

# REFLECTIONS ON MANAGEMENT

WITH TOM GALVIN

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT



## When Unresolvable Tensions Exist, How Can Leaders Maintain Unity?

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*Please note: This transcript has been edited for clarity.*

*“One team, one goal.” Now this and other expressions of unity are often invoked to get the organization working together and moving in the same direction. Hopefully a positive one. Some organizations go so far as to treat unity as a virtue or core value, particularly in those performing high risk activities. You can think about first responders, for example. But, real unity is often elusive. In complex organizations, differentiations among the organization can manifest themselves in very, very deep tensions, possibly even paradox. So consider when two parts of the organization, each with capabilities essential to the organization's success, are essentially representing two mutually exclusive perspectives. There is no resolution. The leaders desires for unity in vain. What can they do?*

*My name is Tom Galvin and these are my Reflections on Management.*

Tension is a natural part of organizational life, of course. I mean, organizations are 'complex adaptive systems.' You know that there are tensions present [that] can definitely be expected. The tensions that I'm talking about here are ones that surface that have a very persistent character to them. They tend to be that sort of tensions that arise on a routine basis or they underlie many decisions that the organization makes. As I surveyed the literature, I often drawn to Marianne Lewis's work on paradox, because I think that she does a really excellent job of articulating several types of tensions that have this persistent and durable capability.

Just as an example, one of them is how the needs of the individual can be in constant tension with the needs of the collective body. There is how centralization for control can run up against forces that desire decentralization for innovation and flexibility. And she's also written about a tension between just continuity and change. If tensions like these are not critical to the organization, if they don't really disrupt the organization's activities, then that's one thing. You know, maybe maybe the leader can make a decision and things can be manageable. But what I want to talk about are the cases where this tension is severe, could be so strong that the two perspectives are such strong opposing forces that the leader really is walking a tightrope between the two perspectives.

Let me take the combination of centralization for control and decentralization for innovation, along with the continuity versus change and give kind of an example of what I'm talking about. One of the organizations that I was [a member of] had completed a operation, a very significant operation, and the operation had exposed some deep underlying flaws in the organization's mission and the organizational structure. The organization is faced with the need to transform itself, or at least that's sort of the external mandate. You have to reorganize. You have to rethink. And this is this particular

organization has been through these episodes several times in the past for different reasons, sometimes crises, sometimes other things.

But the general tension around continuity and change becomes really apparent, apparent when you're talking about the transformation of an organization such as the one I'm talking about, which has a very, very long-standing mission, is dealing in an environment ... With great uncertainty because the organization does not know what the future portends. So the challenge becomes that for all of the talk of wanting to do change in order to recover from the lessons learned of the past organization, there were some very, very strong forces that were saying that we we have to be careful not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. It's OK to be innovative, but at the same time, we have these long standing requirements that have not gone away. And so we can't being the kind of organization that we were while we're trying to embrace this new way of doing business.

In association with that was a need for changing the way that the organization managed itself. Downsizing was going to be part of the of the equation. And the tendency was to try to do things, to centralize what was left of the organization, put a lot more of the responsibilities for control administration, et cetera, in a more centralized fashion, as opposed to continuing to operate in a decentralized fashion where subordinate organizations were given a lot of freedom to manage themselves.

And at the same time, the larger organization in this case, it was the Army was looking to centralize some activities out of this organization, Army wide, trying to do centralization for efficiency. There was a tension there because this was a military organization and you're talking about the importance of decentralization, not just for innovation, but also as a as a way of doing business -- [the move to] centralization can rub against that. On the other hand, you know, efficiency was a big deal. And we're talking about a downsizing. Efficiency is one of those watchwords.

These tensions all kind of came into play and they were they had been by the time that I [got there]. They had been unresolved for a couple of years and continued for a couple of years more, several years actually after I had departed. You know, these were long-standing, persistent problems of what the leadership wanted to do, you know, to recover from the lessons of this operation and to move forward. There were some very, very deep tensions that were just seemed unresolvable and it was frustrating. I mean, I remember watching the staff meetings. I remember watching the organizations, the staff officers, the the personal staffs, all of them.

Everybody was feeling the pressure. It's like we should be able to do something, but we can't because we can't seem to ameliorate these deep tensions that are just limiting our options. This happened long before I considered going into my doctoral program in organizational behavior. So an organizational development. So I didn't have the tools available to me at the time. That seemed like they could help, you know, advise the leadership to to resolve it.

So one of the things that I took as a mission of my own personal mission was to try to think about how do I help people? How do I consult or address these sorts of deep tensions with leaders in my program? One of the first readings that we had on organizational change [in my doctoral program] was this was this wonderful article. It was a meta analysis by Andrew Van de Ven and Marshall Poole back in 1995. What they talked about in there were motors of change. And this was a way of capturing

someone metaphorically the different ways in which the changed theories were conceptualizing the way change occurs in organizations. And at the time Van de Ven & Poole had broken it out into planned change -- which is to say what a leader intentionally wants to do to intervene in the environment -- and emergent or constructive change, which is sort of like, you know, change that occurs through the ordinary churn of life.

And one of these motors that really caught my attention, it seemed to me, to match very closely the character of change efforts that I had seen in these cases were when a dialectic or a paradox was present. It also explained to my mind why leaders found these so frustrating. It's called the 'dialectic motor of change.' And here's kind of how it works.

OK, so let's imagine that you have two camps and I'm going to call them A and Z. One of them is the thesis. So that's basically the one perspective. And then Z is the antithesis or the antithesis, which is the opposing perspective. They don't have to be opposites. They just have to be alternates of each other. OK. And the assumption is, is that A and Z have their own world view. They have their own desired state of things. If A is favoring centralization, then, of course, A is going to push for centralization. And what they see is the desired future state of the organization is going to look bureaucratically efficient, perhaps, whereas Z is going to be looking at, or harboring, a worldview where the goal is the opposite. It's to have innovation, experimentation, a lot of diffusion of ideas. In A's view. Z's world is going to be rather chaotic or look chaotic. In Z's perspective, looking at A is going to look awfully boring, monotonous.

So you have these two perspectives and they have their own world views. So then what happens, say, when a leader intervenes and says, all right, we've got to move the organization forward in some way? Ok, we're going to come up with a synthesis that is some sort of a hybrid between A and Z, OK?

So the synthesis is ostensibly established in order to provide this path to unity. If we're wanting to have the organization act as one team, one goal, one, whatever, then. Yeah. This synthesis represents that, that unity. However, according to the the dialectic motor of change, that synthesis is a temporary state. And that's because the underlying tension, the world views of A and Z and the desired future states that each are trying to pursue are ultimately irreconcilable. Especially if it is rooted in paradox, if it is a paradoxical difference between A and Z -- then no solution will ever be permanent.

Now, from the leader's perspective, then, this is the source of frustration, because if you're a leader, especially one who's judged by their decisiveness, who is judged by results, then the idea of having to revisit old problems can really get in your way. I mean, it really becomes an a source of aggravation, constant aggravation. And therefore, while the leader could be trying very, very hard to keep this synthesis together -- even when the conditions have changed such that the synthesis needs to break, or the synthesis can no longer hold, or can no longer provide the benefit to the organization -- can actually do more harm to the organization than good.

I was thinking about this and what I came to realize. Van de Ven & Poole did not actually define what constitutes synthesis. And a lot of ways organizations may be prone to thinking that synthesis is going to be sort of a negotiated solution. That is, we take A and Z and we sort of combine the best of them, create hybrids. And that becomes the synthesis. That may be kind of the language that we talk a lot, because our desire for unity is often accompanied by a desire for inclusiveness that we don't

really think about anything else. You know, it's A plus Z divided by two, if you will. When I find about the various ways in which I watch leaders address these sort of paradoxical situations, I found two other forms of synthesis, a play that I actually think are more common in the negotiation.

One of them is what I call *domination*,<sup>1</sup> and that is essentially when the leader decides I'm going to take one perspective and marginalize the other one just completely, I am. I come into the organization as a leader and I decide I am in a person. I am into centralization. So I am going to require actions or perform you to direct the organization to take actions that centralize a function which ultimately disadvantages decentralization, disadvantages ideas of innovation, or "I'll do the opposite. I'll come in as a blanket change agent and say we're going to change everything. We're gonna tear this place up old ways of doing business are no good, no more. Now the centralized crowd is on the defense. I find that that is actually a very, very common thing to happen. And what happens is the leader perhaps makes that decision to side one way or the other and thinks that, "all right, it's all done. I have made my decision and there it is."

And then in the process of mentally celebrating their decisiveness, the forces that align with the opposite perspective are regrouping to the point where no matter what happens in the synthesis, something is going to cause that tension to renew. It just isn't going to be resolved. And the and the opposite perspective is going to come back almost with a vengeance. And then the leader is wondering what the heck happened.

But that's kind of to be expected in these sorts of situations, I believe, because if you do weigh things a little bit too too much to one side without necessarily realizing it, the opposite perspective in a paradoxical situation is going to gain strength or exploit the vulnerabilities of the position that you have.

The other one is what I call *arbitration*. Arbitration is, you know, just imagine, instead of a negotiated settlement between the two. It's a sort of like the two sides just don't want to deal with each other. They won't deal with each other. What they just basically do is say whatever it is that can be minimally done, that has to be minimally done between the two camps will do with everything else. It's like A and Z sustain their own worldviews and limit communication with each other. That also very severely limits any sense of unity. I mean, that sounds like something that we would not want.

But I would also maintain that it actually works quite well. I mean, it has its benefits. Benefits are that you don't have to cause trouble. You don't have to forge a clumsy or a messy synthesis where it is needed. The downside is, is it can lead to stovepiping. And this is why I think that this is actually a very, very common way of dealing with these sort of paradoxical tensions, which is to say you don't deal with them. You get people to commit to the minimum necessary to move forward.

And if it breaks after a while, then OK. We just try something else or whatever, but we end up not actually resolving the underlying stovepiping, and the stovepiping can then form pretty solidly after a period of time. Van de Ven & Poole treated these as constructive or emergent forms of change. They didn't see this or they least didn't know when they wrote the article in 1995, they didn't express it as an idea of a deliberate form of change. ... Perhaps, you know, because of the way that the state of

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<sup>1</sup> Note: In a table late in their article, Van de Ven & Poole (1995) identified domination and arbitration (they called it 'stalemate') as degenerative cases of synthesis, but did not get into detailed definition.

change literature was at the time. It wasn't seen that dialectic change would be something that one would want to do deliberately.

But I think that that actually is has been shown not to be the case. I think that the dialectic motor of change winds up being kind of a default mechanism by which people constantly take on and retake on complicated, persistent challenges within the organization, especially those where there is no dominant solution. My own view is that it's really, really hard. I mean, all members of the organization deal with tensions, of course. But I have a hard time seeing how in large organizations where anybody other than the top leader or the senior leadership team can really be the ones to set the direction to navigate or to point the direction to help the organization navigate the tension. Somebody has to set the synthesis. Somebody has to recognize when the synthesis is breaking. Somebody has to be prepared to set the conditions so that the breakage of the synthesis does not break the organization. Somebody has to bring A and Z back together.

And it's hard to imagine that that that that somebody is anyone other than the top leader.

If we're talking about the organization really being able to make the best use of this motor of change -- to take this constant cycle, a constant churn and actually put it in a common direction, because if it is delegated, if it's, you know, left to the middle managers or whatever -- then the synthesis may very well be destructive. It may very well cause the organization to go backwards because the lower level managers do not have the same perspective as the senior leadership team. They don't necessarily have that broader strategic view that the leadership team needs in order to be able to forge the proper direction.

I have actually used this concept or this structure in consultations, but I have found it to be rather successful because one of the things that is, is Eye-Opening for for some leaders, especially those who are accustomed to the idea that once you make a decision, you move out and the decision is done and you never have to revisit it. Leaders are a little bit more attuned to thinking that, yes, indeed, certain Sipes of decisions we make actually have to be revisited and they have to be revisited often and we've got to get comfortable with it because otherwise if you don't get comfortable with it, then when it comes back, it's going to become frustrating and that frustration will pour all over the organization. So I think this is something that from a leader development perspective, we ought to consider.

*... And that's all for now. The views expressed are my own and do not necessary reflect the United States Army War College, the United States Army or the Department of Defense. Thank you for listening and have a great day.*

**ALL THE BEST!**

**TOM GALVIN**