



**European Forum on
Paradox and Pluralism**
Nova SBE Twinning Project

MANAGING PARADOX MINI-CASE SERIES

Leaders, followers and pragmatic paradoxes

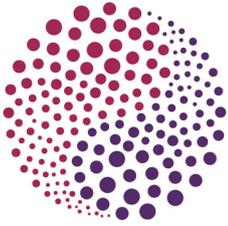
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THE CASE

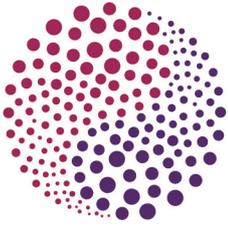
Leadership is the process of social influence through which one person (the leader) directs a team or organization in the direction of collectively desired goal. The process is generally portrayed as one involving alignment and a measure of empowerment. Leaders are expected, in general, to motivate their teams to do things and to get things done through clear and consistent messages.

But think about the following cases in which leaders send mixed messages. These are expressed in forms such as

- “I warn you because I like you”
- “Be creative!”
- “I am punishing you for your own good”
- “We need to innovate but we cannot afford to make mistakes”

These ideas are often transmitted in quotidian conversations between leaders and followers. It is possible that leaders aim to transmit positive messages, but it is also likely that these messages, even if positively intended, will end up producing negative results.

Sometimes it is possible to solve the impasse by explaining that the request is contradictory and ambiguous; however, the situation becomes pathological and paralyzing when one is not given the opportunity to negotiate demands. This can happen because any attempt to discuss directives is considered a form of insubordination, or because leaders are not approachable. These paradoxical demands can also be impersonal, deriving from inconsistent bureaucratic rules or social expectations, creating vicious circles. For example: someone who is not given an opportunity to be promoted to a more senior position because they lack managerial experience (how can they develop experience if they are not given the possibility to do so?). Or the case of a female manager who is criticized for being too soft and nurturing, and, as soon as she behaves more vigorously, is carped for being too aggressive and unfeminine.



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An important question therefore is: why do leaders create negative effects when they aim to produce positive effects? What happens if these messages persist for significant periods of time? What can followers do to respond to the sometimes-impossible requests?

To explain the occurrence of these interactional patterns, called pragmatic paradoxes, or double binds, it is important to explore the reason why people engage in these interpersonal dynamics. In particular is important to consider the power relationship that can curtail people autonomy and capacity to deal with multiple logics and requirements, an unavoidable occurrence in any complex organization.

Step 1: The situation

Identify a lived situation corresponding to the above pattern. Then consider the following questions:

- What caused the situation?
- What are its consequences?
- How does it influence the future of the relationship?

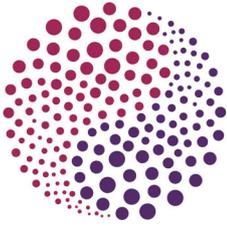
Step 2: The follower's view

From the perspective of followers:

- How can the situation be handled?
- Under what circumstances is the situation "impossible"?
- How is it possible to regain control of the situation?

Step 3: The leader and organization's view

- What happens when organizations systematically confront their members with these contradictory requests?
- How to break a pragmatic paradox?



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Useful sources:

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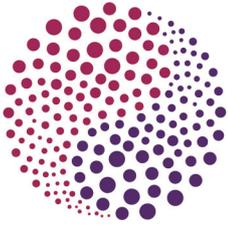
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TEACHING NOTE

The case indicates how complex interactional patterns form and are maintained, creating difficulties for all the involved. The case can be used to:

- Highlight the importance of interactions in organizations and why some become dysfunctional and crystalized.
- Explain that paradoxes are not always external to organizational actors sometimes fruits of their own creation
- Explain the role of power in the constitution of organizational paradoxes
- Discuss possible remedies to pragmatic paradoxes.

Areas:

organizational behavior, double binds, pragmatic paradoxes, power.

Keywords:

paradoxes, pragmatic paradoxes, interactions in organizations.