

## Building Equity

Marketing executives must build leadership brand equity at a personal level.

By William B. Locander and David L. Luechauer

**A FEW YEARS BACK**, we attended one of those motivational rallies in which a variety of famous and not-so-famous speakers tell the audience members that they can live happier, healthier, and more rewarding lives if they follow the speakers' principles, emulate their examples, and of course buy their books and tapes. The eager crowd is typically made up of sales and marketing types looking for a fix of energy to carry them toward their monthly, quarterly, or yearly goals. We are worried that these events have become a sort of corporate morphine drip. They are often used to give the troops a day away from the rigors of their jobs, when a day at the beach or just playing with the kids would be more valuable. We question their utility—and the costs, which have skyrocketed—but sometimes there's a kernel of wisdom worth passing along. At the session we attended, one of the "lesser-known" speakers shared one such kernel, which we later found in William R. White's *Stories for the Journey* (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1988).

As the story goes, once upon a time, a young soldier was traveling through the country when he stopped to rest his horse in a little village. As he walked around, he spotted a wood fence with nearly 40 small chalk circles. Right in the center of each was a bullet hole.

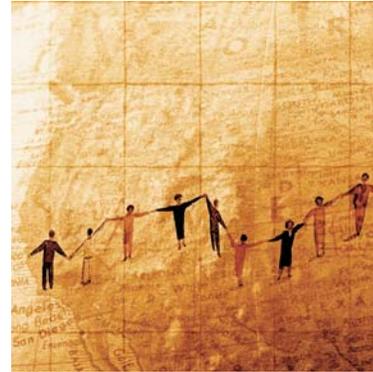
"What amazing accuracy," the soldier thought as he examined the fence. "There is not a single shot that didn't hit the bull's-eye." The soldier quickly set out to find the sharpshooter, and was told that he was a small boy.

Upon finding him, the soldier asked: "Who taught you to shoot so well?"

"I taught myself," the boy replied.

Not satisfied, the soldier pressed him. "To what do you owe your great skill?"

The frustrated boy responded: "It is not very difficult. First I shoot at the wall, and then I take a piece of chalk and draw circles around the holes. That way, I never miss the mark."



This story reminds us that leaders constantly encounter data that don't make sense, and that how they interpret and respond to the data has enormous impacts. Leaders need to learn how to embrace data that are both ambiguous and contradictory. Rather than problems to wrestle, such data can be well-springs of insight. Although challenging, they can

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teach leaders to view situations from multiple angles. When this is accomplished, amazing, novel, and often simple solutions emerge. Paradoxes work the same way, and that's why we spent this year writing about the importance of appreciating them instead of denying, resisting, or fighting them.

### Embrace Paradox

As we have attempted to demonstrate in this series, we live in a world full of paradoxes. Things are seldom as they appear. Sadly, too many sales and marketing executives wrongly believe paradoxical thinking comes naturally only to Nobel Prize winners, world-class inventors, and global tycoons, and that it will never be a tool in their leadership belts.

Moving from a managerial orientation to a leadership orientation really requires the ability to think paradoxically. But many aspiring leaders still wonder: "How can I become an and/both thinker in an either/or world?"

According to author Derm Barrett, even the most linear thinkers can cultivate this invaluable skill. In *The Paradox Process* (American Management Association, 1997), he suggests that we embrace paradox by practicing a few techniques:

- Contrary thinking frees your mind of conventional wisdom and turns it to new possibilities in the opposite direction.
- Janusian thinking helps you identify opposites, reconcile them, and ingeniously juxtapose them to produce innovative combinations.
- Hegelian thinking integrates opposites so intimately that the distinctions between them vanish in a burst of new discovery.

In short, these techniques rely on mastering an old Zen directive: “To hit the target, don’t aim.” This is a lesson that the sharpshooting lad had welcomed, and the soldier had resisted. It is one that too many goal- or results-driven executives fail to grasp.

Other authors have articulated techniques for moving toward paradoxical thinking. For example, in a 2003 *Journal of Psychology and Theology* article, Bill Buker writes about the paradoxical character of first, second, and third order changes.

**First order change.** This is commonsense change, the kind that happens when a spouse has to cut back hours at work. Embracing such change means either the couple spends less, or the other spouse works more. This approach is fine when there aren’t powerful personal and psychological dynamics involved, but this isn’t the type of change that most executives come across.

**Second order change.** This entails reevaluating the presuppositions that govern first order strategies. It’s the situation that the soldier encountered: He assumed the lad was a sharpshooter, when in reality he was a chalk artist. To accept this paradox, executives must question the key assumptions directing their decision making.

**Third order change.** This is when the rules and premises governing a system seem to be oppositional or contradictory. Welcoming this paradox requires leaders to develop humility, and surrender well-worn perceptions of identity in favor of new mental models and approaches. Helping sales and marketing executives engage in third order change has been the goal of this series.

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The Greeks had a wonderful word for embracing change: *kairos*. A person with *kairos* knows that what works today might not work tomorrow, and that what didn't work last year, last week, or even yesterday could be a perfect solution in the next moment. When faced with the unfamiliar, conflicting, or paradoxical, leaders would be wise to slow down, breathe in the mystery, and look through a larger lens with eyes of wonder. They will be able to find the right way to be creative and seize opportunity.

Life-purpose coach Amara Rose offers a different approach. She suggests that when paradoxical situations confront us, we should ask more questions rather than seek more answers. Indeed, most executives could enhance their effectiveness by asking better questions instead of making bolder statements. Perhaps this is why some grandmothers say: "We were given two ears and one mouth, and we should use them in that proportion."

In *Wisdom of the CEO* (Wiley, 2000), G. William Dauphinais, Grady Means, and Colin Price offer principles for managing paradox. In proposing the paradox

that change requires stability, they claim that all too often, organizations don't capitalize on their sources of it (e.g., organizational culture, employees, core competencies). And for the paradox that an organization must focus on individuals to make itself effective as a whole, the authors recommend (1) increased emphasis on hiring high-potential individuals and (2) systematically developing them throughout their careers. Thus, the role of the new leader is to establish/communicate a vision and strategy, set objectives, motivate people, create a productive culture, develop the organization, and initiate transformations.

### Manage the Absurd

Managers have sought rationality in their organizational pursuits for too long, according to *Management of the Absurd* (Simon & Schuster, 1996). Author Richard Farson contends that instead of viewing Harvard Business School, General Motors, and Robert S. McNamara's Department of Defense "Whiz Kids" as management models, theater-of-the-absurd playwrights (e.g., Harold Pinter, Eugene

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Ionesco, Jean Genet, Samuel Beckett) are more appropriate. He says that “life is absurd, that human affairs usually work not rationally but paradoxically,” and argues certain points:

- People learn from their successes (not their failures) and others’ failures.
- Big changes are easier to make than small ones.
- Organizations that need help most will benefit from it least.
- People respect bold moves, and are more likely to buy into a change when it’s big enough to withstand attempts to counter it.
- Unhealthy organizations have great difficulty changing, even though they might need to. In contrast, the healthier an organization, the more capable it is of change.

## The paradoxical commandments

*By Kent M. Keith*

- People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. Love them anyway.
- If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. Do good anyway.
- If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway.
- The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.
- Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank anyway.
- The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds. Think big anyway.
- People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs. Fight for a few underdogs anyway.
- What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway.
- People really need help but may attack you if you do help them. Help people anyway.
- Give the world the best you have and you’ll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you have anyway.

Farson’s goal is to move managers away from logical and linear thinking; things aren’t good/bad or true/false. They must accept the coexistence of opposites.

## Work With Paradox

There’s no doubt that in your psyche, there are parts of you that exist for the love of order. They create structure, rationality, and routine; keep your experience of the world tidy; and feel safest with stability and certainty. At the same time, there are parts of you that exist to maintain chaos in the purest sense of the word. They strive to keep you free and unfettered, seek new adventures, move you toward the creative process, and feel that life—at its core—is about novelty. This is the paradox of existence.

We tend to gravitate toward one of these principles over the other. As a result, part of us generally feels safe while another feels that life is out of balance. The judgment is that we’re either too messy and unpredictable, or too controlled and unyielding. Again, we are both. And until we welcome this inherent duality, we will feel pulled in multiple—and seemingly incompatible—directions. Indeed, what many executives call “tension” is simply this presence in their lives.

In 1968, speaker and author Kent M. Keith wrote a treatise (see the “The paradoxical commandments” sidebar). His words are as appropriate for business leaders as they were for his original audience of students. They offer the best advice we’ve read on embracing paradox and leading from within.

We need leaders who don’t just see black and white, but also see the shades of gray in between and the rainbow beyond; who feel the fear and “do” anyway; and who know there’s a difference between doing things right and doing the right thing. In short, we need those who are comfortable with paradox.

We hope this year’s series of articles helped you become better acquainted and more willing to work with paradox, and that it inspired you to realize this isn’t the end of your leadership journey. This is just the end of the very beginning, and the secret to successful leadership is to begin. ■

## About the Authors

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