

“quality circles,” “TQM” (total quality management), “paradigm shift,” and “re-engineering.”

The confused manager, careening from trend to trend, cannot become an effective leader as long as he or she continues to believe in simplistic techniques. But a manager who can appreciate the absurdities and paradoxes of business relationships and organizations is surely going to be far less vulnerable to fashion, and therefore stronger as a leader.

I should note that I use the terms *manager* and *leader* almost interchangeably, even though I know that one can make important distinctions between them. I personally like the one that organization theorist Warren Bennis makes: Managers do things right, leaders do the right things.

Some Definitions

Paradoxes are seeming absurdities. And our natural inclination when confronted with paradoxes is to attempt to resolve them, to create the familiar out of the strange, to rationalize them. In this book, however, we are going to resist that temptation and instead just let them wash over us for a while, to see if we can become comfortable using a kind of paradoxical logic to understand management and human affairs.

The paradoxes in the pages that follow are stated in a deliberately declarative manner, with the full knowledge that they require clarification and qualification. They are meant to challenge conventional ways of thinking and present alternatives to the traditional viewpoints that have been the received wisdom in management literature for many years. All have what I regard as an element of the absurd, and all ask us to turn our thinking upside down. Regard them as exercises for the mind.

Suppose, for example, I were to pose this question: “If you were asked to predict the group in our society that is most likely to mount a liberation effort to end its oppression,

would you have a greater probability of success by picking the group for which you feel most sorry, or the one for which you feel least sorry?"

If you employed the unconventional, paradoxical approach, you would have picked the group for which you feel least sorry. Liberation movements usually arise from groups thought at the time to be perfectly content. That is why they so often have taken society by surprise. Earlier generations, for example, complacently saw Negroes as being happy in their place. Women, before the 1960s, were thought to be on a pedestal, adored and provided for by men. And today, in spite of the efforts of child advocates to call attention to the often oppressive conditions of childhood, children remain in the public mind as carefree, fully protected, joyful in their innocence.

Next question: "From where is the leadership of those liberation movements most likely to come—from those most oppressed by the conditions or those least oppressed?"

If you said least oppressed, you're beginning to get the idea. The leaders come from outside or from the margins of these groups, seldom from the most oppressed segments. African-Americans were most helped at first by white abolitionists. Gloria Steinem is hardly the most oppressed woman in America. Children are represented almost entirely by adult advocates.

As we explore the paradoxes of management, keep in mind that there is a difference between absurdity and stupidity. Stupidity is behavior that can be recognized to be mistaken, incompetent, or blind to the facts. It refers to insensibility, not having all of one's faculties available. With stupid management, it is easy for someone else to see how to do it right. Absurdity, on the other hand, arises from the essential humanness of the situation. Absurd behavior jars us. It seems unreasonable, even ridiculous. It is not what we would expect a rational person to do. It contradicts our conventional ways of thinking and it usually confronts us not

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Individuals Are Almost Indestructible, but Organizations Are Very Fragile

I HAVE BEEN impressed again and again by how resilient individuals are, but how fragile are the organizations that are key to their survival.

Even the most intense, confrontational, and sometimes traumatic situations rarely damage an individual. Yes, there is hurt, but seldom is there permanent damage. People survive the most devastating natural disasters in relatively good psychological shape. But relationships can be destroyed with one wrong word, one single act. That has important implications for organizations, particularly small ones. Most businesses fail because of ruptured relationships among the principals.

Commonly held ideas about the fragility of individuals have led us to treat people who have gone through horrifying experiences such as the Holocaust as if they were damaged goods. So we compound their hurt by regarding them as somehow less than fully capable. That is not to say people don't suffer, but they are not damaged to a point where they function less than normally. A former student of mine, Edith Egers, a survivor of Auschwitz, discovered this when she conducted a study of other Holocaust survivors. While they

were no doubt deeply scarred, on all life-adjustment and personality measures they functioned as well as or better than others who had not experienced such traumatic ordeals.

Fragile Monoliths

Individuals are very strong, but organizations are not. Part of the reason why we don't recognize the vulnerability of organizations is that we have a hard time believing that the relationships which make them work are real. Even psychologists sometimes think of organizations as simply collections of individuals. But relationships—the bonds between people—are very real, and they have a life of their own. To a great extent they determine the behavior of an organization and the people within it.

We may also feel that we can abuse organizations because we have all had experiences with bureaucracies that make them seem like monoliths, impenetrable to all our efforts to make them respond. We feel we have no impact on organizations, that no matter what we do, they can absorb it. That, of course, is not the case. One bad press story can severely damage a bureaucracy. Even giant corporations that seem indestructible can be seriously wounded or even brought down by a single unfortunate turn of events, as we have recently seen with the bankruptcy of Dow-Corning as a result of lawsuits filed on behalf of the recipients of the company's silicone breast implants, and with the closure of Johns-Manville because of litigation over the health hazards of asbestos.

Not all companies deserve to survive but, nevertheless, we should be paying more attention as a society to sustaining organizations. We cannot assume that because they are large they are also invincible. A troubled or failing organization needs at least as much attention as a troubled or failing individual. After all, our lives depend upon organizations. For all practical purposes, in terms of our ability to understand and improve the way society functions, it may be that

the individual is the wrong focus of our attention. Perhaps we should be looking more carefully at constellations of individuals, groups, families, work teams.

My experience tells me that people suffer most in their lives from failed or failing relationships—parental rejections, marital strife, difficulties with bosses—or from the lack of relationships—isolation, alienation, erosion of community. It follows, then, that the best way to deal with individuals may be to improve relationships.

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