the sources of the word 'soul' (Latin: *anima*). The word *ruach* is used in the bible story of god creating man from dust and breathing life into him, turning him into a living being. That which turns us into living beings is that breath of life, that vital life force. Rather than something we initiate this force is given to us and happens inside us. The force itself is neither visible nor demonstrable but its effect can be felt, as it creates natural movement (as the breath itself is movement).

¹ Alan Briskin (1998), p. 239

² Schuijt (2001, 2009), Schuijt & Hoefman (2009), Schuijt (1999)

Current change management approaches often start by top management formulating the desired change and sketching the path from current to future situation. They then attempt to implement the change in the organisation, which means trying to get people to cooperate in the changes deemed desirable and necessary. An example of this approach is the 8-step model (Kotter, 1996). Such a change approach often kills the spirit in an organisation, as it considers organisations as dead objects., that can be manipulated at will. But more recent literature shows that organisations are living systems that will move and change without our volition or interference (a.o. Guillory 2000, De Geus (2002), Senge, Jaworski, Scharmer et al (2008), Scharmer 2009). If we look for natural movement we should focus more on what *wants* to grow than on what they themselves want to see happening. Where does the energy flow? What is it that co-workers are enthusiastic about? Leaders need to get a sense for movement that is happening already and move with what is arising. Theory U (Scharmer, 2009) is an approach that focuses on attention in the here and now, having an eye for what is in front of us, and getting to the source of what is coming into existence. Leaders who wish to strengthen the spiritual dimension in/of their organisation would do well to connect with the inspiration already present in their company.

Connectedness

The spirit in an organisation can also be observed in the degree of connectedness (Lamont, 2002, Conger, 1994). To what extent are people related to each other in their daily work? Is there a free flow of ideas and the forming of opinions between professionals? Do the employees identify with the organisation as a whole? Are they willing to make an effort for their clients and their colleagues?

When organisational spirit becomes trapped, employees will provide only that which what is strictly expected of them. They complete their tasks and go home. They keep their creative ideas to themselves. Often connection in organisation is a one way process: the company requires their co-workers to be connected to the company goals.(Gobillot, 2008) Managers can give an alternative example by descending from their boardrooms and getting in touch with employees in the organisation. Simple things like knowing the employees' names, greeting the concierge on arrival, sharing the teachers' coffee break in the staff room, writing a weekly blog make a huge difference. Furthermore, the manager can facilitate connections between people, by organising meaningful conversations and freeing up communication channels.

Purpose

Most managers have their primal focus on money and performance, while the bigger picture, the purpose of the work remains in the background. Profit-driven companies run the risk of losing the human dimension of work. 'All things of value are defenceless', the Dutch poet Lucebert wrote. That which is not protected will be trampled under foot. This is why managers should defend 'soft' values with hard measures, lest they disappear. Trust is such a value. To nourish an atmosphere of trust, managers must take strong action against abuse of trust. They must not allow the culture to be ruined by employees who cut corners and must call violators to order on a regular basis.

Organisations which feed the spirit make sure that their employees do meaningful work (Vaill, 1998, Briskin, 1998). They try to allocate the tasks in such a way that every co-worker can see how they contribute to a meaningful purpose. They explore which

procedures and decisions might jeopardize the purpose of the work and they consult with employees to make sure that obstacles are removed. The leaders in such organisations operate from a clear vision and mission and set an example for their co-workers to express their values in their work.

It is a common misunderstanding that all is smooth sailing in organisations where the spirit is nourished. This is not the case. Recession and dismissal of co-workers occur also in these organisations. The point is that some organisations have an enormous resilience to recover from setbacks. The organisation as a living organism has an amazing capacity to change, to adjust, to grow and to develop. If managers do not desperately try to avoid setbacks and chaos, these phenomena offer tremendous opportunities for growth. Ancient spiritual wisdom repeatedly points this out. Who wishes to be without failure draws out his vivacity together with his ambitions, destroying his strengths together with the weak.

In our progress-focused society we are less than charmed of setbacks and stagnation. We want the production process to be managed in such a way that setbacks are prevented where possible. This fails to do justice to the polarity of death and life, of demolition and construction. Death gives life, or so the classical saying goes. If we only want to build, without being prepared to cut, break off, stop and destroy, we nip the spirit in the bud. Sometimes the form (committees, rules and regulations) must be destroyed to offer new opportunities to revive the essence (why did we do this in the first place?). Setbacks offer opportunities for people to take responsibility. Crisis is an opportunity because, if only for a short while, everything is at issue.

Paradox

Vital organisations which nourish the company soul and spirit, foster creative tensions that arise from apparent opposites (Briskin, 1998). They cherish paradox.

Paradoxical leadership is a way of leading the wholeness of an organisation and cultivating connections in the system toward greater creative adaptability (Lewin & Regine, 2001).

Let's consider more closely the concept of 'paradox'. A paradox is an assertion that combines two apparently contradictory statements. It is a false contradiction. A classic eastern example is 'when in a hurry, take a detour.' A more modern example in organisations is: 'It is actually by mobilising your inner strength that you develop the courage make a difference in the outside world'. And another: 'Managers who are willing to let go of control and to trust their employees experience how a form of direction is generated on a higher level.'

Paradoxical assertions unite polarities such as order/chaos, unity/diversity, construction/demolition. It is not at first glance obvious what 'soulful capitalism' or 'constructive demolition' looks like. Therefore, a paradoxical statement inspires us to explore the insoluble relationship between the two forces in question.

Paradox differs from polarity in that, within a paradox, no choice needs to be made between the two contrasting forces. Both operate simultaneously. The key characteristic in paradox is the simultaneous presence of contradictory, even mutually exclusive, elements.

In the simultaneous presence of two opposites lies also the main difference between paradox and dilemma. Dilemmas present an either-or situation, for which there is usually no harmonious solution that serves a range of interests. There is no win-win available.

Dilemmas are often moral issues; they invite us to make a choice based on our values. Dilemmas force us to take a position. Well-known examples are to be found in the Greek tragedies, in which a hero is faced with the dilemma of staying with his loved one (but living on in disgrace) or defending his country (but leaving or betraying a loved one).

It is precisely because they incite us to choose that dilemmas are ideal for making people reflect on their underlying values and presuppositions. Should I hire this young, ambitious woman (at the risk of losing her later to a head hunter), or that more experienced man (who might not generate as much energy or initiative)? Since we need to choose, there is always a price to pay when facing a dilemma. That is why they are often painful.

On the other hand, the challenge with a paradox is to find a perspective that allows us to unite or integrate two apparent contradictions. Paradoxes incite us to use creativity, to think out of the box and to take a reconciling attitude.

Living with paradox

Embracing paradox means to accept and stimulate ambiguity. (Lewin & Regine, 2001). This challenges managers to operate from integrated thought (and/and) and to do justice to paradoxes. It means that leaders are idealistic in a realistic way, and flexible in their control. We need authentic professionals, value-driven lobbyists, service-oriented performers and independent team players. Such leaders are capable of loving confrontation, consistent change and provide adventurous certainty, they create unity in diversity and work hard in a relaxed way. Paradoxical leaders are efficient in an inspiring way, and inspired in a business-like fashion.³

The ambiguity of paradox often awakens feelings of insecurity, impatience and frustration, especially for managers. Trained in a dualistic (either-or) world, they often find it difficult to accept that there are many faces to the truth. Many are strongly rooted in their either-or paradigm and cling to the classic attitude that every phenomenon in the organisation can ultimately be brought under control using rational thought.

Learning to live consciously with paradoxes means letting go of that very control, getting to know our own extremes and shadows, giving both/and solutions time to ripen and like a chess player, always keeping several options open. Leaders who learn to operate from a paradoxical perspective may give the impression of drifting to and fro, sometimes galloping from one extreme to the other. Of course they will pull on the reins every now and again, for fear that everything otherwise might escape them. But taking a paradoxical perspective, they will soon realise that letting go does not have to mean giving up or passing the load onto other people.

³ Lenette Schuijt *Met Ziel and Zakelijkheid* Schiedam: Scriptum, 2009, 2001

In the following section I will describe one of the leadership programmes I have conducted, the ABD Candidates' programme. This programme was initiated by the Dutch central government to develop their future top civil leaders. I will show how the concept of spirit finds an expression in this leadership programme.

The Candidates' programme ('Kandidatenprogramma')

The profile for a new generation of leaders is an indication of what the organisation values in their leaders. By training potential leaders, an organisation attempts to promote desirable behaviour in those who will lead others in the future. By the end of the Candidates' programme, the future managers will meet the following quality requirements for future leaders: they will be inspiring managers with a broadly developed international orientation and thorough knowledge of what goes in society, who lead from a well informed vision on the main challenges of our society and are capable of implementing innovative policies on complex politico-social issues. Dozens of candidates are nominated for this programme by their ministries; thirty of them are selected annually. Since 2002 more than 300 candidates have participated in the programme. The alumni of the programme have been very successful in terms of their career steps. Four years after they started the programme 95% of candidates is in a different job, often in a different department. Seventy percent of the participants has reached a directors position within four years of starting the programme.

The programme has been evaluated externally (using Appreciative Inquiry) and the experience has deepened the programme over the years.

"Being a civil servant is not an easy thing in these post-modern times. Guts and leadership are required; you have to be willing to face the storm. It is political entrepreneurship: leading as well as serving. This makes it tricky and challenging at the same time."

-Henri Kool, former candidate.

Approach

In the view of the ABD Bureau, the Senior Civil Service of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, who has initiated the programme, managers learn most by gaining experience. Candidates are encouraged to learn to analyse situations and to reflect on their own actions. Accordingly, the candidates' programme is set up as a journey. This means being on the road, gaining impressions and meeting other people and cultures, and coming home, processing experiences and making new plans. The traveller is deeply touched and maybe transformed by the many experiences. Characteristic for this programme is the combination of professional expertise (*knowing one's profession*), personal development (*knowing oneself*) and in-depth knowledge of society (*knowing the world*). The collective programme covers eighteen months; the individual programme can run up to four years. Besides training and coaching the programme also consists of a change of context (internship in gaining a different ministry, a province or a municipality) and international experience (visit to a European counterpart and to the European Commission in Brussels).

Paradoxes as a didactical model

The didactical approach used in the programme is a cyclical leadership model, based on the basic structure of myths, described by Joseph Campbell as The Hero's Journey.⁴ This journey consists of twelve steps, each representing one leadership competency. As each competency has its counterpart, the twelve steps can be seen as six paradoxical challenges: Steering With A Free Reign, Autonomous Cooperation, Creative Destruction, Unity in Diversity, Spirit Matters and Servant Leadership.

The competency initiating and giving direction, with its opposite of following along and letting go, is translated into the paradoxical challenge of 'steering with a free rein'. Accordingly, result-driven work is united with process orientation; leaders are being trained to not just focus on gaining control, but also on letting go with confidence.

Since order and chaos are essentially linked - like life and death, movement and stagnation, horizontal and vertical - choosing one of these forces always invokes the other. The challenge lies in viewing the opposites in their mutual dynamics. As all twelve competencies are parts of a cyclical circle, they are interconnected and follow from each other in an organic way. This approach invites leaders to reflect on their actions and their choices at a deeper lever. It prevents competencies being learnt and implemented in a flat, instrumental manner.

I will illustrate the paradoxical perspective by using a current management issue, the desired scaling down of the government organisation. Many departments are confronted with a twenty percent budget cut and a number of ministries are being combined. Viewed from a one-dimensional approach, this is destruction of jobs, a demolition of what has been built up. However, from a paradoxical point of view there is just as much creation: new structures are being formed, new working methods introduced. The challenge lies in creative destruction.

That does not mean to concoct a simple compromise between the two forces: closing a unit while increasing the number of external consultants. Rather, the challenge is to reflect on the connection between creation and destruction and to seek the tension between the two, so as to utilise this. How do we destroy so that we can create something new with the remaining staff? How may our efforts to build something, break off other activities? What do we want to stop doing, in order to start doing what?

In this way, a major reduction can constitute an opportunity to reconsider the actual tasks performed: which ones really matter? What is the essence of the government role? Instead of focussing on how to reduce staff, we might ponder the actual social problems and what is needed to solve them. How could we use the budget cuts to overcome some administrative barriers to effective solutions? We could seize the reduction as an opportunity to reassess the level of quality required. Just how well does the department work, which unproductive habits could we stop in the process? A few of the paradoxical points for action that sprang from such reflections with the candidates in the programme were:

- Downsizing to the extent that remaining departments become stronger
- Discontinuing some positions to make space for new, more relevant activities
- Stopping with activities which do not help improve our society
- Letting go of some employees for the continued existence of the entire department

⁴ Campbell, J. (1949, 1973)

Exploring the soul

Managing paradoxes and dealing with complexity and ambiguity requires future leaders to have a high degree of self-awareness. A leadership training programme should not only include knowledge transfer, case studies and skills training, but also thorough intrapersonal development. Personality-type identification systems such as MBTI or the enneagram, and models that distinguish between various layers in the personality, such as Gregory Bateson's logical levels or the Hourglass model of ego and soul drives (Schuijt, 2001), can be a first step.

In the candidates programme we spend quite some time exploring candidates' biographies. Which events have coloured their being? Which inner contradictions have they developed? As trainers we attempt to go beneath the surface by probing questions regarding assumptions, deeper convictions and views on mankind. It is precisely the candidates' dark and suppressed sides that require attention. We focus on the cracks in their existence. What setbacks have they encountered, and what dents has life put in them? We investigate how taboo feelings such as guilt and shame play a role on their lives. This investigation invariably leads to a deepened connectedness among the candidates, thereby opening up the space even further. By embracing and owning the downsides of being human, these future leaders will guide their employees with more compassion and patience.

In the candidates programme, we regularly ask candidates to reflect on a question or a paradox. In line with Harry Kunneman (2005), we speak of 'slow questions', to which there is no immediate answer or solution but which value lies in dwelling in the question for a while. We devote plenty of time to the exchange of ideas. Managers rarely have the opportunity during their work to examine an issue from all sides. The exchange of ideas generates awareness of one's own principles and presuppositions. By confronting our ideas with others, we learn to see past our own assumptions and to rid ourselves of deeply entrenched truths. A manager once learned that he always assumed the best of people, and it was a real eye-opener for him that it was this very behaviour that had enabled the commitment of fraud in his department. An enthusiastic and passionate leader may miss the fact that leaning back sometimes generates more activity among the staff than intervening. The process of learning to deal with paradoxes can bring up feelings of insecurity, impatience and frustration. The trainer is to create a learning environment that encourages the candidates to confront their deeper convictions.

Embracing all

To deal effectively with paradox, we need to feel at home with extreme opposites. We must embrace diversity as well as unity, creation as much as destruction, risk as well as certainty. If leaders are at comfortable with both poles of a paradox, and understand how they are intertwined, they can really create a win/win solution. They will not be disempowered by setbacks, but instead, will develop resilience. We therefore challenge candidates to get out of their comfort zone through various assignments. In one of them, the candidates are asked to climb out of their ivory tower in the residence and to have an experience in the capillaries of society, which will shake and shock their assumptions and convictions. The idea is for them to

develop new perspectives from which to look at society. One candidate, who wrestled with power/ powerlessness had dozens of talks with a homeless person and found how this apparent powerless person in fact had more control over his life than he himself experienced in his comfortable existence. Another candidate did an internship in a youth prison and learned about compassionate discipline; yet another coached children with behavioural disorders during a summer holiday camp and learned to integrate rationality and emotionality.

It is often more powerful to experience, rather than understand, how opposites can be reconciled. That is why we give the candidates plenty opportunities to experience paradoxes. For example, using the voice can help trainees experience the 'autonomous co-operation' paradox: it is by using my own natural voice that I make a positive contribution to the group sound, and it is through singing with others that I can make contact with the individual nature of my voice. Activities such as archery or juggling allow trainees to experience physically the paradox of letting go while focussing on a target.

"As a result of investigating my uncertainty, I have found more certainty. But it is a certainty inside me rather than from the outside. I used to be able to come across as a certain person and impressing others by using my rational mind. Now, by allowing my insecurity and confusion to be, I can reconnect with an inner power and I feel certain from within."

-Bart Zijlstra, former Candidate

Leaders know how to follow

In the programme the candidates conduct a dialogue about inspiring leaders in their environment and what it means to inspire others. What is inspiration in the context of leadership and what place does their own passion have in their leadership? Candidates each choose an inspiring leader to interview and to follow in their workplace for a few days. They converse with them about passion, inner drives, their vision and values, and how these are reflected in their actions as leaders.

What and who do you follow? Civil servants are traditionally expected to serve politicians. However, this does not mean that a civil servant should not have views or be uncritical. To find solutions for the complex challenges in our society future leaders will have to resolve thorny issues and make sweeping choices, which require courage. Having a vision and living that vision is a significant competency in the candidates' programme. Leaders must reflect on the right course for the organisation and move people in the right direction. We train the candidates to develop their views on society. What should our financial system look like? How can we innovate our health care system? Which values do we want to pass on to young citizens? Participants explore their values and future perspectives and formulate a vision statement. We challenge them to find their purpose in life. Subsequently they practice debating, to be able to defend a specific law or major decision from the perspective of their vision. We also support the group of candidates in developing a collective vision on the role of the civil service.

Lastly, we coach the participants not just on their competencies from the leadership profile but on their way of being. Being a leader is not just about having the required qualities to fill a director's position: it is also making the greatest possible contribution to the Civil service, judging from that person's personality and talents. We do not seek people to fill existing positions but rather, search for the appropriate match between an individual's talent and passion and assignments that the organisation is willing to spend money on.⁵

Heart & mind

The language used by managers in their everyday work is eroded and empty. Johan Verstraeten quotes Hannah Ahrendt when he writes: "Everywhere the dominance of the scanty, economised, one-dimensional word, the standard formula with which man may be securing his place in the system, but which anaesthetises the full life. (...) Even education and the intellectual life are colonised by economical language and its corresponding interpretations."⁶

That is the reason why the candidates' programme frequently uses image and imagination. Candidates view film footage that reflects aspects of leadership: documentaries about actual leaders as well as fragments from comedy, animation movies, adventure film, YouTube videos and commercial clips. We teach candidates to appreciate the wealth of meaning in symbolic language and to think in metaphors. For instance, we show them a film fragment of the mayor of Amsterdam, leading a meeting in which he reaches his goal, steering with a free reign. When exploring creative destruction we may show a film fragment of a mountain expedition in which one man painfully sacrifices his life in order for the group to survive.

Another form of imagination is used when we train the candidates to give presentations. Through stories leaders can create meaning. We encourage the candidates to tell stories that highlight their point of view and to gather specific anecdotes to illustrate a substantive argument in a speech.

Conclusions

Paradoxes open the way to the spirit. It is precisely the irresolvable duality and the associated dichotomy of paradox that require us to tap into deeper levels of understanding. Organisations that welcome contradictory forces, wrestle with them and find pathways that are not obvious, appeal to the vitality of their co-workers. They call for creativity and commitment. It is in such places that the wisdom and experience of all people are called upon.

Being able to live with paradox helps leaders to deal with the complexity in and around their organisation. Through training, these leaders develop an awareness of unity at a deep level. They learn to lead their organisation from wholeness.

As living with paradox is never easy and requires thorough rethinking of our convictions and habits, training to deal with paradox should be part of any programme which aims to prepare our future leaders.

⁵ Jim Collins calls this the hedgehog principle. Jim Collins *Good to Great* Amsterdam: Business Contact, 2004

⁶ Johan Verstraeten (2003), p. 20

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