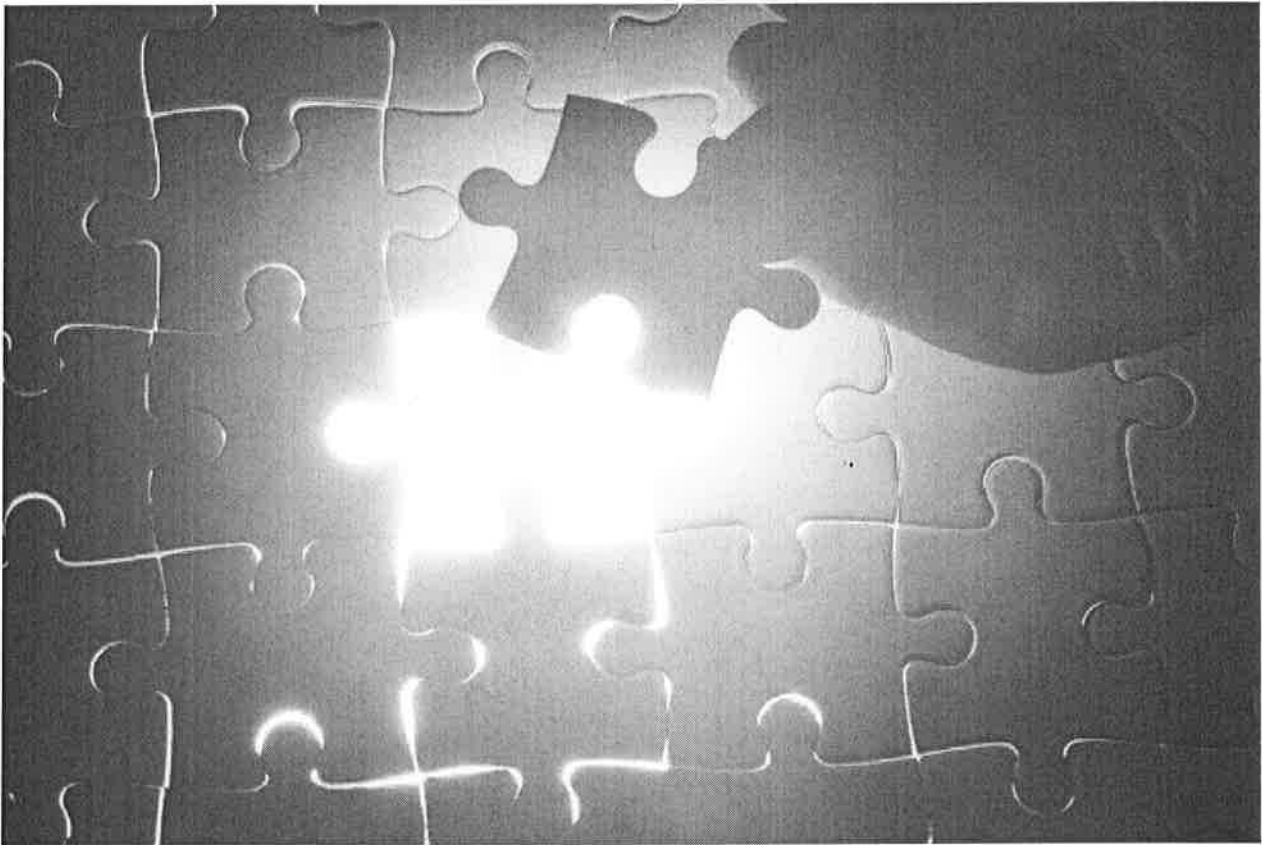


Great Leadership: The Missing Link

By Clegg, Pina e Cunha and Rego - September 19, 2016



Contradictions as an inherent feature of social organizational life

Social life exists in and through communication. Social processes are shaped by tension and contradiction, a struggle between centripetal and centrifugal social forces. The debate, negotiation and discussion of differences is frequently more productive than the matters on which there is agreement. Although tension and paradox may be uncomfortable for those who experience them, and are often perceived in a negative light by observers, they are a necessary and important part of organizational life.

It is a worthwhile challenge to explore how to deal constructively with contradictory demands. Depending on one's handling of dissonance, contradictions can be a source of learning or a well of anxiety. Faced with contradictions, leaders can adopt several strategies: *excluding* one element in order to resolve conflict; *separating* into different elements and ignoring some of



them; *integrating* the elements in a structural solution; *connecting* different elements together with more or less weak ties between them or *engaging in a process of synthesis*.

The last option, the dialectical approach, is having a growing influence on management and organization theorists as they recognize that the social world is a “dynamic knot of contradictions, a *ceaseless interplay* between contrary or opposing tendencies” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p.3, italics in the original).

Individual and leadership dialectics

Adam Grant (2015) extolled “the virtue of contradicting ourselves” and illustrated his reasoning with the following observation from artist Marcel Duchamp:

“I HAVE FORCED MYSELF TO CONTRADICT MYSELF, IN ORDER TO AVOID CONFORMING TO MY OWN TASTE”

This capacity is especially relevant for leaders seeking to engender change. Dialectical processes are exemplified in cases such as Apple, Cirque du Soleil and El Bulli, where leaders have approached situations characterized by contradiction and potential for change and devised a means to replace an existing order with a new one. Individual leaders need to become “ambidextrous” in order to navigate business as a process rich in contradictions offering fecund possibilities.

A major source of contradiction in business is the need for the individual ego to assert itself and for the organization to contain egoism. The synthesis between individual level differentiation and integration can be explored culturally. Individuals are increasingly being pushed to accept and live by an organization’s culture and values while also being proactive and independent, providing the organization with unique and spontaneous forms of contribution (Grant & Ashford, 2008).

When organizations invite their members to adopt what Unilever’s Paul Polman qualified as an “AND mentality”, members will overcome traps of anxiety and defensiveness aroused by contradiction (Lewis, Andriopoulos & Smith, 2014) which, in turn, may lead them to explore opportunities for learning through synthesis.

Synthetic learning is an emergent and holistic mode of learning that, through combination, reveals new forms of knowledge. Leaders combining idealism and realism in a unique and idiosyncratic way illustrate the role of synthesis at an individual/leadership locus. Adam Grant (2015) pointed out that

“JUST AS WE WOULD FEAR VOTING FOR CANDIDATES WHO CHANGED THEIR MINDS CONSTANTLY, WE SHOULD BE WARY OF ELECTING ANYONE WHO FAILS TO EVOLVE”

and that the capacity for “contradicting ourselves” may be one crucial component of successful political leadership:

“When historians and political scientists rate the presidents throughout history, the most effective ones turn out to be the most open-minded. This is true of both conservative and liberal presidents. Abraham Lincoln was a flip-flopper: He started out pro-slavery before abolishing it. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was a flip-flopper, too: Elected on a platform of balancing the budget, he substantially increased spending with his New Deal.”

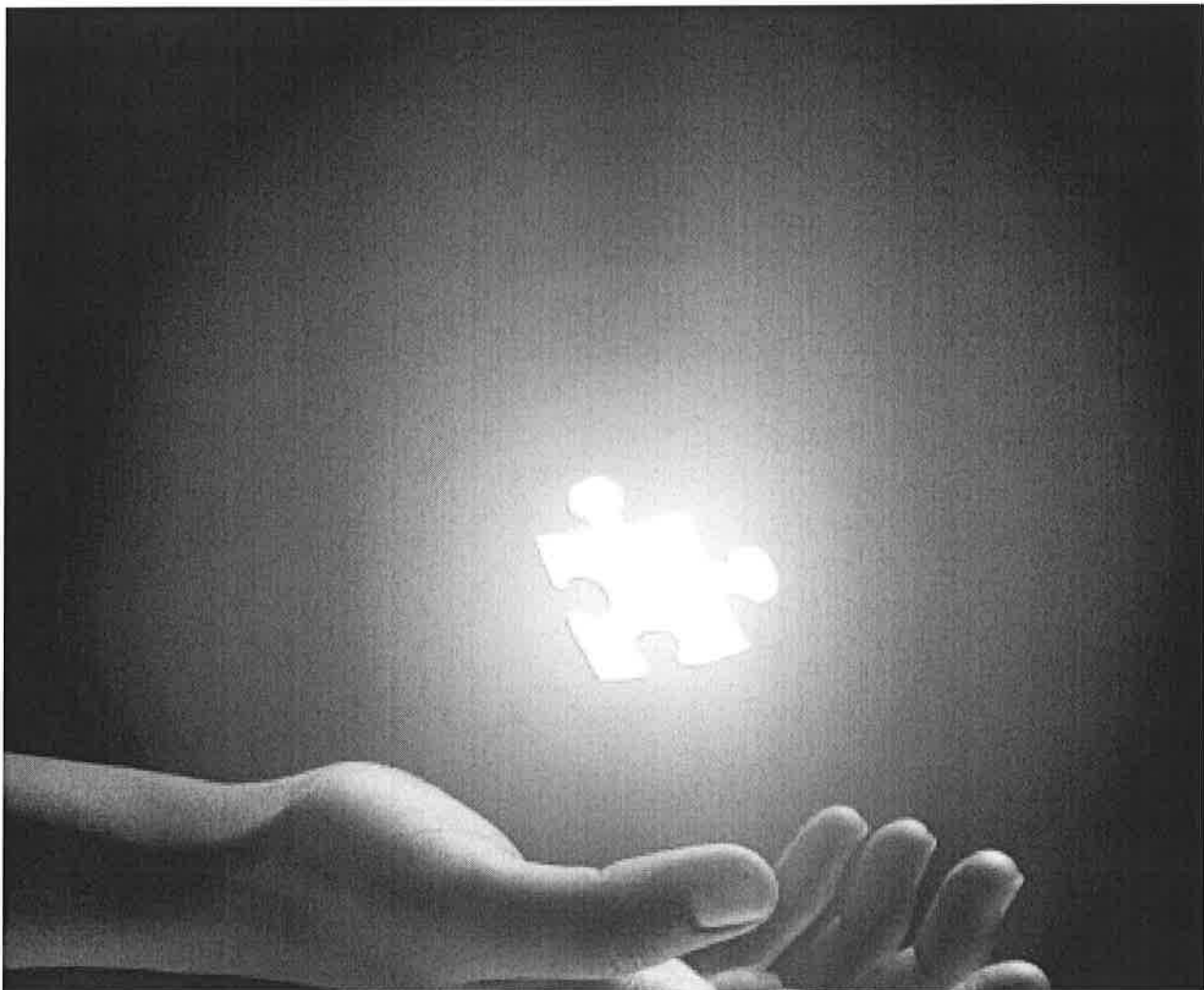
Brooks (2015) has also studied this tension via the cases of historical leaders. He points to Washington, Roosevelt and Churchill as men who were able to achieve extraordinary leadership by cultivating both an *inner* moral voice capable of radical self-awareness as well as a pragmatic *outer* voice. The ability to articulate these two “voices” in a personal, authentic way may be a key to great leadership. As Brooks (2015a, p. A27) explained:

THESE TWO VOICES WERE IN CONSTANT CONVERSATION, CHECKING EACH OTHER, PROBING FOR SYNTHESIS, WISE AS A SERPENT AND INNOCENT AS A DOVE

Brooks (2015b, p. A23) also praised the strategic duality of Abraham Lincoln to cope successfully "with the political realities of the moment":

"He had the double-minded personality that we need in all our leaders. He was involved in a bloody civil war, but he was an exceptionally poor hater. He was deeply engaged, but also able to step back; a passionate advocate, but also able to see his enemy's point of view; aware of his own power, but aware of when he was helpless in the hands of fate; extremely self-confident but extremely humble. Candidates who don't have a contradictory temperament have no way to check themselves and are thus dangerous."

In contrast, the selection of one voice over the other may be a source of imbalance. Stephen Green, Anglican pastor, HSBC's former CEO, and author of *Good value: Reflections on money, morality and an uncertain world* (a reflection of his *inner* voice) was unable to create a culture that embodied his proclaimed values (i.e., he overlooked his pragmatic *outer* voice). The scandal that rocked the bank in 2015 indicates that the capacity to be moral *and* pragmatic is mandatory. Therefore, accepting duality and dissonance may incline people to avoid selection and separation in favor of synthesis.





Team dialectics

Groups are constantly shaped by the opposing desires of their members for independence and interdependence. Even when there is agreement about the goals, groups are often divided by conflicting views on how to achieve them. How these tensions are managed defines the collective, and some collectives are more effective than others in using opposites *virtuously*. The study of Pixar by Harvey (2014) exemplifies the power of synthesis as a facilitator of superior levels of group effectiveness. Creative synthesis at Pixar occurred as a result of the integration of members' perspectives through a process in which the team's output transcended individual views. By engaging with one another's ideas, group members overcame the limitations resulting from individual resources. The collective ideational pool was used in such a way that the team achieved unique results via the struggle between different perspectives, by blending technology and animation.

Tension is also present in the team behind the world famous restaurant, El Bulli (Svejenova, Mazza & Planellas, 2007). Led by Ferran Adriá, the team departed from both traditional and *nouvelle cuisine*, by fusing culinary exploration with scientific influence. The end result was not purely gastronomical so much as a combination of cuisine and science that changed the restaurant experience. Unusual combinations, such as those involving technology and animation, food and science, theatre and circus, function and design, create breakthroughs (Harvey 2014). These syntheses are always temporary states, as conflict will push challenges in new, unexpected directions. Teams that learn to live with paradox and define contradiction as a path to transcendence, gain a potential advantage in terms of their innovation capabilities. Their challenge lies in pushing the tension forward, without letting either side of the tension suffocate the opposing pole.

Organizational dialectics

A dialectical approach can also be cultivated at the organizational level. In this case, an entire organization becomes permeated by a dialectical worldview. Cirque du Soleil and Apple offer two great examples. Their unusual capacity to transform distinctly separate

categories into a new synthesis is a vital aspect of their successes. At Cirque du Soleil, Guy Laliberté and Daniel Lamarre (Kets de Vries, 2007) created a winning synthesis of circus and theatre. This was more than some bland halfway: it composed a new approach to arts.

In the case of Apple, Steve Jobs' interest in both technology and the humanities allowed him to adopt a new approach to technology. The visions of their founders created distinctive organizations. This led them to create so-called "blue oceans", market spaces born out of synthesis. André Hoffmann, vice-chairman of Roche, pointed out how that company has continued to achieve significant success through a "dialectical" feature of the shareholder structure: "The beauty of the structure is that we call the shots in the long run by controlling the AGM [Annual General Meeting]. But we can't ignore short-term investor sentiment because it affects our cost of capital" (Ward, 2015).

One specific field where the dialectical approach *must* be cultivated at the organizational level is corporate sustainability. Hahn et al. (2015) advanced an integrative perspective in which companies accept tensions in corporate sustainability and pursue different sustainability components simultaneously (e.g., short-term and long-term) even if they contradict each other. The authors identified four tensions (personal vs. organizational sustainability agendas; short-term vs. long-term orientation; isomorphism vs. structural and technological change; efficiency vs. resilience of socioeconomic systems). Synthesis strategies can tackle those tensions; for example, the short-term vs. long-term tension may be handled through a synthesis strategy involving the implementation of an alternative corporate governance structure that is more forgiving of not meeting short-term financial goals.

Applying dialectics

How can organizations cultivate a dialectical approach? Here are three possibilities: gain comfort with paradox and contradiction, cultivate duality and increase diversity.

First: the capacity to see paradoxes as generative forces can be practiced and learned, both at the individual and collective levels.

Second: to do so, it is important to replace dualistic views with duality views. Learn that opposites (e.g., short-term and long-term orientation; tradition and innovation; perseverance and the capacity to "give up" when necessary) are equally valid and must be embraced. For example, change and routine are both necessary. Cultivating both at

once (e.g. through seeing things as a process that can constantly be improved (*kaizen*, as the Japanese call it) can offer relevant competitive advantages.

Third: surround yourself with people that challenge your ways of thinking. Deliberately mix different disciplines (technologies and the humanities, circus and theatre). Create psychological safety, allowing people the freedom to think differently, to behave diversely, and to interrelate through disparate pathways. Anne Mulcahy (2010, p. 10), who saved Xerox from bankruptcy, pointed out the following:

“You need internal critics: people who know what impact you’re having and who have the courage to give you that feedback. I learned how to groom those critics early on, and that was really, really useful. This requires a certain comfort with confrontation, though, so it’s a skill that has to be developed.”

A final note

A dialectical view of organizations explains how the tensions inherent to organizing stimulate the emergence of new organizational states through synthesis. Syntheses are not necessarily superior to other forms of dealing with tension nor are they a permanent state of being: they are an ever transforming source of change, revealing new capacities to integrate opposition and leading to new organizational states. The full presence of the poles of a contradiction is a force that pushes further syntheses forward, in an infinite process of organizational evolution and renewal.

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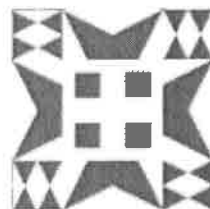
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