

Leaders and paradoxes

Working with paradoxes within the context of leadership development

1. Introduction

A number of recent management publications have painted the practice of leadership as a collection of conflicting demands. Modern leaders must be in possession of a number of mutually contradictory skills. Quinn (1991) speaks of 'competing values' and describes pairs of opposite values that keep each other in check. For example, in addition to knowing what is going on internally in the organisation, leaders must also be excellent networkers who can sense what is happening in their environment. Many managers have the feeling that devoting attention to the outside world robs the focus from internal affairs.

Among other things, Van Muijen (2003) points out the paradox that while change is inherent to organisations, too much change is detrimental to the innovative power of the organisation. Organisations must therefore constantly try to strike a balance between change and stability. Elsewhere, I myself have described five paradoxes (Schuijt, 2001) that I encountered in managers' day-to-day work. For example, managers are often regarded as strong visionaries, as those who lead the way and provide direction. At the same time, they are expected to stand beside their people, guide them, coach them, and empower them.

It would seem that in our time, the answer to the question of how leaders should act within organisations is no longer completely unambiguous. Some authors (Kouzes & Posner 1995, Fijlstra & Wullings 1996) reconcile this inherent contradiction by drawing a distinction between managers and leaders, in which managers seem to handle the more administrative aspects and leaders formulate visions for the future and inspire others. However, in practice these two concepts constantly overlap, making it more useful to speak of leadership as an umbrella term that encompasses a range of different aspects.

This focus on the paradoxical facets of leadership indicates that another perspective is slowly starting to emerge regarding the complex reality of organisations. The quest for the one, true theory of leadership is disappearing, making way for the search for the connection between various aspects of leadership.

In this chapter, I discuss paradoxes as an instrument for another way of thinking. I will attempt to separate paradoxes from dilemmas, and identify the challenge that they present to modern managers. Finally, I will investigate the role that working with paradoxes can play in the training of future leaders.

2. What are paradoxes?

Paradoxes are apparent contradictions. They are matters that at first glance seem contradictory, but upon closer inspection turn out not to be. 'Death brings life' is a well-known example of a paradoxical statement.

Paradoxes often present as two extremes or 'poles' that create tension. For example, providing 'strong direction' is often at odds with 'letting go' or 'trusting things to take their course'. The paradox is that direction often emerges exactly at the moment when somebody dares to let go. Paradoxes do not require a choice to be made – they are not really conflicting ideas, but ideas that are connected at a deeper level. In essence, they are two sides of the same proverbial coin. Centralisation and localisation, for example, are two manifestations of the same phenomenon.

It is possible to view paradoxes as two extremes on the same continuum. The truth (e.g. how to act as a leader) does not lie somewhere in the middle, but in the realisation that both extremes are necessary. The trick is to learn to see how the extremes are connected, and to recognise how leaders can move between them without feeling torn apart.

The link between the two sides of a paradox represents the most important difference between paradoxes and dilemmas. Dilemmas are moral issues – they force people to make a choice according to their values. 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 situation. People who stand before a dilemma are forced to determine a standpoint, to take a position. The most well-known examples are to be found in the Greek tragedies, in which a main character is faced with the dilemma of staying with his/her loved one (but living on in disgrace) or defending his/her country (but leaving or betraying a loved one).

It is precisely because they force a choice that dilemmas are ideal for making people reflect on their underlying values and presuppositions. Should I set deadlines for this innovation (at the risk of frustrating my employees), or not take any action (and run the risk that nothing will come of the innovation)? Should I hire this young, ambitious woman (at the risk of losing her later to a headhunter), or that more experienced man (who might not generate as much energy or initiative)?

Paradoxes often contain surprises ('But still...'), because both sides are united in an unexpected manner ("It was actually me revealing my desperation that renewed others' belief in the project"). Paradoxes arouse curiosity ('Although we now have more information, we still have less of an idea of what is actually happening in the world'), cause surprise ('The Ministry of Health does not conform to its own smoking legislation') and sometimes even confusion ('the development of the European Union has made Europe both more and less democratic').

Paradoxes make it clear that both sides are related in many ways, although the relationships may not be clear at first glance. Paradoxes therefore require reflection – it is precisely because they seem to contain irreconcilable aspects that they force us to take a different perspective. Moreover, it is not always clear whether the contradiction is merely 'apparent', or whether there is indeed a genuine contradiction. As is the case with dilemmas, paradoxes permit neither a simple compromise nor a simple choice (or, if we do make a choice, it hits us from behind like a boomerang). For example, leaders who place a strong emphasis on team spirit and a feeling of togetherness will irrevocably come up against anxious souls who are frightened for their individual freedom.

Thinking about paradoxes can result in deeper understanding, such as the discovery of higher-level interrelationships. It is possible to experience this connection without destroying the tension between the two poles.

3. What can be gained from thinking in terms of paradoxes?

Why should we actually view organisational issues as paradoxes? How can we benefit from looking at them this way?

3.1. Thinking on different levels

Firstly, paradoxes prevent us from oversimplifying the organisational context, and encourage us to think on different levels. They force managers to take a critical view of all the knowledge and information that reduces complex, changeable and ambiguous organisational phenomena to a simple arithmetical equation.

Thinking in terms of paradoxes transforms the classic notion of 'planning and control' (which aspires towards clear, unambiguous parameters) into more diffuse concepts such as 'dealing with' or 'managing', doing greater justice to the complex environment in which managers work.

For example, the extent to which an organisation should be run either centrally or locally can be viewed as a paradox. The more centrally an organisation is run, the more local initiatives emerge. A reduced focus on specific situations and exceptions is an inherent aspect of the uniform nature of centralised organisation, eliciting a response at local level. Conversely, the more an organisation is governed locally, the more friction arises as a result of maintaining different guidelines and criteria. The need to centrally organise some aspects the same way for everybody emerges automatically, encouraging centralisation.

The classic management attitude regards the issue of 'how central and how local' as a question of how best to manage processes. What is the best solution? Central or local? What approach do we take?

In the 'planning & control' approach, executives try to maintain and perfect a principle of order and discourage any attempt to implement local solutions. When this proves ineffective, they select another principle of order. It is in this manner that many organisations shuttle between periods of centralised and localised management. Taking a paradoxical view, however, organisations may adopt a principle of order without eliminating local tendencies. Management of this type is aware of just how much centralisation and localisation are two facets of the same reality, and does not try to boil them down to just one.

Whenever we reason based on an apparent contradiction that contains hidden interrelationships, we abandon the illusion of a quick or unambiguous answer. The focus shifts towards an understanding of the dynamic within an organisation, to an exploratory management of the extremes and the search for criteria that we wish to apply. Our attention is directed more towards a clear view of organisational processes and our own role within them, than onto the one right approach or method of control.

3.2. Non-dogmatic thought

A second consideration with regard to viewing organisational issues as paradoxes is that they discourage us from taking a one-sided or dogmatic standpoint. Granted, in the west, we are becoming accustomed to the idea that 'the' truth does not exist, and that 'truth' has become unworkable as a concept. Nevertheless, in practice many of us are still in search of an irrefutable truth, the one true principle that makes it crystal-clear what we must do. In organisations, this often shows itself as 'the best formula for crushing the competition' or 'the best solution to the current problems'. The congress industry takes clever advantage by appealing to this hope, magically producing guru after guru, who all seem to be able to fulfil people's expectations. Publishers of management books also help to fuel this hype-based culture. You have not even received your 'balanced score card', when 'customer relations management' becomes the order of the day, only to be subsumed by the 'competency management' craze. These fashions often function as dogmas, until each one is traded in for

the following dogma. Thinking in terms of paradoxes enables us to avoid such biased perspectives.

Masters of the Tao often give their pupils a paradoxical statement for contemplation. By training their pupils with paradoxes, they prevent them from becoming attached to a truth or clinging to a conviction. They learn not to think in terms of either one thing or another. Taoism believes that one thing can emerge from the other, and that each one contains a part of the other (visualised by the yin-yang symbol).

In practice, most managers allow themselves to be guided by convictions and habits that were established long ago ('that's how it's done'). The task is also to identify convictions in organisations that are 'rusted solid', and to develop a broader perspective – to maintain awareness of the whole, as it were, even while the focus is on one extreme or the other. Taoism states that people only attain maturity once they are able to submit themselves to, experience, or gain some understanding of that which seems paradoxical.

3.3. Spirit

Lastly, paradoxes open the way to vitality or 'spirit'. It is precisely their irresolvable duality and the associated dichotomy that taps into a deeper level within the organisation, posing questions such as 'What is really going on here?', 'What is the dynamic at play?', 'What are our experiences?', or 'How can we unite two apparent opposites?'

An organisation that works with blueprints generates little creativity, just like organisations that only think in terms of development. Organisations that wish to allow blueprints and development to flourish are precisely those that wrestle with and search for pathways that are not immediately obvious. It is such places that appeal most to people's vitality, demanding their creativity and commitment. It is such places that call upon the wisdom and experience of all people.

To make an either-or choice is to deny the tension that exists between the two sides, yet it is exactly this tension that gives rise to energy and vitality. The American author Alan Briskin paints a picture of an American industry with a dying soul. He says: 'What kills soul in organisations is the wish to cleave the paradox in half, to ignore one side or to ignore the tension between the two sides.' (Briskin, 1998). According to him, it is the tension between the extremes that keeps the soul of an organisation alive. The creativity of an organisation is fostered by allowing both strict management and a coaching leadership style to co-exist. Removing the need for a clear-cut answer allows things to emerge (including innovations), fuelling people's vitality.

Denying one side of the coin to favour the other (such as allowing rationality to prevail over feeling) kills the inherent vitality of an organisation. It is in this way that a biased emphasis on planning and control in organisations is often the cause of managers complaining that 'they can't motivate their people any more'. Contrary to the classic 'planning & control' school of thought, it is not the task of the manager to stamp out this creative tension, but rather to seek it out, foster it and steer it in the right direction.

4. Dealing with paradoxes

The previous section may give the impression that the managing of paradoxes is a problematic and vague business that managers simply have no time for. What they do need are fast answers for making important decisions and providing alert responses. Nevertheless, in the context of organisations there are many inherent problems that cannot be solved in this

manner, such as a lack of innovative resources, high absenteeism due to illness, too little women or people of non-Dutch backgrounds advancing to management positions, demotivation of professionals, non-transparent or delayed decision-making, fragmentation of energy and wasted effort etc. There is no obvious, clear-cut solution to such complex problems. However, it is possible that thinking in terms of paradoxes, which does greater justice to this complexity and ambiguity, may present a way of ‘managing’ these problems. But how exactly? How should one deal with paradoxes within an organisational context? Below, I describe four strategies.

4.1. Acceptance

An initial strategy (and actually the first step in every other paradox-management strategy) is to learn to accept the paradoxical nature of organisational phenomena, in other words, to realise that everything (i.e. life) is essentially connected but presents itself to us in ‘shards’, as a series of unrelated phenomena. Accepting the paradoxical nature of life entails letting go of the hope that somewhere there is a simple instrument that can put the shards back together, whilst at the same time avoiding desperation by realising that although it may not always be apparent, a meaningful interconnection does exist.

It is about accepting this duality. Learning to live with paradoxes is actually about learning to live with ambiguity: the realisation that people cannot be pigeon-holed; that good communication is nonetheless subject to interpretation; that the things that you strongly advocate still have disadvantages; that irrational events can sometimes determine the success of a new product and not logical or rational decisions; that meaning is constantly shifting, allowing ambiguity to emerge in spite of clear information.

Accepting paradoxes is accepting that some things have no solution, and that in many cases there is no ‘correct’ way to act. It is the acceptance that we will sometimes never know what is right, whilst not allowing ourselves to become nihilistic or cynical.

It often takes years to reach this kind of acceptance, which means that paradoxes are particularly troublesome for young, ambitious managers. They want to bend the world around them to their will, which makes them very goal-oriented and sometimes prone to overlooking the more complex nature of reality. Most learn that things are never as bad as they seem. But we can ask ourselves whether young, talented managers might not be better helped by a focus on the paradoxical nature of organisational phenomena during their training. It is also useful to pair them up with a more experienced mentor, thereby benefiting from the life experience present within the organisation.

The acceptance of paradoxes expresses itself through a certain modesty, e.g. by putting ambitious and often pretentious restructuring plans into perspective, or by making room for the uncertainty that surrounds strategic plans and not seeing them as a rock-solid proposal. Acceptance can also be reflected in a certain detachment from standpoints, in not clinging to convictions. As Taoism says, if you think you have it, then you do not. A manager who invests in a certain strategy but who can still keep an alternative strategy in mind, or even present counter-arguments to his/her own strategy, demonstrates this type of wisdom. It is therefore necessary to regard the whole in all its nuances (as opposed to dilemmas, which require taking a clear position that one is prepared to stand by and defend). Although one thing may be useful, the other extreme is too. Arriving at a decision rationally is good, but intuition also plays a large role. Pulling weight by yourself is fine, but you must remain a team player. Neither thing is better than the other.

4.2. Confrontation

Confronting a paradox involves a manager investigating and genuinely getting to know the two extremes. Take the goal-oriented/process-oriented paradox: every manager has an impression of both of these extremes and everybody, guided by their character and personal style, also has a certain preference. Some managers are highly ambitious and focused on achieving challenging targets. Others are by nature more concerned with the quality of relationships and the method of co-operation. Others find co-operation enjoyable, provided it produces results.

Each of these preferences evinces a greater familiarity with one side of the paradox than with the other, and people often have a stereotypical idea of the relatively unknown side. For example, a person who feels more comfortable thinking about results might label a process-oriented approach as 'vague', 'soft' or even as 'navel-gazing'. Contrariwise, a person who tends towards a more process-oriented management style may dismiss goal-orientation as 'a brutal mentality' or 'obsessive and pushy'. I have met managers who believe that relaxing their forceful style somewhat is tantamount to 'just letting everything take its course'. Stereotypes like this can lead to the avoidance of one side, or set one galloping for the other.

A lack of familiarity with the extremes is what causes such stereotypes. This strategy for managing the paradox entails immersing oneself in those aspects of the paradox that are still unfamiliar. This can be achieved by spending time with other managers, putting oneself into another way of working, asking others about what motivates them, experimenting, and developing an awareness of one's own ideas as well as communal ideas. As a manager, what is your understanding of 'directing' or 'letting go'? What do you see as chaos, and what as order?

It is not only a lack of familiarity with the extremes, but also the fear of extremes that prevents people from gaining a full perspective of a paradox. There are managers who never dare to let go completely, who always include a safety net that they can fall back on. Or there are those who never dare to stand alone, to take up a position and put themselves on the line – who always hide behind others, or operate in tandem with someone else if necessary. In this way, managers who strive to create harmony ensure that they avoid any type of conflict and tread a safe middle ground, to the detriment of their effectiveness in complex organisational matters. Experiencing extremes makes managers less afraid, gives them a wider repertoire, makes them more flexible and also (paradoxically enough) gives them a more solid foundation to work from.

The strategy of 'confronting the paradox' also involves increasing the tension between the two extremes – bringing them into greater relief, as it were. This can be a valuable experience for managers who tend to favour compromise. One example is the paradox of 'showing one's true self' versus 'projecting an image or selling oneself'. Many managers experience pressure to show that they are ordinary people, just like everyone else. At the same time, many organisations harbour a pressure to compete, to present oneself as effectively and strongly as possible, to exploit one's successes and call attention to one's strengths. These two forms of pressure sometimes cause managers to seek out a kind of average, an image that is neither too vulnerable nor too slick. People like this can increase the tension between the poles by revealing much more of themselves than before in some situations, and by presenting themselves more strongly as leaders in other situations.

It is this kind of 'magnification' that can help people discover that both aspects ultimately contain elements of the other. Showing one's vulnerability is often what makes an impression, and putting one's ego on display can provide a glimpse of one's fear or insecurity.

The primary goal of this strategy is to allow managers to get to know themselves better, allowing them to become more open to the different (seemingly contradictory) facets of others. This way they learn to show more understanding for various forms of human behaviour, and that there are many roads that lead to Rome.

4.3. Transcendence

The third strategy for dealing with paradoxes is the (possibly temporary) transcendence of the contradiction. Every manager has experienced moments at which both extremes of a paradox go hand in hand – moments when adopting a collegial attitude led to individual recognition, or when a more inward focus allowed for more effective outward action.

Although such moments can occur spontaneously or by chance, it is precisely then that we often in a flash become aware of a deeper connection. The experience allows us to view a situation in a new light, and the significance of a paradoxical situation changes. The contradiction is still there, but we no longer experience it as such. Managers, in considering the futility of many processes within the organisation, which allows them to feel the associated desperation and realise how insignificant they are as one of the many managers, are able to realise what they have to contribute and how they can benefit the organisation. This experience offers new insight into the nature of things (paradoxical or otherwise).

Transcending a paradox means finding another context (sometimes even another paradigm) in which the contradiction no longer exists as a contradiction.

The feeling of transcending a paradox may only be temporary, or may be the result of a brainwave or coincidence. Through a random series of events, we suddenly learn to view a situation differently. However, a study or thorough examination of the paradox can also allow for the emergence of a new perspective. For example, after years of wrestling with the question of whether he/she is (or wants to be) a 'leader', a manager can gain insight into the paradox of predestination vs. free will. This insight will allow a manager to accept his/her unique aspects, but also to operate at the limits of his/her personality. At the same time, he/she enjoys complete freedom to choose one role or the other.

4.4. Playing with paradoxes

A fourth strategy (and one that demands a certain level of training in the previous strategies), is the strategic application of paradoxes by playing with the paradoxical nature of various situations. People who realise that the semblance of a contradiction harbours a single entity can make deliberate use of the paradoxical nature of the world. It is possible, for example, to take a paradoxical approach to intervene in a situation. Paradoxical intervention involves taking the exact opposite approach to the one that you would normally take, or that other people would expect. One example is to agree with an employee's complaints instead of refuting them ('Yes, exactly, I have the same problem. Annoying, isn't it?'). You can even add to the complaints, magnify them, and enable the other person to put their complaints into perspective. This approach adopts a position at the very opposite end of the continuum. Adopting a completely unexpected approach injects a new dynamic into the situation, encouraging both sides to respond differently than usual, just like pulling on a donkey's tail to get it to move forward. Some other examples: encouraging a faster pace in a discussion in which you are usually the one who steps on the brakes; freely assuming responsibility in a conflict for what you believe to be someone else's mistake; defending a different standpoint in a discussion when everybody seems to agree (i.e. playing the devil's advocate); recommending an absurd solution instead of a feasible one, as people normally expect from you.

Playing with paradoxes brings us out of our comfort zone and encourages others to do the same. A paradoxical intervention taps into the tension between the two sides, which (as we saw earlier) generates dynamism and vitality. The fog often lifts, and people laugh at the absurdity of their behaviour, their problems or the situation. A manager who can play with the paradoxical nature of organisational phenomena brings fresh air and a vital dynamic into the organisation.

4.5. Learning to live with paradoxes

The paradox-management strategies given above are often the result of years of practice. They do not emerge by themselves, and they do not come easily. For managers in particular, the maintenance of paradoxes is often coupled with feelings of insecurity, impatience and frustration. Managers that have been trained in a dualistic (either-or) world 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 good old rational thought.

Learning to live consciously with paradoxes means letting go of that very control, investigating, getting to know your own extremes, giving solutions time to ripen, saying goodbye to long-cherished convictions, and like a chess player, always keeping several options open. To many managers, this is nothing less than turning their world upside-down. Learning to manage from a paradoxical perspective can make it appear to the outside world as if managers drift to and fro, sometimes galloping from one extreme to the other. Of course managers who learn to let go will pull on the reins every now and again, for fear that everything otherwise might escape them. But then they will leave everything to their co-workers once again, and realise that letting go does not have to mean giving up or passing the load to other people. This ebb and flow (however problematic for those involved!) teaches managers how both extremes are connected.

5. Implications for leadership development

Above, I have attempted to clarify not only the role that paradoxes play in the work that managers do, but also the manner in which thinking in terms of paradoxes might support them in carrying out their duties. I therefore believe that such skills should form part of management training programmes and internal programmes aimed at further leadership development (such as MD programmes). In this last section, I offer some suggestions regarding the integration of paradoxical thinking into such programmes.

Managing paradoxes and dealing with complexity and ambiguity requires managers to have a high degree of self-awareness.

This means that in addition to knowledge transfer, case studies and practising skills, it is important to devote sufficient attention to intrapersonal development. Personality-type identification systems such as the enneagram, and models that distinguish between various layers in the personality, such as the levels of Bateson or the Hourglass model (Schuijt, 2001), can help in this regard. Approaches that focus on trainees' biographies may also be helpful. Managers require coaching that is aimed at getting to know and reconciling themselves with their unfamiliar aspects – discovering the unexplored parts of one's soul, as it were. This requires the trainer to adopt the role of coach and ask probing questions that go beneath the surface (such as questions regarding assumptions, deeper convictions and views on mankind).

It is precisely people's dark sides (aspects that have been suppressed) that require attention. In this way, managers become much more familiar with constructive and initiative behaviour instead of being critical or dismissive. Exposing oneself to various forms of criticism (constructive or otherwise), investigating moral and other convictions that obstruct criticism, and being confronted with critical behaviour towards others helps trainees to recognise their own extremes.

In addition to coaching aimed at developing deeper self-awareness, trainers must give trainees the opportunity to experience paradoxical truths. It is sometimes much better to experience, rather than explain, the duality of unity and contradiction. For example, using the voice can help trainees experience the mechanism of 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. Another example: activities such as archery or juggling allow trainees to experience with their own bodies how the paradox between letting go and providing direction works. Whoever carefully aims an arrow and then releases it from the bow feels how although letting go and providing direction may seem contradictory, in reality they are not.

It is also useful to devote plenty of time to the exchange of ideas. It is a fact that managers rarely have the opportunity during their work to examine an issue from all sides. Exchanging ideas generates an awareness of one's own principles and presuppositions. By confronting ideas with others, people learn to see past their own assumptions and to rid themselves 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 partly this very behaviour that had enabled fraud to be committed in his department.

Furthermore, exchanging ideas allows managers to become aware of factors or nuances that until then had possibly remained invisible. An enthusiastic and passionate leader may miss the fact that sitting back is sometimes what generates more motivation among the staff. However, this requires an investigative attitude and the skill of maintaining dialogue with one another, instead of debate. It is up to the trainer to create a learning environment in which trainees are encouraged to reflect, to explore the far reaches of their souls and to confront their deeper convictions.

In terms of structure, when selecting the framework and core concepts it is important to be wary of simplistic approaches that threaten to reduce the complexity of the organisational world. An overly biased approach must also be avoided when selecting guest lecturers and/or the management theories to be studied.

Contemplation of the paradoxical nature of many organisational phenomena requires an atmosphere conducive to deep immersion in a topic. Short periods of instruction make it difficult to achieve the necessary depth, while large quantities of input can also impede contemplation. Ensure that the programme contains enough room for reflection.

The process of learning to deal with paradoxes can bring up feelings of insecurity, impatience and frustration. Make sure that these can be expressed in one-on-one situations, but that they possibly also have a place within the programme itself.

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