

Introduction

If there are two courses of action, you should always pick the third.

—Proverb

There are two questions virtually everyone asks: “Why is managing people so hard?” and “Why do people dislike management so much?” The answers to both questions involve *paradoxes*—seemingly incompatible ideas and practices that have to be made to work well together in organizations. Working well means, on one hand, that they are efficient and effective at achieving their intended purposes and, on the other, that they are the kinds of places where people would like to be. This book, written for current and future public managers, not personnel technicians, highlights paradoxes in human resource management and invites you to join the search to improve work life in organizations. While human resource management may start with identifying workplace problems—the subject of scathing criticism over the past century and the “Dilbert” cartoons of today—the purpose is ultimately to find ways to make life better for employees and to enhance performance of public institutions as a whole.

In so doing, this text seeks to both “build in” (Latin: *instruere*) and “draw out” (*educare*). That is, most people benefit from an integrated, structured knowledge base more than from disconnected facts and ideas. Yet learning is not simply instruction—it is also an unpredictable process of exploring and questioning, a process that draws out the best in the human mind. Accordingly, you should truly “own” this publication by annotating these pages with *your* ideas, disputes, satisfactions, discomforts, experiences, comparisons, applications, inventions, and paradoxes. Then interact with other readers in a live or virtual classroom to stretch your thinking about the management of work. The way to get the most *out* of the book is to get *into* it! Ask more of yourself than anyone can ever ask of you; that way you will always be ready for anything. Nothing is as exhausting as underachieving. Become knowledgeable, for without knowledge progress is doomed; be prepared to contribute, because giving ensures growth.

MANAGING PEOPLE

What, then, is *human resource management*? If an organization can be defined as a group of people working toward a goal, and management can be defined as the process of accomplishing these goals through other people, then the subject of this volume is the

development of policies for effective use of human resources in an organization. Stated differently, all decisions affecting the relationship between the individual and the organization can be seen as dimensions of personnel management. Psychological and productivity goals are pivotal to this relationship. That is, the work performed must be meaningful to employees as well as to the institution. Not surprisingly, these two goals are interactive, reciprocal—and sometimes contradictory.

Human resource management, in short, is a titanic force that shapes the conditions in which people find themselves. Its daily practice is an area that administrators are responsible for and can have a genuine impact on. Human resource management *matters*. Indeed, the most important job of an administrator is to help the organization use its most valuable asset—people—productively. From deciding how individuals will be recruited to how they are then compensated, trained, and evaluated, human resource administration has a significant, even definitive, effect on the careers of all employees and employers. Legislative officials and chief executives may have authority to design new programs and approve budgets, but it is managers who hire, place, pay, develop, and appraise subordinates. They spend more time on managing people than on anything else. Nothing is of more consequence; nothing is more difficult.

And it is not going to get easier. Not only have personnel specialists in many jurisdictions been “downsized,” but also organizations are experimenting with entirely new approaches to human resource management, including far-reaching civil service reform. Managers are being required to do more with less, despite the fact that human resource issues are becoming—as this text demonstrates—more numerous and increasingly complicated. Clearly, a supervisor who regards personnel concerns as a nuisance to be endured will be overwhelmed by additional responsibilities and the need to deal with them. As one wise official stated, “Put human resource management first because it is the most important.” The unimpeachable fact is that a leader who does not take care of his or her people will have no one to lead. Fail to honor people, and they will fail to honor you. The tragedy: Few are trained to manage employees.

THE PARADOX PUZZLE

An inexorable element of the world is that it evolves and becomes more complex, making management of organizations more difficult. Rapid and spastic change spawns confusing, contradictory, absurd—and true—paradoxes. Existing in a twilight zone between the rational and irrational, a **paradox** (from the Greek *para*, or beyond, and *doxa*, or belief) is an anomalous juxtaposition of incongruous, incredible, and sometimes burlesque contentions. Such seeming absurdities and tantalizing riddles contradict oversimplifications and overrationalizations in conventional thinking. In so doing, they produce humility, vitality, and surprise; the beginning of wisdom is the realization of ignorance. These gnarly predicaments jolt the brain, alternatively puzzling and inspiring people to wring further understanding from understanding by making the unknown known (Rescher, 2001). This creates a deeper comprehension of the principles behind the paradoxes, furnishes valuable insights, and provides unexpected solutions to thinking about people and institutions.

Indeed, the recognition of ambiguities, equivocations, and unstated assumptions inherent in paradoxes has led to significant advances in science, philosophy, mathematics, and other fields. “The true test of a first-rate mind,” F. Scott Fitzgerald said, “is the ability to hold two contradictory ideas at the same time and still function.” Some of the best-led organizations, likewise, are those that achieve a balance between seemingly contradictory opposites.

Full of paradoxes, the management of human capital embodies clashes between apparent truths that sow confusion and tax the ability of administrators. These truthful contradictions lurk and mock both study and practice. Everyone agrees in principle that people are essential, for example, but often they are taken for granted in organizations. One key conundrum, as obvious as it is ignored, is the **paradox of democracy**. Citizens have many civil rights in the conduct of public affairs (e.g., the freedoms of speech, elections, and assembly), but employees experience precious few such rights in organizations (e.g., subordinates seldom choose superiors). One part of American culture stresses individualism, diversity, equality, participation, and a suspicious attitude toward power, but another emphasizes conformity, uniformity, inequality, and submission to authority. In fact, the unity of opposites revealed by paradoxes is embedded in the human condition—birth and death, night and day, happiness and misery, good and evil, as each defines the other.

People may value freedom very highly, but in the end they work in organizations that significantly reduce it. As Rousseau observed, “Man is free, but everywhere he is in chains.” Political democracy lies uneasily alongside economic authoritarianism. While “we the people” mandates sovereignty over political and economic life, political power has been democratized to serve the many, but economic power nonetheless serves the few (Kelly, 2001)—which includes relentless pressures to turn concerned citizens into mindless consumers. “We stress the advantages of the free enterprise system,” Robert E. Wood, former chief executive of Sears, has been quoted as saying, “but in our individual organizations, we have created more or less a totalitarian system.” Because capitalism and democracy are mutually exclusive concepts, the manner in which this contradiction is resolved greatly affects quality of life. Does the economy exist for society, or vice versa? Does America belong to citizens or to corporations? In a democratic society, should there be an arbitrary distinction such that people have a voice in political decisions but not in economic decisions?

A related fundamental riddle is the **paradox of needs**—individuals and organizations need one another, but human happiness and organizational rationality are as likely to conflict as they are to coincide. Many institutions today remain predicated on the machine model of yesteryear; indeed, the vast majority of them were created in the Machine Age of the industrial era. A top-down, command-and-control approach, revealed by the hierarchical organization chart, seeks to impose static predictability, demand efficiency, and expect self-sacrifice—the hallmarks of bureaucratization. But human beings, by definition, are premised not on a mechanical model but rather on an organic one. They are everything machines are not: dynamic, growing, spontaneous problem solvers. Thus, not only do people surrender their democratic liberties, but they also give them up to work in organizations quite unlike themselves. Human flourishing is no mean task in such conditions.

The cardinal human resource management problem is this: Do organizational processes and procedures help or hinder the resolution of these two grand, bittersweet paradoxes in

democratic and work life? To put it bluntly, what difference does it make if people function efficiently in a schizophrenic civic culture and in dysfunctional work organizations? Such issues cannot be left unaddressed by institutions whose stated purpose is to champion public, not private, interests—ultimately, government by, for, and of the people. Human resource management in democracy is simply too important to be left to those who would see it as a technical problem. Because most of the nation's wealth is in the form of human capital, the talents of employees offer more value to the overall well-being of the country than anything else. Staffed by men and women, the public service makes it possible on a day-to-day basis for democracy to succeed (Goodsell, 2015). Public administration has always been about governance, not merely management. Unmasking the false clarity found in taken-for-granted operational assumptions can bring about a broader view of the role of citizens in society and organizations.

"There is," then, "nothing like a paradox to take the scum off your mind" (Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., as quoted in Vaill, 1991, p. 83). Starting with a "clean slate" (Exhibit 0.1) is a vital position from which to reconcile points of view that often seem, and sometimes are, irreconcilable. In fact, dealing with contradictions defines much of a manager's job. Nonetheless, contemplating ironic, ambivalent, inconsistent, poisonous paradoxes is something few employees and managers relish; attempting to make sense out of what seems wholly illogical is generally avoided.

Exhibit 0.1 "Close Enough for Government Work": A Linguistic Hijacking

There is much to be said for forcing people to rethink the basic assumptions of how they run their operations by starting with a clean slate. We all "know," however, certain things that may not be true. Some are all too willing to chuckle after some imperfection is found and say, "Close enough for government work." The phrase originated with government contractors who were making uniforms for the military 150 years ago. Because government standards for uniforms were so high at that time, saying that something was "close enough" meant that it was genuinely first-rate quality. How far we've come! It's all too easy to let the "can't do" types in the office beat down our optimism and desire for change. Starting with a clean slate challenges assumptions about how work is done and how it might be changed.

SOURCE: Adapted from Linden (1994, p. 155).

Yet it is precisely because paradoxes reveal the tensions in operating assumptions that exciting opportunities for investigation, discovery, insight, and innovation exist in managing organizations. Using paradoxes as a way to think about human resource administration is hardly a panacea, however. What it will provide is an occasion for reflection on and questioning of perplexing organizational routines. While there may be no solutions qua solutions, the right queries can provoke interesting, different, and—sometimes—quite suitable responses. If nothing else, a deeper understanding of dilemmas will be achieved, which is, of course, the first step toward their resolution.

Ways to embrace paradoxes include inquiring into the bases of clashing perspectives, identifying and appreciating the best of different viewpoints, and striving to create new viewpoints that incorporate a balance of divergent opinions. Predicaments, then, require integrative thinking, “the ability to face constructively the tension of opposing ideas and, instead of choosing one at the expense of the other, generate a creative resolution of the tension in the form of a new idea that contains elements of the opposing ideas but is superior to each,” in the words of scholar Thomas C. Chamberlin, as quoted by Martin (2009, p. 15). “Phenomena,” Martin continues, quoting Chamberlin, “appear to become capable of being viewed analytically and synthetically at once” (p. 23).

In other words, systematic, **dialectic** reasoning juxtaposes contradictory opposing ideas (theses and antitheses) and seeks to resolve them by creating new syntheses. A dialectic, then, is a method of reasoning that compares opposing viewpoints in order to seek a reconciliation that integrates the best of both. There can be unity in diversity. Jazz, for instance, “beautifully expresses the dialectic between hope and despair,” the tension between individual freedom, and the greater good (Hertsgaard, 2002, p. 59). Leaving your “comfort zone” to engage in this mode of thinking should be as challenging as it is rewarding; change is inevitable, growth is optional. “You cannot solve the problem,” Einstein once said, “with the same kind of thinking that created the problem.” In short, a key question facing managers is less “What should I do?” and more “How should I think?”

Developing a capacity to manage—and even thrive on—paradoxes is important because they will only multiply in the years ahead with the expansion of the information superhighway, the virtual workplace, and a demographically diverse workforce. Make no mistake about it: Any changes in how people are managed are unlikely to be effective without recognition of the paradoxes born in the 21st century (Heller, 2003). Know, too, the paradox that embodies all such paradoxes: As contradictions proliferate, the expectations to resolve them become increasingly intense.

PATHWAYS THROUGH PARADOXES: CARPE DIEM

Reading is a commitment to the future, an odyssey characterized by the unexpected. To facilitate the journey, this text includes critical questions for you and your organization, be it a governmental agency, nonprofit organization, or educational institution. It reveals logical inconsistencies and conflicting assumptions in human capital management; in so doing, it offers intriguing opportunities to position problems in quite different ways. The charge is to recognize and use this fact—that is, to manage conflicts for mutual benefit. *Human Resource Management in Public Service: Paradoxes, Processes, and Problems* is a reality check on management and the workplace intended to enrich the organization’s human capital.

Louis Pasteur once said, “Chance favors the prepared mind.” Since the trends discussed in this volume will change you whether or not you read it, you are now presented with an authentic opportunity to “seize the day” and think creatively about managing people. To do this, use the text as a springboard and amplify the example of Leonardo da Vinci (Exhibit 0.2) by developing your own techniques of discovery. The analysis here will spark but seldom

settle discussions about how to “do” human resource management. Revealing useful insights does not necessarily lead to easy answers. Reader learning, instead, will develop as much, we hope more, from personal reflection as from pedagogical suggestion.

Exhibit 0.2 Leonardo’s Parachute

“There is no use in trying,” said Alice; “one can’t believe impossible things.” “I dare say you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

The example of Leonardo da Vinci—an accomplished painter, inventor, sculptor, engineer, architect, botanist, and physicist—has inspired people for hundreds of years to tap into their creativity (Gelb, 1998). For instance, by studying the science of art, Leonardo created a masterpiece, the *Mona Lisa*, that reveals how many different truths can be held, and enjoyed, simultaneously. Conversely, by studying the art of science, he invented a perfectly designed parachute—centuries before the airplane. To wit, as long as you are going to think anyway, you may as well think big!

In doing so, resist your first impulse, as jumping to conclusions stifles creativity. “I don’t know” is often one of the wisest things that can be said as a prelude to contemplation. A mind is like Leonardo’s parachute (it can function only when it is open), and paradoxes will never be adequately addressed without the creativity of a nimble mind. Ask yourself, for instance, “What would I attempt to do if I knew I could not fail?” “If the obvious ways to deal with a problem did not exist, then what would I do?” Answers may not be immediate, specific actions, but rather may evolve from a different perspective, a changed basis for choices, or an alternative way of thinking. As John Lennon once said, “Reality leaves a lot to the imagination.”

The act of discovery, in short, consists not of finding new lands but of seeing with new eyes. (For instance, what color are apples? White, of course, once you get inside.) To nurture this capacity to “think outside the box,” do at least one of the following every day:

- Take a 5-minute “imagination break.”
- Look into a kaleidoscope.
- Pretend to be the secretary of a major government agency.
- Make odd friends.
- Develop a new hobby.
- Read things that you do not normally read.
- Defer judgments and let your ideas incubate.
- Talk to someone from a different walk of life about a challenging problem.
- Use healthy snacks (chocolate, some claim, is not a vegetable) as imaginary “brain pills.”
- Form a team and use the “25 in 10” brainstorming approach: Aim for 25 ideas to solve a problem in 10 minutes.

In other words, look where others are not looking to see what they are not seeing (Burrus, 2013). Be the person who “sees a glass not as half full or half empty, but as twice the size that it needs to be and considers designing a vessel with different dimensions” (Rothfeder, 2014).

It is no surprise that Japanese workers are encouraged to learn flower arranging, practice the highly ritualized tea ceremony, and play team sports to appreciate the value of beauty, precision, and cooperation in producing goods and services.

Indeed, we hope to change you from thinking as you normally do, but fall far short of telling you what to think. This book is peppered with precipitous, pernicious, persnickety, pugnacious, perfidious paradoxes designed to propel you toward reflection on and resolution of work/life puzzles. Complete escape from paradoxes, however, is unlikely, because pathways through them, ironically, may generate new problems. But paradoxes also create unique opportunities and, together with the tools and strategies presented here, a chance to achieve democratic freedom in organizations and a matching of individual and institutional needs. “The best way out,” wrote Robert Frost, “is always through.”

And now for the adventure!

KEY TERMS

Dialectic
Paradox

Paradox of democracy
Paradox of needs

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