



The Paradox Dialogue

The Secret Sauce to Great Strategic Plans That Actually Get Implemented

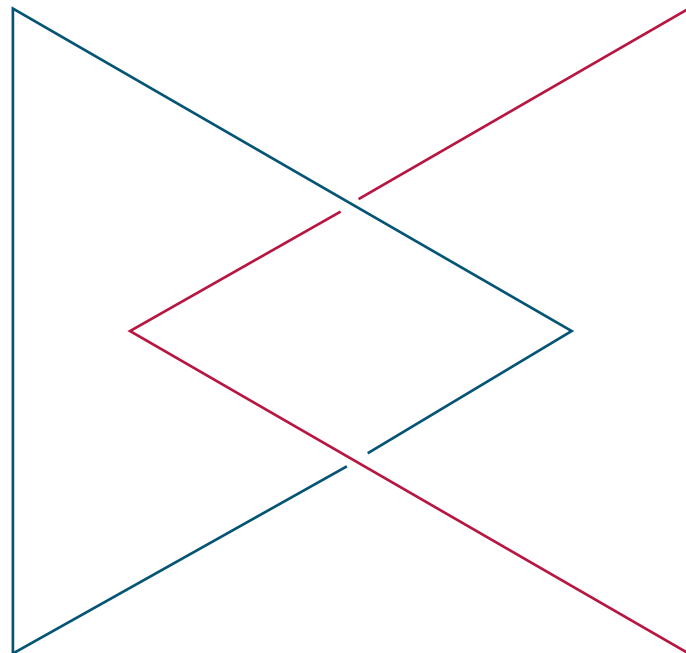
What is it?

Paradox is normally defined as holding contradictory situations at the same time. In the *Team Purpose to Performance™ Process*, the paradox process adds one critical element – emotion. Most planning processes use two-dimensional approaches like SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats). While these components are helpful in the planning process, they are also limiting.

When you engage in exploring a range of emotions, our brains access the limbic system which is the warehouse for all emotions. When we bypass the limbic system and go directly to the neocortex (the executive functioning part of our brain), we miss out on a far more effective way to access critical subtleties that otherwise are overlooked, ignored or that blindside us later on.

Often, we oversimplify issues to a dilemma of “either/or” thinking, “black or white” that limits our ability to address the root cause. Instead consider “both/and”, seeing the shades of gray, appreciating the complexity of the multi-faceted, multi-layered reality of issues.

We acknowledge the range of opposing emotions to better understand the complexity of the situation. “I see an array of possibilities in this situation that



both concern and excite me.” “I recognize and accept how people are feeling, both positively and negatively.”² Excitement without concerns, and people feel that it’s inauthentic, lacking reality. All concerns without excitement, and hope is futile thinking. We get better results when they acknowledge and integrate feelings into the planning process. “Like breathing, it would be ridiculous to tell someone either inhale or exhale. To live we have to inhale and exhale.”¹



When to Use It

- 1 When you feel like you have had the same arguments repeatedly and want to use precious energy and time in a more productive way.
- 2 After you have aligned on what will make you proud and want to act.
- 3 To successfully narrow the strategic focus to the fewest, essential objectives and results that matter most.

How to Use It

To get the ball rolling, use the “MadLib” fill-in-the-blanks approach:

I feel (emotion) because (...) AND I feel (opposing emotion) because (...)

Sample Paradoxes

- 1 Our IT leaders are fearful of not pleasing the business partner within our silo, working different purposes and processes and having to sacrifice from our individual functions AND we will feel stronger and more confident, through influence, to speak with one voice and making decisions based on optimizing the portfolio.
- 2 Enthusiastic about our purpose statement and worried we won't have the discipline over time to say no, fragmenting our resources.
- 3 Proud that we're focused on health outcomes and worried that business opportunities might drive us in many different directions such as financial need, so we sell cigarettes.



Once the paradoxes are brainstormed, the next step is to better understand which paradoxes are worthy of our time and energy versus accepting those that are inherent in a situation. Consider using the following four questions as a criteria to decide which to work on:

1 Is it in our sphere of influence?

(Vs. what is out of our control, such as the economy or the weather). Sometimes paradoxes are simply inherent in our situation and there is nothing to be done except to acknowledge them and move on. Labeling is powerful and reduces the airtime for topics that do not deserve additional energy. Move on.

2 Is it work that only we can do?

No one else in the organization can do this work or should be doing this work. This is why we are here.

3 Is it the most important or highest impact work we should address together?

(What customers really want or would simply feel good to get it off the master to do list. Does it move the needle?)

4 Does it help us make progress toward our purpose?

Final thought: The Paradox Dialogue advances work cultures to become more inclusive, engaging multiple perspectives, valuing differences, as a way to achieve the best possible outcomes. The leader's ability to create psychological safety here is paramount.³

Resources:

- 1) Johnson, Barry. (2014). *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems*. HRD Press, Inc.
- 2) VIDEO: A Leader's Dilemma: How to Effectively Deal with Paradox <https://youtu.be/vdxvv-W4NXU> (first twenty minutes)
- 3) What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team, NYT Magazine

Adapted from InterActive Leadership, BurnhamRosen Group.