

PARADOXES AND CONUNDRUMS

How personal leadership provides a balanced approach to difficult situations

By Doug McCarthy

Years ago, when my daughter was working overseas, she told me about the trouble the town residents had with the local bus company. It seems half-empty buses were passing bus stops without picking up waiting passengers. When people complained, the response from the bus company was that they had to keep buses on schedule.

For years I have wondered, tongue-in-cheek, how that decision was made. Perhaps someone from the main office, frustrated with complaints about late buses, sent a memo to all bus drivers stating: *From now on, if you are running late, stop picking up passengers.* Or was the decision made at a meeting? It is hard to imagine a discussion that resulted in drivers being ordered to stop picking up passengers when behind schedule.

Yet, what is truly amazing is that the solution to a management problem superseded the main mission of the organization: transporting passengers.

Recently, an Ontario school board made a decision to deny unpaid leave to a teacher hoping to accompany his veteran father to the liberation celebrations in the Netherlands. It was reported in the press that the Board “caved to public pressure” and reversed its decision. It would have been more satisfying to learn that the Board re-thought its decision, recognizing the situation was difficult because of the paradox created by the human element and its management policies.

Dealing with Paradoxes

Many of us have encountered this kind of paradox: a decision by an organization seems illogical and the only rationale offered is, “That’s our policy.” That rationale is the final retort of an organization desperate for a more reasoned response.

There is a band of research on how organizations can effectively deal with paradoxical situations exhibiting apparently contradictory natures. (See *Organizational Change and Managerial Sense Making: Working Through the Paradox* by Lucscher & Lewis)

What’s interesting is that research has expanded to help us deal with contradictory realities in our own lives. In his book entitled *The Passion Plan*, Richard Chang notes that like organizations, people can sometimes have a totally head-driven approach to situations without listening “to the whispers of the heart.” Or they can have a solely heart-driven approach to a situation that may result in unreasonable and unsound decisions.

Personal Leadership

Stephen R. Covey, in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, talks about the need for leadership and management in our personal lives, as well as in organizations. Says Covey: “Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.” However, the danger is that one can get trapped in the management paradigm.

In this regard, Covey writes that personal leadership is the “first creation” and that it has to come before management considerations. The imperative is that the leadership must be “principle-centered.”

So, when faced with a paradox, the principles of personal leadership can give you guidance and a more balanced approach to the situation – a foundation. The result should be a more coherent response than, “That’s our policy.”

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