Bachelor of Commerce

Business Management

Module

PCD100 Problem Solving, Creative Thinking & Decision-Making

Item 7

Paradoxical Thinking

Fletcher & Berrett-Koehler (1997)
Paradoxical Thinking

How to Profit from Your Contradictions

by Jerry Fletcher and Kelley Olwyer
Berrett-Koehler © 1997
219 pages

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Take-Aways

• Successful people are contradictory and comfortable in their contradictions.
• When individuals perform at their best, they almost always approach situations in a paradoxical way.
• Your paradoxes are your contradictory or inconsistent qualities.
• Paradoxes may seem to involve mutually exclusive or impossible combinations of ideas or actions, but they really don’t.
• Many seemingly impossible paradoxes are possible.
• If you understand how to use your paradoxical qualities, you can guide your own behavior more effectively.
• When you use the paradoxical thinking process, you consciously bring together two paradoxical sides of yourself.
• The first step in the paradoxical thinking process is finding your core personal paradox.
• Your core personal paradox represents your most basic tensions and issues.
• An oxymoron best describes this paradoxical combination — a combination of apparently contradictory words or phrases that describes a paradoxical truth.

Rating (10 is best)

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**Review**

*Paradoxical Thinking*

Jerry L. Fletcher and Kelley Olwyler examine how you use paradoxical thinking — contradictory ways of approaching a situation. Then, they discuss ways to use your paradoxes to your strategic advantage. You can use their “pendulum” to help you recognize the positive and negative ways you express these paradoxes — so you can apply the positive actions to difficult situations. They invite readers to analyze themselves and resolve a current problem. The book can help you devise more creative solutions to personal and work situations. However, while the system is fairly straightforward, elements do seem complicated and may be difficult to apply on your own. *getAbstract.com* recommends this book as a novel approach to problem solving and a worthy way to regard goal setting without the nagging voice of consistency in your ear.

**Abstract**

*The Nature of Paradoxical Thinking*

Very successful people seem to be both contradictory and comfortable with their contradictions. In fact, when individuals perform at their best, they almost always approach situations paradoxically. The advantage of paradoxical thinking is that it enables you to perform at higher levels of ability and to expand your sense of the value of your efforts.

A paradox is a contradiction that expresses a truth. The term also refers to any person, thought or action showing apparent contradictions or inconsistencies. While a dictionary may limit the description to only mutually exclusive combinations, often those combinations, which seem to be impossible, really aren’t. If you explore them more fully, you find both sides can be true simultaneously.

If you understand how to use your paradoxical qualities, you can better guide your own behavior and become more successful. You can apply these qualities to resolving complex and confusing problems and to achieving what you want to accomplish.

**Some Examples of Effective Paradoxes**

You have your own particular combination of paradoxes, and your own contradictory and paradoxical qualities. By combining them, you can produce your best work. These juxtapositions are part of your personality, although you may not be aware of them.

Athletes need to combine contradictory qualities for success. For instance, sprinters don’t succeed just by running as hard as possible. Rather, they need to both run as hard as possible and be calm and relaxed. Your eyesight is another example. Each of your eyes sees a slightly different image. They combine to produce stereoscopic or depth perception. Likewise, music has counterpoint. Two or more different melodies combine to provide a richer sound.

Such paradoxes exist in successful people, too. Bill Gates of Microsoft can be charming on the one hand, yet arrogant and subject to fits of anger on the other. He is both visionary and intuitive, while practical and driven. Bill Clinton is both sincere and calculating. He is loyal under some circumstances, yet he has a history of infidelities.
The Paradoxical Thinking Process
Use these five steps to employ the paradoxical thinking process and achieve results.

- **Find your core personal paradox** — Identify the contradictory aspects of yourself. Choose the one representing the most basic core tension with which you struggle.
- **Engage in perception shifting** — Break open your narrow judgments about the positive or negative value of your contradictory qualities. Then, decide how to express your core personal paradox in a way that impels you to do your best work.
- **Define your problem situation** — Then, set the goal of resolving your paradox. Select an important problem to work on and examine it carefully from a paradoxical approach.
- **Rate yourself** — How do you express both sides of your high-performance paradox? You can use the measurement technique known as Fletcher’s Pendulum.
- **Finally, choose steps to improve** your self-ratings — Base these steps on finding ways to more fully express your paradoxical qualities.

Now, put these five steps in to action.

**Finding Your Core Personal Paradox**
People perform their best work when they learn to accept and express their paradoxical qualities. To do this, **list your personal qualities** and characteristics. Try to come up with at least 20, both positive and negative.

List the types of actions you like to take and the kinds of roles you like to play. List words or phrases your friends would use to describe you. List words that someone who doesn’t like you might use. Even if you don’t like the words, list them. For example, your positive qualities might include “careful, take-charge, overachiever.” Your negative qualities might be “cautious, vague, self-doubter.”

Next, combine your personal characteristics into paradoxical pairs. Use oxymorons (combinations of apparently contradictory words or phrases which describe a paradoxical truth). Some oxymorons are “jumbo shrimp” or “plastic glasses.” Sometimes these combinations are humorous, such as “bureaucratic efficiency” or “military intelligence.” Find your own oxymorons by expressing two opposite qualities that often are in conflict with each other. Combine your characteristics to create four or five oxymorons.

Then, select the combination that best describes a central conflict or tension you experience. Examine the ways that dynamic creates a struggle in your life so you can begin to resolve it.

Consider the case study of a client who thought of herself as a self-doubting achiever. She explored this paradox to try to understand how it affected her central dilemma — whether to continue working at a bank or to start her own floral design business. Select your core personal paradox or create an oxymoron that will express it by:

- Inventing words or phrases (“feather smoother” if you often assuage others’ feelings).
- Using animal names (describing yourself as “lion-hearted”).
- Looking for combinations of words on your list that already are opposites.
- Elaborating on the words or phrases on your list.
- Thinking of metaphors.
- Using fictional or famous people (describing yourself as a “laid-back Attila the Hun”).
- Using humor.
- Accepting ownership of characteristics you originally resist or don’t want to admit.
Engaging in Perception Shifting

Look at your core personal paradox more deeply by expanding your perceptions about its positive and negative values. Then use Fletcher’s Pendulum, which calls for labeling your qualities on a 200-point scale, ranging from the most negative, which you can label -100, to the most positive, which you can label +100. For instance, if you consider yourself disorganized, the most negative label would be that you are a slob. The most positive one would be that you are a nonconformist and you aren’t compulsive.

Every characteristic has potentially good and bad, positive and negative, and mature and immature aspects. To shift your perceptions, follow these six steps: 1) list positives on your preferred side, 2) list negatives on your preferred side, 3) list negatives on your disliked side, 4) list positives on your disliked side, 5) choose a high-performance oxymoron and 6) choose a nightmare oxymoron.

Examine the different qualities that make up your core paradox. List your initial positive associations and then your newly perceived negative associations (or, do it the other way around). For example, when the “doubting overachiever” client did this, her positive expressions of her preferred overachiever side included words like “leader,” “fearless” and “productive.” Her negative expressions included words like “compulsive,” “dictatorial” and “workaholic.” When she examined her disliked self-doubting side, her initial negative expressions included “indecisiveness,” “fear” and “lacking confidence.” But her positive expressions included being “cautious,” “protective” and “prepared.”

Then, choose a high-performance oxymoron. Select your list of positives and choose the one that best describes how you would like to be — or how you are, when you are most effective. For instance, the self-doubting client felt she was at her best when she was “thoroughly prepared.” As an overachiever, she was an “expectation exceeder.” Finally, choose your nightmare oxymoron, the worst possible scenario for expressing these core qualities. For instance, at her worst, the self-doubting client experienced feelings of hopelessness. As an overachiever, she felt like a “wheelspinner,” doing work over and over.

Depersonalize the process by recognizing that some words already are negative. Look for extremes rather than opposites — such as when a “shark” becomes overly destructive and out of control. Experience your chosen oxymoron as having a personal truth. Think of a personal story illustrating each of the four quadrants, (where your original oxymoron has both its best possible outcome and its nightmare dimensions).

Oxymorons in Action

With your oxymoron in mind, pick a problem that you think you can address with this method. Set a goal for yourself. First describe your unsatisfactory choices and explain how the situation has affected you. Then, assess your past efforts. Write a goal statement with a deadline.

Select an important current problem — a project that is behind schedule, a difficult emotional issue, a critical decision you have to make or a frustrating relationship. Use this paradoxical thinking approach when facing two or more unsatisfactory alternatives.

First, consciously examine yourself by honestly assessing your own behavior. Then, bring both sides of yourself to bear on the selected problem. Examine your past
unsatisfactory choices and efforts to see what hasn’t worked and to find out if you can determine why.

Then, rate yourself using your own Fletcher’s Pendulum. Place each of your contradictory qualities on a scale from +100 to -100. Imagine the high-performance points on top as the apex. A nail at the apex supports a hanging string with a weight on the bottom (which represents your nightmare oxymoron). The resulting diagram will resemble a swinging pendulum between the two nightmare positions, as you seek to achieve your goal on the top.

Define how you would act if you were expressing the top performance qualities on one side of your oxymoron, and how you would act if you were expressing the nightmare qualities on that side. Then, do the same for the other side of your oxymoron. Finally, rate your current actions according to how consistent they have been with what you consider your most exemplary expression of that goal. Put the related words on one side of your oxymoron, on the same side of the pendulum, with a scale of -100 to +100. Finally, choose action steps to improve your self-ratings. List the steps you can take to raise your lower self-ratings on your downside. Then list the steps you can take to raise them on your higher side.

For instance, after the self-doubting, overachieving client applied this process to her dilemma, she realized she needed to do additional research on starting the floral business. Ultimately, the additional information helped her decide to leave the bank.

You can apply this process to many situations, such as avoiding the loss of a major sale, overcoming problems with a stalled employee or improving team performance.

About The Author

Jerry L. Fletcher specializes in helping corporations handle the human side of large-scale organizational change. His clients include Digital Equipment Corporation, Pfizer Pharmaceuticals, IBM and Procter & Gamble. He also is the author of Patterns of High Performance and Human Growth Games. Kelley Olwyler focuses on one-on-one executive coaching, team consulting and innovative thinking processes. She has trained and managed consultants in the U.S., France, the United Kingdom and Latin America.

Buzz-Words

Core personal paradox / Fletcher’s pendulum / Oxymoron / Paradoxical thinking / Perception-shifting / Self-ratings