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### Introduction

# Embracing Paradox and Absurdity

*There is only one truth, steadfast, healing, salutary, and that is the absurd.*

- ANDREW SALMON

ALL OF US like to think that human affairs are essentially rational, that they work like other things in our world, and that we should therefore be able to make them work for us. The wealth of experience that fails to support this notion never seems to faze us. Small wonder, then, that it may require some effort to accept the ideas presented in this book - that life is absurd, that human affairs usually work not rationally but paradoxically, and that (fortunately) we can never quite master our relationships with others.

That is certainly true in regard to our relationships in business and other bureaucratic organizations. It is my hope to encourage managers and all those in positions of leadership to think beyond the conventional wisdom - in particular, to understand how the ways we think shape what we see, and how paradox and absurdity inevitably play a part in our every action.

I am inspired, of course, by that group of post-World War II playwrights - Pinter, Ionesco, Genet, Beckett, and others - who questioned the assumptions of traditional theater, criticizing it for oversimplifying and overrationalizing human affairs. They felt that only by recognizing the mystery and absurdity of life was the dignity of the human being served. Collectively, their work became known as the "Theater of the Absurd," and it turned out to be an important moment in the history of dramatic art. I believe that we need such a moment now in regard to the art of management.

## The Wrong Direction

Examining the absurd is not just a playful exercise. I believe that many programs in management training today are moving us in the wrong direction because they fail to appreciate the complexity and paradoxical nature of human organizations. Thinking loses out to how-to-do-it formulas and techniques, if not to slogans and homilies, as the principal management guides. I can understand their appeal. Considering the difficulty of the tasks before them, it is not surprising that managers still find themselves prone to accept a definition of management that makes it seem as if it could be simply learned.

Indeed, what's the harm? Why not let managers believe the familiar bromides? As we will see, there is a considerable downside. Leading managers to believe that their responsibilities can be discharged adequately by attending seminars or following simplistic formulas creates just the opposite of its intended effect. When such formulas fail them, managers become frustrated, aggressive, and sometimes verbally abusive.

Still, managers are whipsawed from one fashionable training program to the next as their organizations keep buying into new trends, new definitions of management, new motivational phrases. Years ago we talked about "leadership," then the byword became "morale," then it was "motivation," then "communication," then "culture," then "quality," then "excellence," then "chaos," then back again to "leadership." Along the way we were buffeted about by buzzwords like "zero defect," "management by objectives," "quality circles," "TQM" (total quality management), "paradigm shift," and "re-engineering."

The confused manager, careening from trend to trend, cannot become an effective leader as long as he or she continues to believe in simplistic techniques. But a manager who can appreciate the absurdities and paradoxes of business relationships and organizations is surely going to be far less vulnerable to fashion, and therefore stronger as a leader.

I should note that I use the terms manager and leader almost interchangeably, even though I know that one can make important distinctions between them. I personally like the one that organization theorist Warren Bennis makes: Managers do things right, leaders do the right things.

## Some Definitions

Paradoxes are seeming absurdities. And our natural inclination when confronted with paradoxes is to attempt to resolve them, to create the familiar out of the strange, to rationalize them. In this book, however, we are going to resist that temptation and instead just let them wash over us for a while, to see if we can become comfortable using a kind of paradoxical logic to understand management and human affairs.

The paradoxes in the pages that follow are stated in a deliberately declarative manner, with the full knowledge that they require clarification and qualification. They are meant to challenge conventional ways of thinking and present alternatives to the traditional viewpoints that have been the received wisdom in management literature for many years. All have what I regard as an element of the absurd, and all ask us to turn our thinking upside down. Regard them as exercises for the mind.

Suppose, for example, I were to pose this question: "If you were asked to predict the group in our society that is most likely to mount a liberation effort to end its oppression, would you have a greater probability of success by picking the group for which you feel most sorry, or the one for which you feel least sorry?"

If you employed the unconventional, paradoxical approach, you would have picked the group for which you feel least sorry. Liberation movements usually arise from groups thought at the time to be perfectly content. That is why they so often have taken society by surprise. Earlier generations, for example, complacently saw Negroes as being happy in their place. Women, before the 1960s, were thought to be on a pedestal, adored and provided for by men. And today, in spite of the efforts of child advocates to call attention to the often oppressive conditions of childhood, children remain in the public mind as carefree, fully protected, joyful in their innocence.

Next question: "From where is the leadership of those liberation movements most likely to come - from those most oppressed by the conditions or those least oppressed?"

If you said least oppressed, you're beginning to get the idea. The leaders come from outside or from the margins of these groups, seldom from the most oppressed segments. African Americans were most helped at first by white abolitionists. Gloria Steinem is hardly the most oppressed woman in America. Children are represented almost entirely by adult advocates.

As we explore the paradoxes of management, keep in mind that there is a difference between absurdity and stupidity. Stupidity is behavior that can be recognized to be mistaken, incompetent, or blind to the facts. It refers to insensibility, not having all of one's faculties available. With stupid management, it is easy for someone else to see how to do it right. Absurdity, on the other hand, arises from the essential humanness of the situation. Absurd behavior jars us. It seems unreasonable, even ridiculous. It is not what we would expect a rational person to do. It contradicts our conventional ways of thinking and it usually confronts us not with a problem, but with a dilemma. Even the best of us are not sure what to do.

Paradox and absurdity keep us off balance. In so doing, they produce the humility, vitality, and creative surprise that make life so worth living. But they cannot be controlled. They will always defy the attempt.

I find it disquieting to see the term paradox entering management literature in a way that indicates it can be "managed." I suppose we should expect this because of the sense of omnipotence that plagues American management, the belief that no event or situation is too complex or too unpredictable to be brought under management control.

But as Charles Handy points out in his book *The Age of Paradox*, "Paradox can only be 'managed' in the sense of coping with, which is what *management* had always meant until the term was purloined to mean planning and control." Thus, paradox is not just another organizational factor to be brought into the workshop of the management technologist. It would be misleading even to suggest that it can be coped with in any systematic or rational way. It will never be that comfortable. Therefore, as you will no doubt discern in the pages that follow, the phrase "management of the absurd" is, itself, an absurdity.

## **In Pursuit of the Paradoxical**

My contrarian view of human relations and my interest in paradoxical thinking have been with me so long that I'm not sure when or where they began. Certainly, I have profited from having worked closely with the late and distinguished psychologist Carl Rogers, as his student, his research assistant, and his colleague at the University of Chicago, and eventually as president of the Western Behavioral Sciences Institute, where he did some of his most important work. Over the years I watched him take positions that were in striking contrast to the mainstream thinking of the day, defend them successfully, and eventually see them incorporated so thoroughly into the mainstream that most people now don't even know where the ideas came from. He has been called America's most influential psychologist, and he certainly provided an example of how one should think for oneself, questioning the conventional wisdom.

My long friendship with the exceptionally creative social psychologist Alex Bavelas, who is a major contributor to our understanding of organizations, surely aided my pursuit of the paradoxical. I was a junior member of the human relations faculty at the Harvard Business School (he was then a professor at nearby MIT) when I first encountered him face-to-face and experienced his remarkable ability to take a completely fresh look at ideas, often turning them upside down, illuminating the paradoxes.

There were other influences. I worked at universities, research institutes, and as a naval officer, studying leadership and organizational behavior. I consulted with corporations, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations. But probably the most important contribution to my thinking has been my thirty-plus years heading organizations. Being both a psychologist and a CEO has given me a special appreciation of the paradoxes and absurdities of organizations, and how nothing works quite the way we have been taught.

I could honestly title this book *What I Wish I Had Known Forty Years Ago*. It is a book of ideas, observations, and lessons learned, not a book of management techniques. I have organized it first to delve into the nature of paradoxical thinking, then to examine particular paradoxes that we all encounter in human relationships and organizations. Along the way, I will call attention to those qualities of effective leadership that often go unrecognized.

These chapters need not necessarily be read in sequence, but can be read in whatever order appeals to the reader. It is my hope that they will strike familiar notes in the reader's own experience, and in so doing will lead to the development of a more realistic way of assessing situations, a more fully integrated approach to managing oneself and others, a more genuine and potent leadership style, and an improved ability to contribute to the success of organizations at whatever managerial level one works.

I know from having talked with hundreds of managers that the ideas in this book can be disturbing initially. But I also know that after managers have enough exposure to them, it is possible not only to entertain these ideas, but also to take comfort in them. After all, the beauty of paradoxical thinking in management is its timelessness. Most ideas come and go with discouraging regularity in management literature and executive training programs. But paradox and absurdity will be with us as long as humans congregate in organizations.

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