HOLDING THE TENSION OF PARADOX

THERE IS OPPORTUNITY IN OPPOSITES.
At exactly the same time: we can want and not want a change; we may wish to be told "the answer" to a problem while we also wish to decide ourselves; we may have to give directives for action while we also wish to assure freedom of choice....

While definitions vary, by paradox I mean the presence of two feelings, ideas, principles, ways of being or values that seem in opposition to each other. Also, there are truths in both sides of the paradox relevant to an immediate situation.

Exploring both sides of a paradox often leads to higher quality decision making and action. But, this can be a leadership challenge--opposites may create difficult personal and group tension which can push us to land on just one side of the paradox, excluding important considerations.

COMMON PARADOXES TO LOOK FOR IN LEadership.
Two very common paradoxes in organizational life and leadership are:

• **Head to head disagreements**: Contradictory proposals for action can represent a paradox. Each action may address different opportunities or risks, all of which are relevant. Closing down discussion too soon undermines quality of strategic design.

• **Telling people what they have to do and facilitating self-motivation**: Exercise of authority is essential for effective leadership; however, better results occur when people are helped to find their own motivation rather than just complying with orders. The optimal blend of telling vs. facilitating varies in every situation.

Additional common paradoxes in leadership include:

• Giving directives for action and assuring freedom of choice

• Strongly asserting opinions and strongly assuring opinions of others are heard

• Assuring a focus on outcomes and assuring high quality relationships

• Striving for perfection and staying nonjudgmental about imperfection

CASE STUDY: A NEW MANAGER IS CONFRONTED BY PARADOX.
A new manager of an outpatient healthcare clinic receives a vacation request from a physician. The physician is adamant that he needs to go even though, due to other vacations at the same time, his absence will result in too few urgent care appointments to meet patient demand.

The manager feels caught in paradox: meeting patient needs vs. meeting physician needs. She feels she must assure appointment availability but she could damage new relationships if she denies the vacation request. She calls a staff meeting to discuss the problem. The physicians are quite upset and angry. They feel overwhelmed with work. They think the manager has no concern about their vacations. The previous manager always approved vacation requests without asking questions. The physicians pressure the new manager to do the same.
THE EMOTIONAL TENSION OF PARADOX CAN BE INTENSE.
Multiple paradoxes escalate emotional tension, especially for the physicians. They seem to see meeting patient needs and meeting physician needs as mutually exclusive. They also don’t know how much the new manager will set limits vs. enable freedom of choice or just assert her opinion vs. assure they are fully heard.

The manager's wish for dialogue prolongs decision-making which is hard when the stakes feel high. Strong feelings on one side of a contradiction can make considering the other side feel personally threatening.

Personal history could impact ability to tolerate emotional tension. For example, because of past experience, a manager could have a hard time both asserting her opinion while also hearing others. Then, a manager could be too arbitrary or too lax or bounce between the two.

CASE STUDY FOLLOW-UP: THE MANAGER EMBRACES PARADOX.
As the meeting proceeds, the manager finds ways to hold multiple paradoxes:

- **She asserts her opinion and assures the physicians are heard:** The manager steadies herself emotionally to tolerate physician anger and distrust, She uses active listening to assure the physicians feel heard. The manager affirms that physician needs are important. She also asserts her opinion that patient needs should be met.
- **She creates dialogue on both sides of the paradox of needs:** The manager then pursues exploration of patient needs. Due to her previous, skillful active listening, a couple of physicians are able to say they are uncomfortable about appointment shortages.
- **She gives a directive for action and assures freedom of choice:** The manager states that adequate appointments must always be maintained. She also asks for physicians' help in creating a fair plan for vacation coverage, giving them both influence and choice. This further diminishes tension. She shows data suggesting that vacation coverage would not create significant extra workload.

At the end of the meeting, volunteers agree to cover appointments for the recent vacation request so that the physician is able to go.

HOLDING AND WORKING THROUGH PARADOX REQUIRES ONGOING PRACTICE.
In a few weeks, the manager and physicians devise an appointment coverage plan. That dialogue surfaces the complexity of the issue of appointment availability vs. individual physician workload. They shift their work into those broader concerns. Through embracing multiple paradoxes, the manager has enabled the team to tackle more difficult problems.

I find that the perspective of paradox can be one way to help sort out difficult problems. In coaching, I help clients identify paradox and create strategies to manage tension to make possible the most effective solutions.

Substantial self awareness, integrity, art and skill are necessary to hold and work through the tension of paradox.