



THE CONTRADICTIONS OF LEADERSHIP: MAKING CUSTOMIZED EMPLOYMENT WORK

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Business ownership, and other Customized Employment options, do not happen by accident. Creating inventive career opportunities with consistency and quality requires leaders and management systems dedicated to redirecting funds, rethinking policy, changing practices, truly engaging consumers and families, forging partnerships with the public and private sectors, and investing in staff competency and retention far beyond traditional community rehabilitation practice.

The traditional study of management and leadership leads one to believe that the role of top administrators is to set a course and stick to it. A ship's Captain is the archetypal leader; the haggard old salt standing on deck, wheel in one hand, sextant in the other, guiding the ship tirelessly through the storm. Using time-honored, and often very effective techniques including strategic planning, performance evaluations, formal (written) inter-departmental communiqués, policies and procedures that anticipate every possible corruption of the mission, and internal quality measures, leaders attempt to keep the organization stable, predictable, and on course.

Of course, off course is where the fun begins! And this very issue strikes panic into the hearts of most of us charged with assuring the sustainability of our agencies. The challenge for leaders is contradictory: manage for stability while at the same time create new opportunities and innovations. These mutually exclusive goals are at the heart of the best organizations. Leaders capable of supporting the invention of new products and services, creating multi-layered networks, and casting off the ballast of withered management practices while carefully retaining the best ones, achieve lasting results. And, since leadership and management are largely non-linear undertakings, these are often uncharted waters with no apparent "one right way" and no absolute formula for success. Great leaders see beyond the horizon, but know they will have to adapt along the course as opportunities and obstacles come into view.

The following Ten Contradictions are offered only as a starting point in re-thinking our roles as leaders; leaders at all levels of an organization, and in various circumstances including at work, in our families, our communities, and in the world at large.

1. GREAT LEADERS KNOW THAT THE MAP IS JUST A SUGGESTION. In other words, leaders are responsible for gathering broad-based support for the strategic vision, but must let go of linear work models that allow for only straight line progression. Innovation is generated and nurtured through experimentation that is sometimes wasteful and unfruitful on the surface, but that generates new experiences leading to problem-solving in new ways. An organization that planfully

and playfully embraces new circumstances (and a new circumstance occurs whenever a customer asks for something new, or when we ask a customer if they would prefer something new), is regularly confronted with side trips that potentially lead to new knowledge, opportunities, and customers, but can also lead to loss, political confrontation, and trouble. Good leaders are prepared for either, and take smart risks.

2. OUR JOB IS TO SPEND MONEY. Contrary to the popular clichés, there are stupid ideas, lots of them in fact. Great leaders, and their colleagues, use their intuition and experience to discourage bad ideas, but support marginal ones that just might have a chance at succeeding. A leader who allows for, and budgets for, experimentation sends a clear signal that personnel are encouraged to find better methods and products. In the long run, profits come to those who innovate, not to those who stay the course. Various “skunk works” inside innovating corporations such as Canon, Xerox, and 3M have proven remarkably profitable following short-term expenditures to generate and test new ideas. The public trust is not served best by hoarding money in fund balances; it is meant to be spent, wisely, to advance and improve the lives of people with disabilities. Sometimes innovation costs money.

3. THE CUSTOMER COMES SECOND. Customer service starts internally. Appreciated and intellectually challenged staff perform better, stay longer, and earn organizations better reputations by treating their work mates better. Satisfied personnel treat external customers better, and happy customers tell their friends. Therefore, staff satisfaction should be the first concern of leaders. Job satisfaction comes from reasonable pay of course, but more so from challenging work, being provided the tools and core competencies to do the work, and from the visible respect of leadership. A 360 degree relationship develops over time where appreciation generates high performance, which generates satisfied customers, which generates profits, which generates better pay and new tools for innovation, which generates appreciation and so on. Investment strategies in long-term personnel recruitment and development are a key action step in satisfying customers.

4. LOOSE THE JOB DESCRIPTIONS. While we all want to know where our responsibilities begin and end, it is almost impossible to predict what every employee should be doing for all customers, in all circumstances these days, especially in a person-centered service environment. Certainly, guidelines spelling out broad categories of work duties, core tasks and competencies, and responsibilities are critical, but discretionary effort makes or breaks good companies. Rigid job descriptions are based in logic and analysis, which are good tools for managers. But, adaptive and inventive organizations need personnel who also rely on intuition, experimentation, analogy, and the ability to cope with ambiguity. Consider the airline customer with a cancelled flight who cannot get re-booked on another airline because the gate agent repeats, “I am not authorized to help you.” The situation is so much more pleasant (and eventually profitable) if gate agents have the power to fix customer problems at the point of face-to-face contact. Repeat business from paying customers is critical to even non-profit success. Showing funders and taxpayers that staff inventively solve problems and create careers leads to happier customers, increased public recognition, and better reimbursement rates.

5. PAY ATTENTION TO 20 PERCENT OF YOUR CUSTOMERS. While it is true that all customers are critical and important, and want to feel that way, in most circumstances *Pareto’s 80/20 Principle* holds true. Roughly eighty percent of an organization’s business (profit) is generated from twenty

percent of its customers. Assure a solid future by paying attention to those specific repeat customers. This keeps the organization focused on critical innovations, problem-solving, and opportunities that nurture these select few. Of course, innovation happens on the fringes, so the other customers are important too, and may very well lead the organization into new service territory. Contradiction at its best!

6. STAND IN CONTRADICTION TO THE CORPORATE CULTURE. Corporate culture is made up of all the unwritten and written rules of behavior in an organization. There is comfort and stability in learning, knowing, and practicing the rites and rituals of the corporation. And as humans and good managers, we seek consistency and predictability because it allows us to move forward without distraction. However, a stable corporate culture also breeds complacency and discourages invention. Questioning, bending, revising, and challenging company procedures, not abolishing them, especially by leaders, begins the process of blurring the lines of conformity and allows experimentation to occur. Creating new ideas and concepts necessitates that teams of people create a culture of questioning and positive conflict. From the edges of conflict and anxiety comes innovation. Furthermore, making changes or subtly standing in contradiction to the culture makes the past visible and may reveal fears and traditions that stifle creativity. As someone once said, “if you want to understand the corporate culture, make a change.” Understanding is the first step in making and managing change.

7. PLAY POLITICS. Politics is almost always cast in a negative light. Political relationships bring up images of corruption, favoritism, power plays, and dishonesty. In reality, politics is the interaction of any two human beings. Being politically savvy means thinking about the future and how each action may cause a reaction. Playing politics means managers are considering the impact of their actions on others; that they are using insider information to position the company into a stronger market position; that they are creating alliances and partnerships that offer protection to their organization and enhanced service and value to their customers. Politics keep organizations alive and alerts them to changes in currents and tides. Innovation breeds contempt in others, so being politically astute is key to survival and growth. Einstein said it best: “Politics is harder than physics.”

8. IT’S BUSINESS - IT’S PERSONAL. In western society, people are identified in the community by what they do for a living. Thinking that professional and community/family lives are separate is a strange business-school notion. Imagine if the director of an environmental group, say Green Peace, did not recycle at home. Is that person not guilty, at the very least, of hypocrisy? Leaders are leaders twenty four hours a day, and business relationships are simply human relationships with a profit motive (or perhaps a non-profit motive!). As leaders at all levels, especially in the rehabilitation field, we need to make our passions for economic justice visible and credible by voting for supportive candidates, by shopping in stores that hire people with disabilities, by keeping our money in accessible banks, and by making certain our friends, our Boards of Directors, and our neighborhoods reflect the diversity we champion. One is only as good a leader as they are a person.

9. BOTH/AND, NOT EITHER/OR. Our society is built on the notion of one God, one President, one Director, etc. So, sometimes it is difficult for us to imagine more than one route to a solution, or more than one solution to a problem, or even that there is no solution and that we must manage

ambiguity for long stretches. In most American schools, the biggest person standing at the front of the class has all the answers and he or she disapproves of anything but the one right answer. As students we are also expected to keep quiet, focus our eyes on our own work, and keep our desks in a straight line. The real world is not a linear, controllable environment, so managers are constantly challenged by complex circumstances that do not lend themselves well to the school rules that inhibit teamwork and experimentation. There is unlimited wealth, knowledge, answers, approaches, and options in the world. Great leaders see this circumstance as invigorating and liberating, while more linear thinkers see these options as terrifying and uncontrollable.

10. MOVE TOWARDS YOUR ANXIETY. Most of us attempt to ignore conflict or uncomfortable situations, hoping they go away or resolve themselves. Of course, conflict rarely evaporates. Conflict does, however, fester, manifest itself in other behavioral or organizational aberrations, and eventually grows into a big pile of time and resource wasting goo. True, not every conflict or hiccup in the organization is worthy of attention, but too often gossip, high degrees of expressed emotion, staff turnover, and over-emphasis on internal processes result in people disconnecting from the critical values, mission, and communications that help guide organizations. Leaders, again at all levels, have to tune in to these disruptions, address their causes, seek solutions, and build consensus on new ways of working and thinking, all the while running the risk of making the trivial seem important.

Managing and leading is hard work, which is probably why so many of us turn to the latest best-seller for canned answers. The truth is that hard work, such as Customized Employment, demands approaches that allow each action to solve multiple problems. This is accomplished through networks of allies and capable employees, using some of the tried and true tools of management. Much of the time our actions appear contradictory, in the same way a tacking ship catches the wind using an irregular course to move forward. This is the way it should be in a complex, evolving world.

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