The search for reconciling insights: a "really useful" tool for managing paradox

Sheila Marsh
Development Adviser to the Wolfson Institute of Health Sciences, Thames Valley University and Visiting Tutor, Civil Service College, Sunningdale, UK

Marion Macalpine
Department of Sociology, City University and Development Adviser to the Wolfson Institute of Health Sciences, Thames Valley University, UK

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Abstract *This article uses stories from organisations to show how the "Helvig Square" can be an accessible and stimulating tool for managers learning to manage paradox. Many of us have been socialised and educated into binary, "either/or" thinking. As managers we find it hard to cope with current management dilemmas, such as how to plan and stay flexible, how to devolve decisions and keep corporate focus. In this article we build on the work of Pascale who uses the concept of paradox and working with "contending opposites". This is important thinking, but we show how people can still be entrenched in opposing camps and unable to engage in meaningful dialogue. We explore how managers can expand their thinking through using the Helvig Square. This framework provides a tool which represents the problem more fully, offers a means of analysis and enables a focus on action.*

Vignette

Across the table in a tense team-building session, the top managers of a major public sector organisation were reviewing a new planning approach. Some saw it as too reactive, too short term and the plan itself as a mere collation of individual projects, i.e. not strategic enough. Others saw it as too inflexible and centralised, not allowing staff to develop projects that they thought were urgently needed. Some of their comments were:

What is the role of the Strategic Planning Unit: they don't give anything out, they expect responses from us.

One of our major tasks [as an organisation] is to think strategically.

We spend months writing it, they [Strategic Planning Unit] only dot the i's and cross the t's.

[We are] attempting to plan strategically but reality intercedes.

[It's] sacrilegious [to doubt planning] but does it get us anywhere?

Planning meetings should be every six months at least.

Responsiveness has been lost, the plan is too much of a straitjacket.

Divisions must produce annual projects, commit funds and therefore cannot be responsive to needs.

Introduction

The managers in this vignette were in two camps. They were struggling with what appeared to be an irreconcilable contradiction: how to plan ahead in a strategic fashion, and to remain flexible to their clients.

This article will use stories like this one to introduce an accessible and stimulating tool for managers and for organisations learning to manage paradox. The challenge is how to expand the thinking of managers who are socialised and educated into binary thinking where complexity is reduced to a choice between either "*x*" or "*y*".

Managers (and consultants) who are stuck in binary thinking find it hard to cope with current management dilemmas, such as how to plan as well as stay flexible, how to devolve decisions as well as keep corporate focus. In order to shift the discussion of such dilemmas within management development activities, we have built on the work of Pascale who uses the concept of paradox and working with "contending opposites" (Pascale, 1990). He points out that each of the contending opposites has to be tackled thoroughly – i.e. "both ... and", not "either ... or" – there is no middle point or "golden mean".

This is important thinking, but we have found that people can still be entrenched in opposing camps and unable to engage in meaningful dialogue. What is required is an analytic tool which represents the problem more fully, offers a means of analysis and enables a focus on action. The tool we will describe fills this key gap: it helps people get beyond recognising the dilemma to developing the capability of managing the tension.

Organisational complexity and the emergence of paradox

A number of writers have identified the importance of the concept of paradox in understanding organisations. They have also demonstrated that managing paradox is a key task for managers faced with the increasing complexity of the external environment. Both Peters and Waterman (1982) and Pascale (1990) trace the origins of these ideas. Lawrence and Lorsch are cited (Pascale, 1990, p. 106) as the first to identify the need to manage within the "loose-tight" paradox: "the need both to give parts of an organisation freedom (differentiation) and to pull them together (integration)". Pascale also notes how McGregor's "Theory X" and "Theory Y" have been much misrepresented as alternative and conflicting approaches to management; so much so that McGregor later added "Theory Z" to encourage executives to embrace the paradox reconciling the *x* and *y* opposites (Pascale, 1990). Quinn and Kimberley (1984, pp. 295-313) have contributed to conceptualising the contradictions and demands of the management task in four dimensions:

(1) flexibility – stability;

(2) internal – external;

(3) means – ends;

(4) individual – organisation.

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In 1982, Peters and Waterman published their influential text *In Search of Excellence* (Peters and Waterman , 1982). Here they saw "managing ambiguity and paradox" as part of the "new theory" that managers needed to understand the eight attributes of excellent companies. By 1988, in his *Thriving on Chaos*, Peters emphasised managing paradox as one of his key principles of "learning to love change"(Peters, 1988).

In 1990, Pascale saw paradox as helping to disturb the equilibrium:

> A social system that promotes paradox and fosters disequilibrium (i.e. encourages variation and embraces contrary points of view) has a greater chance of knowing itself (as the by-product of continually re-examining its assumptions and juggling its internal tensions)[1].

He identified factors driving stagnation and renewal in organisations, to create a new view of the management task, and to guide managers working with the contradictions, ambiguities and confusion inherent in the changing organisations of the 1990s. He identified four factors:

(1) *Fit* – the internal consistency and coherence of an organisation (unity).

(2) *Split* – techniques to break an organisation into smaller units and provide them with a stronger sense of ownership and identity, in order to create more autonomy and diversity within the organisation[2].

(3) *Contend* – management processes that harness rather than suppress the conflicts and contradictions that are the natural by-products of organisations (duality).

(4) *Transcend* – an approach to management that can cope with the complexity entailed in orchestrating fit, split and contend (vitality). This requires a higher order approach: what Pascale terms "a different mindset", not simply an incremental increase in management skill. It requires managers to look for the "dynamic synthesis" between contradictory opposites – he sees this as the "engine of [organisational] self-renewal".

Pascale stated:

> ... juggling fit, split and contend so overloads conventional methods of management, that "meltdown" is likely to occur (Pascale, 1990).

Pascale built on the well-known "Seven S" model (see Figure 1) for analysing organisations (Pascale and Athos, 1981).
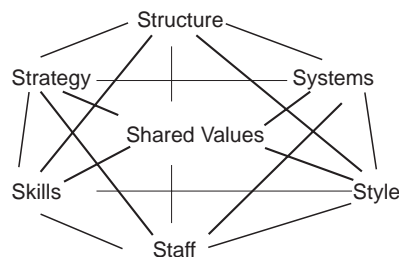

Figure 1.
The "Seven" S model

He developed it further by exploring how managers can "transcend" in their practice. He showed the dimension of tension that exists in each of the seven elements and which managers must manage.

His view was that organisations must strive to be at both ends of these seven "contending opposites" (Pascale, 1990). The "contending opposites" are posed in terms which Pascale intends to give validity to both ends of the continuum (see Figure 2). His message is that on each of these critical dimensions, embracing one or the other approach is not enough; organisations have to do both: "The problem is that if you want to stay in balance, you need to live out of balance". He wants managers to recognise that what have until now been regarded as "hardships or chronic sources of aggravation, are in fact the *wellspring of organisational vitality*" [our italics].

So, to return to the team-building session which introduced this article, we can see that the managers there were battling with the strategy paradox of: planning ... being opportunistic.

As we saw, the disagreement between the strategic planning unit and other, operational managers was indeed a source of aggravation. What Pascale would say is that this was inevitable and should be seen as a creative source of tension. The exciting aspect of accepting the paradoxes of organisations is the potential for creativity and moving away from mechanistic approaches to problem-solving and un-blocking dilemmas.

> The puzzle in a paradox serves as an impulse, it energises our minds to "jump the rails" in search of a reconciling insight (Pascale, 1990, p. 110).

The "stuckness" of managers and management: what does it consist of?

However, it is difficult to jump the rails; things get in the way. Managers have to take account of the external world. Working from the "Seven S" model is not enough as it is limited to issues internal to organisations. Managers also need to grapple with the complexities and tensions concerning the outside: multiple

Element of 7S model	Tension to be managed	
on Strategy:	planned <------>	opportunistic
on Structure: pluralist	elitist <------>	
on Systems:	**mandatory** <------>	discretionary
on Style:	**managerial** <------>	transforming
on Staff:	collegiate <------>	individual
on Shared values:	hard minds <------>	soft hearts
on Skill:	maximise <------>	'meta'-mise

Figure 2.
Pascale's contending opposites

external stakeholders with their different interests, diverse users and customers, and a dynamic and shifting environment.

Faced with these growing demands, managers have tended to see things as alternative solutions, either "a" or "b", which they have often tried out in quick succession, neither of which have been successful. For example, in the context of marketisation in the public sector, managers have swung from acting with "soft hearts" to "hard minds".

This binary tendency is embedded within general cultural assumptions and norms, at least in the West, which infuse understandings and polarise ways of thinking. Examples of this tendency include archetypes such as masculine/feminine, virgin/whore, good/bad. It is also reinforced by mainstream management and professional[3] education, which emphasises rational decision-makers choosing between mutually exclusive options. So even if individuals see paradoxical imperatives, it is still hard for them to act.

Faced with this "either/or" thinking among managers we have worked with, we have explored various ways to help them move forward.

How to "unstick" binary thinking

"The test of a first rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function" (Scott Fitzgerald, 1965, p. 1007).

In working with managers we have brought in the ideas of both Pascale (1990) and Peters (1988) mentioned above. These managers have found Peters' approach to "mastering paradox" too abstract and exhortatory. They have found Pascale's seven "contending opposites" helpfully analytic. However, neither has helped them take action.

We have also tried to move away from analytic thinking through using images and metaphors, following the lead of Morgan. He brought together a range of ways of using metaphor from different sources and traditions, and applied these in a practical way to management:

> Less effective managers and problem-solvers ... seem to interpret everything from a fixed standpoint ... they frequently hit blocks ... their actions and behaviours are often rigid and inflexible ... ...By using different metaphors to understand the complex and paradoxical character of organisational life, we are able to manage and design organisations in ways that we may not have thought possible before (Morgan 1986, pp. 12-13).

> ... using new images and ideas as a means of creating shared understandings [what he calls "imaginisation"] (Morgan, 1993, p. xxix).

Such visual methods of thinking "outside the box" have enabled managers to challenge embedded cultural norms. So, for example, managers in a highly bureaucratic intergovernmental organisation saw their organisation as variously:

- an amoeba, a living organism that could adapt and re-generate;
- a machine capable of doing many things like a tractor;
- a rainbow, suggestive of better things but difficult to grasp;

- a very tall tree whose bushy upper branches obscured the lower branches and forest floor from the light.

In discussing these they were able to hold many perspectives at once, and to develop their ideas of what kind of culture they wanted. However, their approach to resolving the differences was still based on "either/or" thinking. As we did with these managers, we now go on to introduce the Helvig Square[4], a "really useful" tool to help managers move on from this binary thinking (Helvig, 1951).

The Helvig Square: what is it?

Returning once again to the team-building session we started with, the managers were battling with the paradox of strategic planning and staying responsive to clients. This can be represented thus: strategic planning – responsiveness to clients

Presenting only these two concepts, however, highlights their apparent opposition, rather than encouraging managers to recognise that they need to embrace both. They need to be both thoroughly strategic and thoroughly responsive; there is no "golden mean".

For our managers in the team-building session, what was getting in the way of their embracing both elements of the paradox were their fears and anxieties: planners feared short-termism and merely "coping" with events; operational managers wanted to be responsive and feared the "straitjacket" of an inflexible plan. The Helvig Square takes a given paradox as its top line and represents on the bottom line of the square the barriers to achieving the paradox. So here Figure 3 represents the strategy paradox along with the barriers to managing it. Helvig helpfully describes the bottom-line issues as "the degenerate forms" of the paradox which is represented on the top line.

Figure 4 further shows how the "degenerate forms" are in fact the opposites of the paradox across the diagonals. This shows the real opposition which managers are experiencing as they disagree. They are not really opposing "good" strategic planning or "proper" responsiveness, but the "degenerate forms" of these.

By representing these fears on the bottom of the square we were able to help this group disentangle their fears and anxieties about it from the actual paradox they needed to manage. In focusing on how to "stay on the top line"
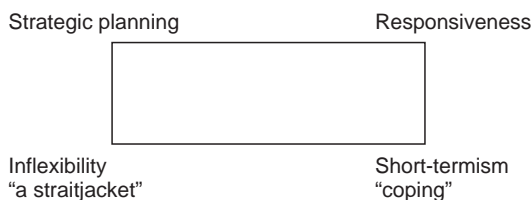

Strategic planning   Responsiveness

Inflexibility   Short-termism
"a straitjacket"   "coping"

Figure 3.
The strategy paradox as
a Helvig Square

and avoid the "degenerate forms" the Helvig Square enabled them to identify some action to do this. For example, they proposed an agreed pool of unallocated resources to enable divisions to respond to sudden needs.

Another story from an international organisation where we were assisting with a major cultural change programme further demonstrates the construction of a Helvig Square with managers. In this organisation, Pascale's paradox of collegiate vs individual working (see Figure 2) seemed to represent key tensions experienced by the staff. The organisation was requiring more collaboration across teams and professions as part of cultural change, as well as continued independent work by expert individuals.

Working independently ——————— Collaborative working.

This represents the two apparently opposing elements which were both required. However this change was not working well. In interviews with staff at different grades and across different functions, people said they were required to undertake what appeared to them to be "meaningless consultation" with other departments. This led to the rejection of collaborative working by some staff. There were also stories of people going on international assignments without realising that colleagues were working on identical projects or even with the same client. This lack of communication had led to some negative experiences which in turn led to managers trying to impose collaborative structures with limited success. We represented this dilemma to them as a Helvig Square as follows in Figure 5.

Here we reflected people's experience on the bottom line, as what Helvig terms the "degenerate forms" of the paradox. The rejection by staff of collaborative structures had to do with their deep-seated fears or anxieties that collaborative working would consist only of "meaningless consultation for

Figure 4.
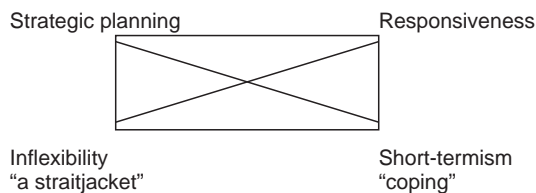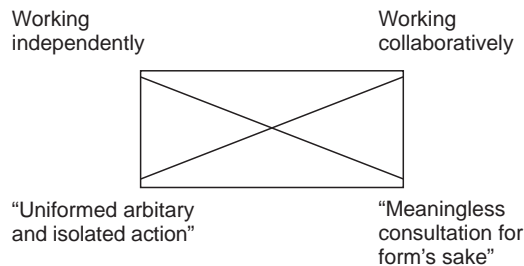The strategy Helvig Square, showing interrelationships

Figure 5.
Helvig Square on work processes of staff

form's sake"[5], i.e. the "degenerate form" of collaboration. Similarly, managers feared the impact of independent working would be "uninformed, arbitrary or isolated individual actions".

The square also shows how the "degenerate forms" are the opposites of the elements of the paradox across the diagonals, i.e. uninformed, arbitrary and isolated action is the opposite of collaborative working. So the square surfaced both the paradox and how people felt. We then asked managers to reflect on actions they could take to "stay on the top line" and avoid the "degenerate forms". This question enabled fruitful discussions on practical actions to manage the paradox (see below).

Actions to encourage collaborative as well as independent working

 · walk around to gain knowledge of other divisions" work;

 · identify resources for cross-divisional work and assess this in appraisal;

 · encourage collaboration through a collaborative initiatives fund held centrally;

 · budgetary improvements to cater for projects which straddled divisions;

 · effective induction for new staff (previously non-existent);

 · use e-mail more for speedy consultation;

 · recognise individual achievement through the appraisal process.

At later workshops it became clear that managers were implementing some of these actions.

In using the Helvig Square in our work, the "top line" paradoxes recur as Pascale's model suggests (see Figure 2), within many different kinds of organisation. However, in working with managers in organisations, we listen carefully to the language they use in discussion as the "degenerate forms" are often expressed differently from organisation to organisation. The words used are often pungently expressive of the culture and particular contexts of the dilemmas they face. For example, Figure 6 shows the dilemma facing nurse executives in the NHS.

Nurse executives need both to manage and lead their professional groups, as well as take a corporate role on the trust board; they need to do both well. They run the risk, however, of being stereotyped by others if they are seen as doing too much of one or the other: seen as "too nurse-y" by other professions if they focus on their nurse leadership role, or seen as "selling-out" by nurses if they
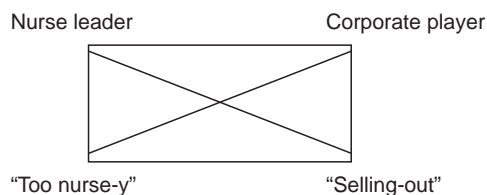

Nurse leader   Corporate player

"Too nurse-y"   "Selling-out"

Figure 6.
Helvig Square on nurse
executive role

are too focused on corporate issues. Here again reflecting back their actual words helped nurse executives get beyond the contradiction to recognise that they needed to do both well and actively develop their role through working in both areas.

In our work, people across sectors and in different countries have found the Helvig Square extraordinarily useful as a way of both reflecting their experience in new forms, surfacing assumptions and of generating ideas for ways to manage the paradoxes. We have used the Helvig Square extensively as a tool within many management development programmes to help managers think differently about the common dilemmas, such as those highlighted by Pascale. We have found that once grasped as a tool, the Helvig Square is applicable to very many situations. In addition, it can be grasped very quickly and managers have been able rapidly to construct their own Helvig Squares to illuminate their own experience.

Conclusion

So we have found in our work that this tool is extremely powerful. Its power derives from its representational, analytic and action-focused properties:

- At the *representational* level, the Helvig Square has enabled us to reflect actual phrases and concerns expressed to us within their specific cultural and organisational contexts. The "degenerate forms" in particular have often emerged as frequently cited phrases, which people readily recognise. These seem to be holograms for patterns of behaviour recurring throughout the organisation.

- At the *analytic* level, the Helvig Square explains why people are stuck, locked into adversarial positions, and provides a conceptual framework for them to map possible future positions. It also reflects the human dimensions of fear and anxiety which are represented in the "degenerate forms". It helps people disentangle fears from possibilities for action. The nurse executive example also shows that these fears may be those of others as well as those of the managers concerned.

- At the *action-focused* level, it enables people to have very different kinds of conversation about the issues, with a more positive focus. Like a "forcefield analysis" (Lewin, 1947) the Helvig Square moves people from a state of negativity to a state where they can plan how to move from where they are to where they want to be. Time after time, we have seen groups of managers poring over the Helvig diagram, in animated discussion, which resulted in clear proposals that they were able to carry through.

We are also struck by the speed and facility with which managers can themselves frame paradoxes in this helpful way and generate action to manage them. It gives them a powerful thinking tool: it has seemed to "energise [their] minds to jump the rails" and identify "reconciling insights".

Notes

1. Pascale (1990, p. 109), citing Kenwyn Smith (1984).
2. "Fit" and "split" echo Lawrence and Lorsch's "integration" and "differentiation".
3. Marks-Moran (1998) draws attention to this dualistic "habit" in relation to nurse education.
4. We are grateful to Mike Hales, of the Centre for Research in Innovation Management (CENTRIM) at the University of Brighton, for introducing us to the Helvig Square as used by Pedlar, Bougoyne and Boydell, (1987). Since writing this article, we have come across *Polarity Management*, by Barry Johnson, published HRD Press, Amhurst, MA, 1992, which is a useful, practical handbook for OD practitioners drawing on silmilar ideas about managing paradox, including Pascal's work.
5. These questions are taken from comments made by managers and staff in workshops.

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