

Leading in an age of paradox and dilemma

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Introduction

The findings from a recent study on leadership in contemporary frontline service organisations (SOLR Project, 2002) indicate that the most difficult challenges facing leaders present themselves as dilemmas, paradoxes or *tensions*. These tensions are usually people-centred and involve contestation of values and/or ethical contradictions.

Tensions are a part of the fabric of life in organisations. Handy (1994) suggests that such tensions are “endemic” given the complex, uncertain, and turbulent world of constant change in contemporary organisations. Leaders, he argues, are faced with tensions, dilemmas and paradoxes that are “inevitable, endemic and perpetual” (Handy, 1994). It is easy to become disoriented, confused and frustrated in such trying conditions. Handy points out that paradoxes confuse us because:

We are asked to live with contradictions and with simultaneous opposites... To live with simultaneous opposites is, at first glance, a recipe for indecision at best, schizophrenia at worst.

There are no simple *either/or* solutions to such tensions and paradoxes. Often choices in such situations necessitate the consideration of seeming opposites in a *both/and* approach to decision making.

Leaders in the SOLR Project reported that they frequently had to make choices about people in situations where there were no obvious ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ answers. Mostly there were degrees of ‘right’ on both sides. It was not a matter of choosing one side or value over another (*either/or* approach) but, more likely, the most effective outcomes would reflect the concerns and values of all people involved (*both/and* approach).

Kidder (1995) makes this point well when discussing the problems for leaders and others making choices in situations where values and ethical considerations are paramount. He states:

Tough choices typically are those that pit one right value against another. That's true in every walk of life – corporate professional, personal, civic, international, educational, religious, and the rest (p. 16).

He points out that right-versus-right values are at the heart of most difficult choices:

The really tough choices, then, don't centre upon right versus wrong. They involve right versus right. They are genuine dilemmas precisely because each side is firmly rooted in . . . core values (p. 18).

Such dilemmas usually present tensions between competing sets of values where each can be interpreted as ‘right’ and justified in a given situation. Many of the tensions faced by leaders in the SOLR project fell into this category of right-versus-right. These included:

- ❑ the rights of the individual versus those of the group or community (eg
- ❑ the student who is disrupting the class with his/her behaviour);

- ❑ the exercise of compassion versus rigidly following the rules (eg often the rules clearly indicate a course of action but the heart calls for other approaches);
- ❑ the pressures to be loyal to colleagues/staff versus telling the truth in the interests of justice (eg being loyal to the long-serving teacher who is now performing poorly versus seeking justice for the students who are affected by this poor performance); and
- ❑ the provision of a quality service versus the efficient use of scarce resources (eg principals are often faced with competing demands for resources – supporting disadvantaged students/programmes or giving priority to the pursuit of academic excellence).

Frameworks for managing tension and paradox

There is a need for leadership and management frameworks that, according to Handy (1994), help us appreciate that “the opposites are necessary to each other” (p. 48). He advocates that we must learn to frame the confusion and find pathways through the paradoxes by understanding what is happening and by learning to be different (p. 3). We must break the bonds imposed on us by the either/or dualistic mindset.

English (1995) prefers to regard paradox as a tension situation that is, primarily, characterised by relationship and complementarity. He recommends that leaders and managers should analyse paradox and dilemma situations, not in terms of contradiction, polarity, and either/or frames, but in terms of a *relationship* that encompasses both competition and complementarity (a *both/and* and *A and not-A* approach). They should, he says, determine as best they can, the qualities and conditions of relationships in each situation. In this way they can better understand and manage a tension situation (usually characterised by uncertainty and confusion) by building a profile of the tensions – in Handy’s terms they are “framing the confusion”.

By emphasising the relationship and complementarity instead of the seeming contradictions and opposites, English argues that leaders and managers have a better chance of influencing the direction and intensity of the positive side of the tension. Otherwise they will opt for the either/or approach, perhaps believing that seeming opposing forces are mutually exclusive and incompatible, thereby creating a win-lose situation. In other words they have fallen for the either/or, *A or not-A* dichotomy.

The challenges facing leaders, including principals, in contemporary service organisations are complex and multidimensional (Duignan and Collins, in press). Finding optimal resolutions to such tension situations demands mindsets and approaches based on *both/and* rather than *either/or* thinking and acting.

Leaders who have to make choices in such paradoxical situations, require more than management skills and competencies. They require creative, intuitive frameworks based on in-depth understandings of human nature and of the ethical, moral, even spiritual dimensions inherent in human interaction and choice. Above all they need sound judgment and a wisdom derived from critical reflection on the meaning of life and work. They have to be people with heart who are emotionally mature enough to develop mutually elevating and productive relationships.

Such leaders tend to be ‘depthed’ people with a spirituality shaped by values fine tuned by the warp and weft of life’s experiences. They often have “spiritual scars and calluses on their characters” (Bogue, 1994) from having battled with the complex, perplexing dilemmas and tensions of life and work. They tend to be morally courageous and unafraid to question unfair and unjust processes and practices when conformity would be the easier path.

The tensions inherent in the leadership challenges identified in the SOLR Project call for qualities, mindsets and dispositions that help leaders form creative frameworks for choice and action that transcend competencies and management skills. Duignan (2002) has identified a

number of the elements of such a framework when arguing for the special preparation needed for authentic educational leaders.

The framework reflects the need for a leader to be:

- ❑ *critically reflective* – capable of critically reflecting on the meaning of life, work and learning;
- ❑ *intuitively connected* – able to tap into the wisdom distilled from the warp and weft of life's experiences;
- ❑ *ethically responsible* – capable of applying ethical standards to complex and perplexing value-tense situations;
- ❑ *spiritually courageous* – has struggled with 'the meaning of life' and has the spiritual scars to show for it;
- ❑ *intellectually nimble* – has a disciplined mind; is knowledgeable and rigorous in method;
- ❑ *professionally committed* – is aware of intention, processes and outcomes;
- ❑ *managerially competent* – has knowledge, understanding, and skills in managing complex organizations;
- ❑ *strategically ready* – is a 'big picture', visionary and strategic thinker;
- ❑ *emotionally mature* – able to engage others in mutually beneficial relationships; using heart as well as head;
- ❑ *culturally sensitive* – capable of discernment with regard to differences and respond with consideration and empathy to individuals/groups; is in tune with the culture of their organisation.

Leaders need ethical and moral frameworks that help them discern what choices and actions will raise "...the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led..." (Burns, 1978:20), thus having a transforming effect on both. This is the essence of leading in an age of paradox and dilemma.

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