

THE FOUR LEADERSHIP PARADOXES

“It is only the great thinker who is exposed to what I call paradoxes, which are nothing else than grand thoughts in embryo.” – Soren Kierkegaard

Change is difficult enough. But for people in leadership roles, change can be made even more difficult because the way is never clear. Everywhere you look there are paradoxes. This tool describes four paradoxes that all leaders have to grapple with.

- **The Ambition Paradox:** Leadership is a humble act undertaken by ambitious people.
- **The Assumption Paradox:** Decisions are made on assumptions, but our assumptions are often wrong.
- **The Worldview Paradox:** A leader has to understand multiple worldviews – and yet operate in his or her own.
- **The Succession Paradox:** All leaders must plan for their own departure.

Because you will deal with all of these paradoxes at some point in your career, it's important to become familiar with them and have a strategy in hand so that rather than being tripped up, you can choose the right road.

The Ambition Paradox

True leaders are ambitious – but their ambitions are in service to something greater than themselves. Martin Luther King, Jr., Jimmy Carter, Cesar Chavez, Barack Obama – each had ambition, but they harnessed their personal ambition to a larger cause. Peter Drucker, the famed management consultant, describes it as a singular focus on defining what the organization needs. When Louis Gerstner took over at IBM, he saw the need for far greater customer focus. When Jack Welch took over at General Electric, he saw the need to divest the company of any business that wasn't number one or two in its marketplace. When Darwin Smith took over at Kimberly-Clark, he saw the need to sell the mills and focus on the paper products business. Make no mistake: Each of these men was ambitious. But more importantly, each believed they knew what it was that the organization needed from them. No one told Gerstner or Welch or Smith to do these things. Each had the ambition to get it done. At the same time, these were the things that needed to be done.

Leaders master the fine line between self-serving ambition and selfless ambition. In the end, it boils down to the fact that effective leaders are willing to do the things that are right for the organization – even though it will challenge the organization and cause some people pain. So when faced with the ambition paradox, ask yourself: “Am I willing to suffer some personal loss – even up to losing my comfortable way of life or my job – in order to do what's right?” If the answer is yes, then you've found the path through the ambition paradox.

The Assumption Paradox

Leaders need to make tough decisions – and yet almost always those decisions are based on a set of assumptions. One of the most pervasive assumptions in our society is that we are powerful actors, capable of solving any problem if we just tackle it rationally. We assume we can affect major outcomes through the force of our will. We assume our competence, act on the basis of that assumption, and then we defend our assumption to the hilt. Even when confronted with contrary evidence, we continue to defend our assumptions out of a fear not to be exposed as silly or foolish. This can result in a series of poor decisions that, bulwarked by our assumption of competence, further reinforce our incompetence! As the author Colin Wilson said: “fear is the mind killer.” And assumptions are the accomplice, driving the getaway car.

The key to negotiating your way through the assumption paradox is by recognizing the underlying fear at work – the fear of self-exposure – and finding the courage to discuss your assumptions and admit your mistakes to others. This means creating a culture where people are free to challenge one another’s thinking and are able to ask questions straightforwardly. It’s a theme I’ve repeated several times in this book: A high-performing organization is one in which trust prevails, in which you, the leader, are the first to admit your mistakes. No one can be right if everyone is wrong, goes the old axiom. But, on the other hand, no one can be right if everyone’s right. You have to set the tone for others.

A major theme of our leadership coaching is that you need to be constantly attuned to your deepest assumptions in order to be an effective leader. Only by constantly scrubbing away at the veneer of self-righteousness can you steer clear of the worst of your assumptions and the worst of your decisions. Regularly challenging your own thinking, regularly gathering a group of people you trust to tell it like it is – that’s the key to solving the assumption paradox.

The Worldview Paradox

To be a leader in an era of increasing globalization and diversity, you need to open yourself to understanding different worldviews. Each worldview carries with it a specific and definable mental model of how the world works – and how it should be. The Western worldview schools us to look at everything rationally. When faced with a problem, our first instinct is to take it apart and devise the best solution. Assuming the world is inherently ordered and rational, that’s not a bad strategy.

But the Western rational worldview is only one worldview. Philosophers and sociologists have identified at least four different worldviews: the Western, the Eastern, the Existentialist, and the Religious.

The Western worldview emphasizes rationality and individual free will. It stresses individual initiative, getting things done, and tackling challenges on our own. This worldview is not comfortable with uncertainty and irrationality. Perhaps that’s why Westerners enjoy neat plot lines that play so well on television. It’s comforting to see sixty-minute solutions, easy outs, and resolvable dilemmas. Unfortunately, this worldview does not prepare us for dynamic complexity, or chaos, or for opening our eyes too wide.

Contrast that to the Eastern worldview, which focuses on what is unknowable. It holds that intuition and insight can help us tap into deeper areas of spiritual meaning. It assumes that the unconscious mind has access to deeper and more meaningful insights than those available through rational thinking, and that this non-conscious awareness can be improved through training. In the Eastern worldview, people act under the influence of unseen spiritual forces, and their lives are suffused with this unseen spiritual world. People with this worldview have a deep psychological need for meditation, for quieting the rational mind, for a personal experience of the unknowable. They also distrust easy solutions to complex problems.

A third worldview is the Existentialist, which holds that life, as it is experienced by human beings, is fundamentally unexplainable, but that we owe it to ourselves to make the best of the hand we're dealt, both in terms of our family and the world into which we are born. This worldview holds that the highest goal is to be authentic to one's own beliefs, to act on those beliefs, and to create a life built on being true to those beliefs. Existentialist thinkers such as Soren Kierkegaard or Jean-Paul Sartre view human beings as forced to deal with circumstances way outside their control – and having no choice but to find meaning by discovering what's truly important to each individual. A corollary to this worldview is that what's important to you has no bearing on what's important to me. We must each discover our individual truth in our own way.

The fourth worldview, the Religious, holds that knowledge is conferred through faith, and that a kind of mystical power is vested in God or a system of gods. People operating under this paradigm have a deep psychological need for prayer and religious experience – and they base their decisions on beliefs and traditions rooted in religion. This worldview confers great power on religious leaders who interpret events in the external world as the manifestation of God's intent and try to impose their interpretations through religious training and teaching.

All four of these worldviews mingle together in today's organizations. At one of our client companies, for example, teams of software developers from the U.S., Europe and Asia routinely work together on projects. Team members have all four worldviews. The team's manager is a gifted communicator, but even he admits to frustration when deadlines approach and people react in different ways. "One guy was praying, another was cursing our sub-contractors, and a third was laughing at the absurdity of it all," he said.

To be an effective leader, you need to find ways to gently manage the contradictions between these worldviews. A well-developed sense of humor helps. But it's also important to establish a framework of core values that can provide people a focus and serve as a bridge between different worldviews. Leaders must lead people in hard conversations about the difference between their values and the organization's core values (the first quantum leap). They must be prepared to teach others how deeply, frustratingly complex the world is. How you lead in this gulf between warring convictions will test your abilities to engage, communicate, and build a high-performing organization.

The Succession Paradox

It has often been said that the true test of a leader is how well you plan for your own departure. If a strong cadre of successors is in place, you've done well. If the organization is left foundering, you've failed. The question isn't whether you have a succession plan. It's how capable you are in surrounding yourself with people truly capable of measuring up and running the show. And therein lies the paradox.

Some of the seemingly most successful leaders fail to find the path through this paradox. They can't handle the challenge of surrounding themselves with people who are ready to take their jobs. Again and again, we see examples of leaders failing to deal with the succession paradox.

On the other hand, we also see great success stories. At one of our client companies, the CEO surrounded herself with a senior staff of highly capable leaders. Her board of directors knew that should something happen to her, there was a surfeit of worthy successors. At another, the CEO of a construction company made a conscious choice to confront this paradox. He held an offsite meeting devoted exclusively to planning the next wave of leaders in the firm. Together with his management team, they identified the selection criteria, evaluated the candidates, and then changed the management structure to give three colleagues the opportunity to buy into the firm.

Cutting through the succession paradox is easy once you let go of the notion of your own indispensability. It's another fear you have to overcome – a fear of the unknown. For some this is hard to do, but it's a necessary step in building a high performing organization.