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Understanding pragmatic paradoxes: When contradictions become paralyzing and what to do about it

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Abstract Integration of paradoxes (i.e., interdependent yet contradictory tensions such as stability and change, learning and performing, or the individual and the collective) have recently been recognized as sources of synergy and competitive advantage. When adequately navigated, paradoxes may promote innovation, which favors generative complementarities. However, not all paradoxes have such generative effects. Pragmatic paradoxes (i.e., managerially imposed contradictory demands that must be disobeyed to be obeyed) tend to create paralyzing catch-22 situations. Like weeds to a flower, pragmatic paradoxes may also grow alongside the generative type. We explore the conditions in which pragmatic paradoxes become invasive in organizations, identify their main characteristics and symptoms, discuss their roots, and recommend potential approaches to their eradication.
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1. Managerial demands that cannot be obeyed or disobeyed

Managers are increasingly being invited to "embrace paradox" by applying a both-and approach to their work (Berti et al., 2021; Smith

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& Lewis, 2011). Instead of choosing between exploration or exploitation, change or stability, tradition or innovation, global or local, and self-confidence or humility, they are being urged to simultaneously embrace both sides to generate positive transformations. Confronted with opposite demands, managers are recommended to not treat them as trade-offs but to embrace a paradoxical viewpoint. Managers informed by a paradox perspective approach contrasting elements as a duality, acknowledging that it is often necessary to simultaneously pursue divergent objectives and accommodate clashing logics. As an example, organizational leaders informed by a paradox perspective might simultaneously pursue sustainability and financial objectives or be globally-minded localists, traditioned innovators, or high-integrity politicians.

While these interdependent and persistent contradictions (paradoxes) can generate creativity, innovation, and prosperity, not all paradoxes are alike (Cunha et al., 2022). A more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon reveals that some paradoxes are damaging and pathological rather than productive. Such pragmatic paradoxes (Watzlawick et al., 1967)—often known in organizations as Catch-22 situations (Ashforth, 1991)—manifest when individuals are subject to contradictory demands that cannot be negotiated because actors lack adequate agency. This leads to self-defying vicious circles, such as an order that needs to be disobeyed to be obeyed. For those who are exposed to them, these paradoxes act like a poison that produces angst, fear, and hopelessness. This causes individuals to feel paralyzed and diminished within the organization. Instructions such as to "act spontaneously" (to comply, one must not act spontaneously), "not be obedient—make up your mind" (obeying this directive implies being disobedient), or "take initiative" (attempting to do so can be construed as reactive obedience, thereby not taking initiative) illustrate pragmatic paradoxes. Similar situations can manifest when an employee is simultaneously required to offer personalized care to each customer while processing many requests. When employees are encouraged to be creative yet told that perfection is the only acceptable outcome, errors, failures, and mistakes are not an option (i.e., a zero-failures policy). Also consider the implications of a CEO who is at one point vocal about creating a psychologically safe climate but, shortly thereafter, refuses to accept the results of an anonymous staff survey indicating employees do not feel psychologically safe.

Pragmatic paradoxes are most likely to grow in organizational contexts in which actors, because of extreme power differentials, lack sufficient agency for negotiating contradictory managerial demands (Berti & Simpson, 2021). In these instances, contradictory demands impose impossible choices that are paralyzing rather than refreshing. Watzlawick et al. (1967) explain how paradoxical dysfunctional communication patterns that aggravate over time trap actors in situations that impede their ability to escape a pathological relationship (i.e., choosing between nonexisting alternatives).

Strange things may happen to individuals and organizations when pragmatic organizational paradoxes are present. A case in point is the classical example of an organization that seeks to control employee behaviors by formalizing them—only to discover that formalization led to disobedience, heightening the requirement for more intense formalization. In this article, we differentiate generative and pragmatic paradox types, discuss symptoms of pragmatic paradoxes, explore their root causes, and offer clues on how to uproot them.

2. Managing through paradox

Managers are becoming increasingly aware of organizations' paradoxical features that are not necessarily signs of dysfunction but rather expressions of organizational pluralism and complexity (Berti et al., 2021). A *paradox* refers to an opposition between two contrary but independent tensions that persist over time. Organizational paradoxes arise from the soil of organizational contradictions, such as those between objectives of social purpose and corporate profit, routine and creativity, or present/future loss/gain. The two poles in these tensions are equally relevant and, therefore, cannot be settled. Rather than merely being solved, they can be managed, navigated, and balanced. Managers can learn to become comfortable—even proficient—in dealing with these ceaseless tensions. Instead of ignoring paradoxes, they are encouraged to leverage the tensional energy to achieve outcomes greater than the possibilities of either pole alone, or even greater than the sum of both poles. Paradox scholars invite managers to develop a paradox mindset based on integrative thinking (i.e., a willingness to make sense of opposition as normal). A paradox mindset can help managers and other organizational members feel stimulated

and energized by the tensions they face. In principle, those capable of paradoxical thinking are better positioned to integrate organizational opposition to harvest vitality and renewal.

Managers have various strategies at their disposal for cultivating paradox. Companies can use integrated hybrid logics, articulate ambidextrous approaches, or adopt design solutions to help deal with tensions—separately or sequentially. Individuals and teams within organizations have developed practices and routines for accommodating or oscillating between tensions or employing irony and humor to relieve the stress they cause. These approaches both attempt to articulate tension forces in a way that uses the energy for organizational renewal. To take full advantage of paradox, however, organizations must distinguish *generative paradoxes* (i.e., tensions that can be harnessed and leveraged as a force for change and renewal; Cunha et al., 2022) from *paralyzing* or *pragmatic paradoxes* (i.e., pathological experiences that impede action and damage individuals and organizations; Berti & Simpson, 2021). In other words, it is important to distinguish paradoxes that can be fruitfully leveraged for improvement from those that are stifling and debilitating, as not all paradoxes are equal (see Table 1).

3. Symptoms of pragmatic paradoxes

Pragmatic paradoxes are like aggressive weeds that not only make the organizational environment appear disordered and chaotic but also choke the plants you are working so hard to nurture. As such, organizational actors must be aware of the characteristics that distinguish pragmatic paradoxes from generative ones. We note four tell-tale indicators (symptoms): emotional distress, withdrawal, contradictory demands, and a sense of absurdity.

3.1. Emotional distress

Emotional distress has multiple sources, including extraorganizational causes and experiences within the organization. When a leader confronts dependents with contradictory yet inescapable rules, a lack of agency may be expressed via apathy or negative reactions. With no good response options available, any response taken is perceived as bearing negative consequences—and this cognitive interpretation triggers negative emotions such as frustration, anger, apathy, and suffering. For example, based on the belief and expectation that happy employees are more productive or more ethical (e.g., when Wells Fargo measured employees' happy/grumpy ratio assuming that happy workers would be less likely to do bad things), several companies have tried to compel employees to present themselves as happy—ultimately becoming a source of unhappiness (Lilly et al., 2021). The US supermarket chain Trader Joe's provides another example of mandated happiness causing unhappiness, as reported in *The New York Times* (Scheiber, 2016):

> Above all, some employees say they are pressured to appear happy with customers and co-workers, even when that appearance is starkly at odds with what is happening at the store…According to an unfair labor practices charge filed on Thursday with a National Labor Relations Board regional office, Thomas Nagle, a longtime employee of the Trader Joe's store on Manhattan's Upper West Side, was repeatedly reprimanded because managers judged his smile and

Table 1. Contrasting generative and paralyzing pragmatic paradoxes

	Generative paradox	Pragmatic paradox
Definition	Situations that allow actors to negotiate contradictory managerial demands	Situations that impede actors from negotiating contradictory managerial demands
Expressions	Contradictions originate fresh solutions	Contradictions are tackled with solutions that further aggravate the problems
Practical options	There are multiple possibilities, such as separation (ambidexterity), integration (both-anding), and dialectics (creative synthesis)	Conformity, lowering expectations, mindless obedience
Implications	Paradox as a source of progress	Paradox as a source of paralysis (and control)
Examples	The boss is both demanding (i.e., sets ambitious and challenging goals) and supportive (i.e., provides social support when the follower experiences failures and drawbacks in pursuit of the goals)	The boss asks the follower to present and implement innovative solutions—which imply taking a risk—but also warns that failure is not an option

> demeanor to be insufficiently "genuine." He was fired in September for what the managers described as an overly negative attitude.

The outcome was the following:

> In Mr. Nagle's final review before he was fired, he was criticized for not greeting a manager with sufficient feeling. "It's not like, 'Hey what's going on,' it's like 'Heh'," the manager said. Mr. Nagle said that when he asked if the manager wanted a longer acknowledgment, he responded, "Yeah, but it's got to be genuine. You have to want to be here."

3.2. Withdrawal

Amid pragmatic paradoxes, individuals often seek relief by resorting to behaviors of withdrawal or avoidance (physical or psychological). By gaining a critical distance from a situation, one can only address the dissonance, not tackle the cause. Sometimes, such an approach develops in tandem with strong cynicism toward the organization and its authorities. The behavior can further become entrenched, sensing that it is safer to isolate and criticize from the outside without doing anything to change the situation. This is often expressed by employees who use "they" when referring to specific groups (e.g., coworkers groups) or even the entire organization (of which they are a part).

In extreme cases, withdrawal is "existential." One example of this phenomenon is Foxconn, whose 2010 annual corporate social and environmental responsibility report stated that the organization had set up "various speech and debate competition shows on the topic of 'I love the company, the company loves me', and a 'happy mothers' forum" (Foxconn, 2010). The report also stated that, in 2011, the organization intended to initiate a Foxconn Volunteer Network to bring "hope and love to those in crisis and to work together for a better society." At the same time, sweatshop conditions and the adoption of people management practices that resembled a total institution resulted in dozens of employees dying—or attempting to die—by suicide (Clegg et al., 2016a, 2016b).

3.3. Literal obedience

Pragmatic paradoxes, as illustrated in the above cases, may invoke a strange kind of self-protective and cynical employee behavior: literal obedience. Faced with the impossibility of making sense of self-contradictory requests, victims of pragmatic paradoxes may take refuge in following instructions literally. In some cases, individuals go a step further and even employ full obedience to expose the system's absurdities. An example of total obedience which ends up functioning as acts of resistance is expressed in Joseph Hasek's novel *The Brave Soldier Svejk* (Fleming & Sewell, 2002). The protagonist manifests cynical obedience by complying immediately and completely with all orders—expecting absurd consequences that cannot be punished because, technically, the obedient behavior is "exemplary."

In contemporary organizations, however, it is rarely possible to avoid the negative consequences of contradictory demands by taking refuge in apparent stupidity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). The full potency of pragmatic paradoxes is deployed when individuals are commanded to both fully comply with rigid directives and to achieve results (e.g., "make customers happy by adapting to their requests, but follow protocols to the letter"). Note that, in this specific case too, even blind obedience is paralyzing: whether the employee adapts to the customer's request or follows the protocol, they will be obeying and disobeying.

3.4. Absurdity

When exposed to a pragmatic paradox, employees are assailed by a sense of absurdity. They come to realize that they are caught in a world that—under a surface of order and rationality—is absurd. It is indeed the attempt of giving an exact, rigid order to a complex, ambiguous context that can be the cause of pragmatic paradox. This can occur when employees get caught in a vicious bureaucratic circle (e.g., you need document X to obtain document Y but cannot obtain X unless you have Y). Franz Kafka's works masterfully depict the absurdity and hopelessness experienced by individuals caught in the web of faceless bureaucratic power (Clegg et al., 2016a, 2016b; Warner, 2007).

4. Roots of pragmatic paradoxes

Addressing pragmatic paradoxes by merely dealing with their symptoms is insufficient. When the roots remain in the ground, new shoots grow. Pragmatic paradoxes typically emerge when contradictions are experienced in a social and material context that deprives actors of their agency and, thus, the flexibility to adapt to contradictory requests. A

lack of agency can derive from various root causes, including bureaucratic responses to complexity, conflicting organizational goals amid scarce resources, conflicting individual objectives or conflicting logics, multiple legal-cultural systems, and leaders' behaviors (Berti & Simpson, 2021).

4.1. Bureaucratic handling of complexity

Organizations need structure (i.e., rules, regulations, and standardized procedures). Rules and regulations are also common causes of pragmatic paradoxes. Rule systems often contain contradictions, especially when they are made of layers that, over time, prescribe mutually inconsistent indications. Layers of rules accumulate inconsistencies when a rule created to solve one problem is in opposition to a rule created to solve another problem. As organizations become more complex, the temptation to shower problems with rules amplifies the complexity, and several rules become mutually contradicting. This is also aggravated when organizations create orders faster than they discontinue them. The accumulation of rules originates administrative sludge (Sunstein, 2022) symptomized by increased conflict in the organization, slow and low-quality decision-making, reduced innovation, and increased ambiguity. The enforcement of rules not to coordinate but to control—or just because they are rules—is not only annoying but also potentially pathological, particularly when organizations still expect employees to be creative and proactive. However, it is not necessarily the presence of contradictory requirements that causes the pragmatic paradox. When these "glitches" are handled flexibly and reasonably, organizations can find ways to overcome obstacles. A pragmatic paradox emerges when actors do not have the possibility of raising an issue or of explaining a contradiction because it is assumed that such bureaucratic mistakes cannot exist—or simply because there is no form of redress or appeal.

4.2. Lack of resources in dealing with conflicting organizational goals

The progressive advance of stakeholder theory replaces the logic of a single goal—shareholder value—with the logic of multiple goals. One does not have to be a critic of the stakeholder view to accept that multiple stakeholders come with different goals that create inevitable trade-offs. Unsurprisingly, such perspectives may be contradictory when stakeholders include shareholders, employees, customers, suppliers, public authorities, legislators, regulators, communities, and civil society at large. Responding more to the demands of one stakeholder may mean that we will respond less to the demands of another stakeholder. Yet this challenge can be addressed, provided the actor can access sufficient resources and/or is free to negotiate the time and mode of compliance. Pragmatic paradoxes emerge when an actor must achieve contrasting objectives while having strong resource constraints, or when one objective is so overwhelming that it renders other, equally important goals secondary.

There are several illustrative cases depicting incompatible organizational goals. For example, NASA's conflict between safety and schedules might have played an important role in the Challenger disaster is pertinent (Vaughan, 1996). In another case, Wells Fargo's Community Bank imposed impossible sales goals on employees that contributed to them resorting to illegal means and cheating their customers to achieve targets and keep their jobs (see Lilly et al., 2021). The Volkswagen Dieselgate scandal further illustrates the dangers of confounding people with demanding, contradictory, and sometimes materially unfeasible goals (Gaim et al., 2021).

These examples indicate that experiencing pragmatic paradoxes may lead employees to engage in illegal, unethical actions. In this sense, pragmatic paradoxes become paralyzing by neutralizing the employees' ethical orientation and encouraging them to try to escape the paradox via dishonest actions. Believing they have no means to discuss the "absurdity" of the organizational demands, or—given the game they are asked to play is inherently absurd—they perceive no ill in cheating. Further, employees may feel that cheating is the only way to achieve managerial goals and avoid losing their job, which partly accounts for the dangerous nature of their response. In a clear demonstration of the paralyzing essence of several pragmatic paradoxes, those who cheat to keep their jobs may later lose them after being fired because of cheating, such as employees at Wells Fargo.

4.3. Conflicting metrics

Management by objectives (MBO) may also spur pragmatic paradoxes, mainly when there are tensions between goals at the same level or across levels. When the team outcome is the

consequence of interdependencies between team members, and the performance appraisal system is based on a competitive (e.g., ranked-forced) logic, pursuing the individual objective of getting a higher position in such a system may require avoiding behaviors that augment team performance. The contradiction is aggravated when the appraisal system contains subjective goals toward "being a good team player." In that case, acting as a good team player may require prescinding a competitive approach that would contribute to a better assessment. These issues reflect the enduring paradoxical problem of "rewarding A while hoping for B" (Kerr, 1975) that has long confronted managers and scholars alike.

4.4. Opposing business logics, causing a clash between symbolic and practical objectives

Organizations are often required to embrace competing logics (i.e., hybridize). Prisons, for example, are expected to repress and educate, hospitals to offer good care and efficient management, and universities to educate while maintaining a robust business model. Hybrid organizations can be successful in managing these paradoxical tensions—even if doing so can be emotionally taxing (e.g., the artistic entrepreneur who starts a business for aesthetic reasons only to end up commanding a business operation). Although opposing logics can be accommodated, pragmatic paradoxes emerge because the different practices required may not be symbolically compatible, even if they are materially compatible. Take the case of an NGO operating in a conflict area to restore peace and social justice. To achieve its objectives, the organization must operate safely in a context with a deteriorated rule of law and failing local institutions. A pragmatic solution to this problem is to make agreements with local warlords (i.e., "buying protection" for them). However, by supporting these actors, the organization implicitly undermines its mission.

4.4.1. Incompatible legal-cultural systems

As organizations become international, they feel the power of diversity. A recent example refers to the case of Xinjiang. Due to the violation of human rights in this Chinese province, companies are torn between nonexistent choices: profit vs. human rights, China vs. home country, present vs. future, and business pragmatism vs. social responsibility. These choices have cultural, political, and historical resonance but put managers in an impossible situation. The Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (1977) prohibits US companies from making bribes in foreign countries—even if bribery is part of the culture—but countries outside of the US are not necessarily prohibited from making such bribes, putting American companies at a competitive disadvantage. As such, concerns about cultural diversity may hemorrhage multinational companies and their expatriates if acting appropriately according to one cultural system may require acting inappropriately regarding another. For example, an expatriate who espouses a universalistic perspective does not trust a partner of a host country with a particularistic culture that shares confidential information to save a friend's business. However, such a partner does not trust someone who does not share confidential information to help a friend. What leads to trust in one context may lead to mistrust in another. What is trustworthy is simultaneously untrustworthy. Once again, this wicked challenge requires playing a "long game," building relational bridges, and creating conditions for a dialogue that transcends rigid principles. What turns this cultural clash into a pragmatic paradox is the unreasonable expectation of finding common ground with another culture without "corrupting" one's own.

4.5. Leaders' actions

Pragmatic paradoxes are often rooted in leader behaviors. Leaders who pursue conflicting goals and objectives may convey conflicting messages without realizing their paralyzing effects on follower performance. Relationally transparent leaders ask for frankness and relational transparency from followers, but they may be unaware of power differentials that cause followers to fear reciprocating such frankness and transparency. Take the case of Carlos Ghosn, former CEO of Nissan Motor Company. While—or precisely because—he was renowned for his frankness and openness, followers were reluctant to say anything that would conflict with his opinions. In cases like this, it is the leader's frankness and relational transparency toward the followers that hinders the followers' transparency in return. Followers risk being criticized for both being frank and not being frank. Pragmatic paradoxes partly lie in the perception that power structures are too tight to be challenged. People may feel they are caught in a structure that expects their conformity rather than their voice. They consider themselves minions in an all-powerful system that accepts no

deviation from the rule—even when the power-holder verbally conveys that deviation is welcome (Cunha et al., 2019).

5. Uprooting pragmatic paradoxes

Given the above, what can organizations do to avoid the potential perils of the pragmatic paradoxes they confront? We describe the conditions in which pragmatic paradoxes flourish and identify ways to uproot them (see Table 2).

5.1. Dealing with bureaucratic complexity

To address bureaucratic rigidity in the face of complexity, organizations can employ audits to reduce administrative sludge. *Sludge* refers to "excessive or unjustified frictions, such as paperwork burdens, that cost time or money," make life difficult to navigate, and may be frustrating, stigmatizing, or humiliating (Sunstein, 2022). Conducting sludge audits or periodic "lookbacks" at existing burdens may expose unnecessary paperwork and help companies decide when and where to reduce it. Organizations may even celebrate sludge reduction. Creating a psychologically safe climate that—at any moment—allows people to question rules, procedures, or regulations is also crucial.

5.2. Handling conflicting organizational goals and a lack of resources

Goals that seem rational in isolation may become problematic when viewed together. An example is the competing objectives of siloed organizational departments. Instead of simply creating objectives, organizations might use techniques that force the integration of objectives to expose possible synergies and tradeoffs. The balance scorecard is a well-known example of such an approach (Tawse & Tabesh, 2022). Goals can also be discussed among members before adoption rather than simply imposed from the top down. In addition to goal setting, organizations may also develop meta-goal-setting systems (i.e., a system to discuss goals). However, the most essential intervention for removing pragmatic paradoxes is to acknowledge the need for providing additional resources and agency to individuals and units

Table 2. Strategies for uprooting pragmatic paradoxes

Pragmatic paradox	How to uproot
Bureaucratic complexity	• Pay attention to warning signals of coercive bureaucracy • Conduct sludge audits • Celebrate the demotion of stupid rules
Conflicting organizational goals	• Discuss the goals • Employ goal integration techniques (e.g., the balanced scorecard) • Develop a meta-goal-setting system
Conflicting individual metrics	• Allow people to talk about goals • Create space for people to refuse goals • Create a culture of "asking why" • Empower genuinely
Opposing logics	• Expose the logics and their mutual implications (dry the roots) • Discuss the trade-offs in the open (dry the roots)
Multiple legal-cultural systems	• Conduct legal and culture risk audits • Develop a risk field map • Assess the implications of cultural differences for the interactions between people from different cultural origins • Make people from different cultural origins aware and respectful of those differences • Help people handle differences productively
Leader behaviors	• Create communicative cultures • Counter self-censorship • As a manager, do not provide input until the followers express their true voices • Empower genuinely

expected to integrate conflicting goals. This requires reducing the emphasis on maximizing efficiency and control.

5.3. Addressing conflicting individual metrics

The previous approach may help mitigate pragmatic paradoxes that emerge from conflicting organizational objectives but not necessarily those that arise from conflicting metrics. To tackle these conflicts, managers can empower their people. Organizations do this in different ways, such as adopting a "no-rules rule" à la Netflix or having a policy of a few simple rules. In this case, organizations empower employees by providing space between the rules rather than imposing rules that deprive agency. Rules that enable rather than coerce are a potential antidote to pragmatic paradoxes. Not by coincidence, the first of the eight big rules at software firm OutSystems (2022) is "ask why," which promotes mindful—rather than mindless—obedience. In such a system, goals can be discussed and negotiated.

5.4. Dealing with opposing logics

The adoption of competing logics is often a gradual process, as logics creep in and take root without thorough deliberation. To avoid this turning into a source of paralysis, organizations can assume and expose logics by reflecting on how they might reinforce or neutralize one another. Discussion rather than assumption may uncover fresh solutions. For example, the logics of care and efficiency in healthcare may seem contradictory, but their paradoxical relationship may be integrated via continuous improvement-type interventions. In any case, it is important to acknowledge that the problem of combining multiple logics is not just complicated but "wicked" in the sense that (1) it does not allow simple, clear-cut solutions (which instead can become part of the problem), (2) its definition is contested, and (3) "optimal results" can never be achieved. For example, the solution to the wicked problem of crime (sending people to jail) often compounds the problem (turning minor offenders into hardened criminals). When dealing with wicked problems, it is necessary to accept our limitations and try to find an imperfect accommodation between contrasting needs.

5.5. Addressing incompatible legal-cultural systems

As organizations internationalize and confront divergent political regimes, cultural roots, and legal systems, geopolitical and cultural risks become more salient. Competing globally is about acting in a world of differences. Especially for executives, mapping the terrain by designing a cultural and geographical risk map may be critical for unearthing cases to potentially seed difficult situations with political or governmental origins. These risk audits may anticipate problems related to management interference, corruption risk, and cultural conflicts (e.g., among board members from different cultural origins or between expatriates and native employees), which helps decision-makers address predictable risks. This might prevent them from sacrificing one force over the other by reducing expectations. With effective risk audits, generative paradoxes will be better navigated, and pragmatic paradoxes will be better avoided.

5.6. Dealing with leader behaviors

Leaders are inadvertent originators of pragmatic paradoxes, but they may also help with their removal. One approach could be creating cultures in which speaking up is safe and expressing different opinions is encouraged—not countered or discouraged. These cultures accept that conflict should be vented rather than suppressed and that, for example, "asking why" is not only a cognitive operation but also an emotional one. The cultural promotion of conflict that supports saying "no" is thus a measure against blind obedience or distant compliance. In the same manner, managers may counter self-censorship. As the literature on groupthink has suggested, self-censorship is a disturbing feature of teams and organizations.

When managers coerce people to accept orders and thus promote self-censorship (e.g., Theranos' Elizabeth Holmes coercion of people in the name of "team spirit" and being a "team player"), they stimulate not only obedience or twisted bureaucracy but also various side effects (e.g., pragmatic paradoxes). In addition, British Airways' unusual creation of a corporate jester role in the 1970s—and space for minority dissent—may help "unfreeze" critical thinking and promote inquiry as a habit (Clegg et al., 2022). Leaders that refrain

from expressing their opinions until the followers' voices are heard may also promote a communicative culture and make team members more comfortable and psychologically safe to flag organizational absurdities.

As a metarule, organizations may also consider communicating about how to communicate. Rules such as "ask why" at OutSystems (2022), as well as the "five why" technique at Toyota (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2019), dictate that employees talk about the rules and how they are framed rather than simple compliance and execution. Pragmatic paradoxes are often a result of power imbalances, and metacommunication constitutes a practice that governs all the others. This means that *metacommunication* (i.e., communicating about the way we communicate) acts as an antidote for addressing pragmatic paradoxes. Metacommunication, however, requires an organization to develop self-awareness, look at itself without defensive protections, and assume vulnerabilities without losing agency. In addition, metacommunication offers a sense of agency as people may refashion the power circuits beyond the decisions of managers. These are then considered "power with" rather than "power over" circuits, meaning power is co-created rather than imposed (Clegg et al., 2022).

6. Key takeaways, a note for managers

In an era that presents paradox management as the key to dealing with complexities, knowing how to distinguish between generative and pragmatic paradoxes may be a critical skill in navigating the field of organizational opposites. Generative paradoxes may help the organization and its leaders deal innovatively and effectively with the complexities, tensions, and contradictions that pervade internal and external organizational environments. However, pragmatic paradoxes tend to paralyze or give rise to problematic employee behaviors and decisions. Pragmatic paradoxes may simply emerge from events and contexts that the organization and its leaders are not able to control—but often, they emerge from controllable behaviors, decisions, rules, and procedures. This article explores the symptoms that help identify pragmatic paradoxes, discusses their root causes, and suggests ways to handle them.

Before concluding, a short note is necessary: from the perspective of managers who practice pragmatic paradoxes, doing so may be effective in that it allows managers to achieve their own goals. A manager may communicate in a paradoxical, practical way to control or dominate followers without being criticized for being autocratic, controlling, or dominating. Paralyzing followers by communicating verbally may be the strategy a manager wants to pursue. A manager who tells followers "Don't bother me with problems—bring me solutions" may effectively further their interests in that followers become fully conditioned by the manager's arbitrariness. It is not possible to bring a solution without addressing, at least implicitly, the underlying problem. Therefore, followers may be afraid to bring solutions to the manager. However, such an approach is also risky in that the followers may be criticized and even punished for not proposing solutions. The followers' excuse that they did not want to bother the manager is not acceptable because the manager had told them to provide solutions. Overall, the difference between problems and solutions gets blurred, and inaction becomes the preferred action.

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