Summary Overview

The word “Paradox” is often used to talk about frustrating situations in which traditional problem solving does not seem to work. We encounter paradox often in the form of conflicts, resistance to change, fixes that fail and chronic issues that we can’t seem to move beyond. In this paper, I will share my understanding of why paradox is so frustrating and how it is also a gift that can become a useful resource for enhancing the lives of each of us and all of us.

The phenomena of interdependency, especially interdependent pairs, is what we are most often talking about when we say we have a “paradox.” If we expand our base of wisdom about paradox to include what is known about interdependent pairs, we open up a much bigger world of fellow travelers, both ancient and contemporary, who can help us make the most of this phenomena. I will identify some of them and how we can build from their wisdom.

Six reasons why paradoxes are frustrating and what will help:

1. We tend to see them as problems to solve when they are unsolvable. They are also unavoidable, indestructible and unstoppable. Fortunately, they are also free and leverageable. **It helps** to be aware of the above characteristics and to stop trying to solve them.

2. When we get frustrated with our inability to solve a paradox we look to our opposition as the source of the problem. We then attempt to persuade or overpower them. This leads to an us or them struggle that is inherently unwinnable. **It helps** to see our opposition as an essential resource to whom we need to listen. We need to empower rather than overpower our opposition while we are also empowering ourselves.

3. Many models for describing paradox overlook some key elements. **It helps** to have as many elements of the phenomena as possible incorporated into our understanding of them.

4. Most models are about the structure of paradoxes while understating or missing their dynamics. Interdependent pairs are essentially energy systems in which we live and that live in us. **It helps** to see this underlying energy system and understand how it works.

5. In many cases, we have not had a way to measure our effectiveness with this paradoxical energy system. This leads to many of our individual, group, and organizational assessments being misleading at best. **It helps** to be able to assess how well we are doing with a paradox to inform future action.

6. We are often told that something is a paradox without being provided a solid process for making the most of it. **What helps** is to have a pro-active strategy for maximizing both upsides of any paradox combined with a responsive strategy to know early when we are getting into either of its downsides.
Leveraging Paradox – Continuing to Learn
By Barry Johnson

Paradox, like gravity or sunlight, is always available as a resource. I keep learning about it from others who are intrigued by it, from clients, and from personal experience. My hope is that this article will support you in leveraging a few key paradoxes in your life and that your responses will continue the learning.

My first encounter

I was first introduced to the notion of paradox in 1973 as a student at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland. It was Beisser’s “Paradoxical Theory of Change”¹ that grabbed me as a young activist wanting to become the best “change agent” I could be.

“Briefly stated, it is this: that change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not. Change does not take place through a coercive attempt by the individual or by another person to change him, but it does take place if one takes the time and effort to be what he is — to be fully invested in his current positions. By rejecting the role of change agent, we make meaningful and orderly change possible. …

The premise is that one must stand in one place in order to have firm footing to move and that it is difficult or impossible to move without that footing.”

As someone wanting to make a difference in the world, I was struck by the notion of a paradoxical truth about change. There is an interdependence between being fully where we are at the moment AND becoming what we want to be in the future. Forty years later, I call this the polarity of Continuity AND Transformation or Stability AND Change. From a polarity perspective, one does not need to reject the role of Change Agent, as Beisser suggests. One needs to supplement it with being a Continuity Agent as well. If you want to be an effective Change Agent, be an effective Continuity Agent, and the reverse.

Expanding the base of inquiry

Since my initial experience with paradox in 1973, I have been fascinated by the phenomena of interdependent pairs and the underlying paradoxes within them. Wherever there is an interdependence, there will be a paradoxical relationship between the parts of the interdependency. The most elemental and frequently identified interdependency is the interdependent pair. Because of this, paradox is most often explored in paired relationships. These interdependent pairs are called: Paradoxes¹-⁹, Dilemmas¹⁰-¹³, Polarities¹⁴-¹⁹, Tensions or Contention²⁰-²², the Genius of “AND”²³-²⁴, Integrative Thinking²⁵, Yin and Yang²⁶, and a host of other names.

It is important to appreciate the broader field of inquiry in which the focus on paradox sits. This broader field of inquiry is the world of interdependence with a special emphasis on interdependent pairs. This radically expands the base of writing
from which we can learn about paradox. Charles Hampden-Turner, for example, has written several books on dilemmas.\textsuperscript{10-12} It would be easy to explore only “paradox” and miss his wisdom. He is but one example.

**Ancient wisdom and current inquiry**

Interest in interdependence and paradox is ancient. Virtually all faith traditions, for example, have a paradoxical message about their deity: on the one hand we are loved unconditionally (Mercy). On the other hand, we are held accountable for our actions (Justice). These two dimensions, as in all paradoxes, do not collapse into one thing. They remain different, in tension with each other and need each other over time. For the rest of this paper, I will use Paradox, Polarity and Dilemma interchangeably. I do this to recognize that there are a number of alternative words in the literature for interdependent pairs – one of which is Paradox. What is common, regardless of what they are called, is that the relationship between the parts of the pair is always paradoxical.

**Multarities**

There are interdependencies beyond the pair. Mind, Body, Spirit, for example, is an interdependency of three. Peter Koestenbaum’s, *Leadership, The Inner Side of Greatness*,\textsuperscript{27} contains his leadership diamond which has an interdependency of four: Vision, Courage, Reality, and Ethics. I call all of these interdependencies greater than two, “Multarities.” With multarities, there remains a paradoxical relationship between the parts just as with a polarity. Once one understands the most basic paradox or interdependency of two, it is relatively easy, mentally, to shift to interdependencies of more than two. For that reason, I will stick with the most basic interdependency = the interdependent pair.

**The origins of the Polarity Map**

We tend to look at our difficulties as problems to solve. When the problem solving process does not lead to a sustainable solution, a deeper look might lead to the discovery, “This is a paradox!” Or, “We have an interdependency here!” The solution which was being pursued is inherently unsustainable without incorporating its interdependent partner solution. This was the realization that emerged while I was working with a first time client, I will call “Ann” as I was completing my second year of Gestalt Training in 1975.

When asked what brought her to the initial session, Ann reported, “I want to be more like you.” Now, one does not have to be Freud, Jung or Perls to know this is loaded! She saw me, only in positive terms, as making a contribution in the community and having a clear sense of what I wanted and the courage to go after it. Being like me was a “solution.” She saw herself, only in negative terms, as the exact opposite: making no contributions, not knowing what she wanted, and believing she wouldn’t have the courage to pursue it even if she was clear. From her perspective, being like her was the “problem.”
As we sat facing each other (Graphic One) I decided to locate the parts of her description in relation to our two chairs. She was talking about a negative image of herself (-) being the “problem” which I suggested we locate on the right side of her chair. She was also talking about a positive image of me (+) being the “solution” which I suggested we locate on the right side of my chair. She was clear about the problem and the solution but was not able to move from one location to the other.

I was aware that there were negative dimensions of me (-) that we could put on the left side of my chair and positive dimensions of her (+) that we could put on the left side of her chair. Paradoxically, in order to get the positive dimensions she was seeing in me, she needed to see and experience the positive dimensions she was not seeing in herself (+) and address the negative dimensions of what she was not seeing in me (-). She needed to see the interdependence underlying her “problem.” She was in a paradox but was seeing it as a problem to solve. Polarities are unavoidable and unsolvable in the sense that neither pole of the polarity is a sustainable solution. They are paradoxically related – the movement toward one pole is made possible by embracing the pole you are on.

She was not able to attain what was the obvious solution because of the limited, gap analysis, context in which she had placed herself. Gap analysis offers us a partial view of a paradox with 3 elements: 1) The present state, usually identified in negative terms as the problem (the right side of Ann’s chair); 2) The preferred future state, usually identified in positive terms as the solution (The right side of my chair); 3) A strategy to bridge the gap between the problem and the solution (The arrow between the right side of her chair and the right side of mine).
Gap analysis must be supplemented when dealing with a paradox. What was getting in Ann’s way was what she was not talking about or even seeing.

Graphic Two – Passive/Receiving AND Assertive/Giving

She saw herself in the downside of being passive and receiving (1) and saw me in the upside of being assertive and giving (4). What was missing was her awareness and experience of the upside of being passive/receiving (2) AND the downside of being assertive/giving (3).

Ann and I engaged in an experiment in which we physically moved through the four spaces on either side of our two chairs. The objective was to identify and experience what was in each of the four locations. We started where she saw herself at the moment: 1) the downside of the Passive/Receiving pole. We made a list of the self-deprecating ways she saw herself including having nothing to offer and having no initiative. This was what she was already experiencing so there was no need to dwell on the experience of this location.

2) We went to the upside of the same pole. Ann had trouble, initially, identifying anything positive about this pole. As we explored some possibilities, we came up with a list including being willing to receive and learn as “upsides” of being Passive/Receptive. Her coming into the session willing to learn more about herself was an example of this upside. To experience the positive dimensions of receiving, Ann agreed to receive a brief shoulder rub from me standing behind her. She said it felt great and acknowledged that, “There really is an upside to this pole.”

Beisser - “The premise is that one must stand in one place in order to have firm footing to move and that it is difficult or impossible to move without that footing.”

3) As I walked to the downside of the Assertive/Giving pole, Ann refused to go with me. She said, “I’m not going there.” I looked back at her from the left side of my chair.

It was the lack of support from the pole she saw herself on, which was only seen in negative terms, combined with the unaware fear of the downside of the other pole = being a “bitch,” that was keeping her from accessing the upside of the assertive/giving pole. Paradoxically, when she was able to see and experience the upside of being passive/receiving (being more fully in her present pole) she became aware of her fear of the downside of being assertive/giving.

I re-joined Ann in the upside of her pole (2) and we looked, together at the downside of my pole, 10 feet away. I told her she had a choice to make. We could stop right where we were and not go to the downside of being assertive/giving. Or, we could go to that space (3) and make a list of what was there and have us experience her most powerful “bitchiness” toward me and then we would move on to the upside of that pole (4). The option I would not agree to do is move from where we were, in the upside of passive/receiving (2) directly to the upside of assertive/giving (4). It seemed important, at the time, to deal with the fear of being a “Bitch” (3) as a part of the process for accessing the upsides of being assertive/giving (4).

Ann asked two questions. She knew the answers but asked anyway indicating how important they were: “Will you go with me?” And, “I don’t have to stay there, do I?” It was the fear of this downside - “Being a ‘bitch” that was getting in the way accessing the upside of this pole - “being more like you.” Ann needed the support of knowing I would go with her. She also needed the support of knowing she wouldn’t get caught in the downside of this pole (3). I confirmed that I would go with her, we would make the list of attributes in that space, she would act (experience) the “Bitch” towards me and then we would move to the upside of this pole (4).

She agreed to do it and let herself get into her “Bitch” with me. In the middle of acting the “Bitch” she started to smile. I said, “Ann, this isn't totally unfamiliar territory for you, is it.” She laughed and said, “No, but every time I get here, I get embarrassed and run back over there.” She was pointing to the passive/receptive pole. I responded, “That's exactly what I do when I find myself here.”

(4) We then moved to the upside of assertive/giving and made a list of what was there. After making the list, I asked Ann to think of anything she had done for anyone in the last week. She had quite a list. I asked Ann if it might be true that she is already in this space in parts of her life and what she was after is experiencing it more completely. She agreed and calmly reflected on this. Then, I asked Ann if there was something we could do while here (4) for her to experience the upside of this pole. We agreed that she would stand behind me and give me a brief shoulder rub as I had done for her in the upside of passive/receiving (2). Ann agreed and I closed my eyes and turned my back toward her. As she started to rub my shoulders, I could feel her hands tremble, which sometimes indicates a release of energy. I slowly turned
around to ask Ann how she was doing and saw tears flowing down her face and a big smile. “I’m here!” She said. “This is where I wanted to be when I came in to see you.” I went home that night and could not sleep. What had happened? How does it relate to change at the organizational and international level? There was something important here that I needed to look into more deeply. This exploration has been the focus of my work for the last 38 years. It is about the wonderful gift of paradox (polarity, dilemma, tensions, etc.)

Some initial insights coming out of the session with Ann included:

1. If we treat a paradox as if it were a problem to solve, we reduce the likelihood of gaining the “solution” we are pursuing.
2. The fear of the downside of the pole we are moving toward gets in the way of accessing the upside of that pole.
3. Paradoxically, we gain access to the upside of the pole we are moving toward by embracing the upside of the pole we are moving from.
4. There is a paradoxical sequence for getting “unstuck” from the downside of any pole: Affirm the upside of the pole you are on; acknowledge and address the downside of the pole you are moving toward; and engage the upside of the pole you are moving toward without rejecting the upside of the pole you are moving from.
5. Because gap analysis and problem solving do not address the paradoxical nature of all polarities, they contribute to the difficulty rather than helping when dealing with any polarity. When you treat a paradox as if it were a problem to solve, the clearer the communication, the greater the resistance. The saying, “there is wisdom in the resistance” is based on the reality that within any polarity there are two points of view. In which case, there is wisdom in the resistance AND there is wisdom in that which is being resisted.

Basic truth and paradoxical truth.

We get into trouble when we treat a paradoxical truth as if it were a basic truth. Basic truths are those truths the alternatives of which are false. For example, it is a basic truth that the earth is spherical rather than flat. Paradoxical truths are those truths that have an interdependent truth that is also true. Both truths are dependent on each other over time. For example, it is true that systems need to decentralize in order to provide adequate freedom, expression of uniqueness and initiative for its parts. It is also true that systems need to centralize in order to create some equality, connectedness, and synergy among the parts to coordinate the whole. Paradoxically, if you want the whole to survive, you must take care of the parts by decentralizing. AND, if you want the parts to survive, you must take care of the whole by centralizing.

When we experience resistance to our “solution” to a problem, the question is not just whether our solution is true but, also, whether it is half of a paradoxical truth.
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it is a half of a paradoxical truth, not only am I and my opposition both right, we need each other’s truth to be sustainable over time. We are interdependent.

Most of the writing about “paradigm shifts” is based on the notion that what was considered a basic truth is not true. For example, the shift from seeing the earth as flat to seeing it as spherical. Paradigm shifts based on basic truths require one to let go of the previous “truth” in order to accept the new “truth.” A paradigm shift within a paradoxical truth is different. The original truth retains its value as a truth and is supplemented by an equally valid and interdependent second truth. In such a case, one is required to hold on to the original truth (rather than reject it) as the second truth is being embraced. Most of the guidelines for dealing with “paradigm shifts” with basic truths, are misleading at best when addressing paradoxical truths.

..... article continues with more detailed explanation ....

Enjoy the gift.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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26. See “Taoism” or the “I Ching”

