

Using the 'Sleight of Mouth' Patterns in Managing Organisational Paradoxes

By Joe Cheal MSc

Introduction

This article seeks to investigate the use of reframing (particularly Dilts' Sleight of Mouth patterns (1999)) as a tool for managing paradoxes, particularly within organisations. Please note that this article is designed to give the reader some ideas and suggestions rather than an in-depth exploration (which would take many more pages than are available here).

Paradox Management

A paradox could be described as "a contradiction between interconnected positions or concepts that still holds true" (Cheal 2012, p9). A paradox can be hypothetical and conceptual (e.g. "which is more important: profit or staff satisfaction?") but can also become very real and problematic (e.g. management want motivated staff but in trying a 'motivation-drive', staff end up feeling more demoralised). When problematic paradoxes are not addressed, they tend to fester and create systemic problems in an organisation.

From my own research into (and modelling of) organisational paradoxes, a paradoxical problem tends to begin with a tension between the two poles of a polarity. This tension generates 'splitting, looping and flipping' within a system to the point where people within the system find it difficult to resolve or escape the problem (perhaps because the problem re-appears or the solution creates new, unintended problems). Organisational paradoxes might include dilemmas, double binds, vicious circles, conflict, competing demands and unintended consequences.

'Paradox management' is the practice of identifying underlying polarities and tensions with a view to addressing them. This might be in the form of a specific solution, a preventative measure or a new system implemented to *capitalise* on the tension and to innovate new strategies.

According to paradox management theorists (e.g. Ford and Ford 1994, Kosko 1993), organisational paradoxes can be approached through different 'thinking structures' or 'logics':

Table 1: Paradox Management approaches (adapted from Ford & Ford 1994 & Kosko 1993)

Logic	What is this?
Formal	Working in the framework of either/or, maintaining a polarity between two seemingly opposing positions.
Fuzzy	Working on a <i>continuum</i> between the two poles of 'either/or'. This 'from/to' approach allows for multiple midway-point solutions.
Dialectic	Creating a 'third way' or synthesis between the polarities (which are known as thesis and antithesis).
Trialectic	Shifting outside or beyond the polarity, seeing the situation from alternative perspectives.

(For further details of these approaches, see Cheal 2012.)

Sleight of Mouth as an Organisational Reframing Tool

According to Ichazo (1982, p74), trialectic logic is about “the change from one material manifestation point to another” and the movement from one point to another point appears to be that of one frame to another frame. In this sense, ‘reframing’ captures the essence of trialectic logic.

Reframing taps into a rich source of material and hence provides a useful resource for paradox management. Bolman & Deal (2003, p12) refer to ‘frames’ as “windows, maps, tools, lenses, orientations, and perspectives” through which organisational reframing can take place. Bandler and Grinder (1982) propose two types of reframing: content and context, and these have been further developed by Dilts with the ‘Sleight of Mouth’ patterns (1999) and also by Hall & Bodenhamer (2005) with the ‘Mind Lines’ patterns. Table 2 (below) compares Dilts’ Sleight of Mouth patterns to some paradox management approaches.

How does reframing address paradox?

Reframing can help to address paradoxical problems in two distinct (and yet interconnected) ways:

- 1) If someone sees something as a problem, to them, it *is* a problem; in this sense, *a problem is only a problem if perceived as a problem*. Reframing gives a different perspective and hence may remove the perception that something is a problem (and hence resolve the problem!)
- 2) Reframing involves thinking in other directions... giving alternatives and broadening out possibilities. This may provide other directions for innovation and creativity in the process of problem solving.

By adapting 'Sleight of Mouth' into a problem-solving tool (as well as maintaining its original purpose as a reframing tool), we may be able to get more perspectives on a paradoxical problem. This, in turn, may help to generate some new solutions and actions. In the table below, the first two columns give you the original Sleight of Mouth (SoM) pattern: labels and descriptions. The third and fourth columns then link the SoM pattern to an approach for managing a paradoxical problem. This is not a matter of using one or the other; you can use the original SoM pattern to *give the person a different perspective* **and** the paradoxical approach to attempt to *resolve the problem*.

Table 2: Sleight of Mouth (SoM) Patterns & Paradox Management approaches.

<i>Sleight of Mouth Pattern</i>	SoM Pattern Definition/Description	<i>Paradoxical Approach</i>	Description of Paradoxical Approach
<i>Apply to Self</i>	Turn a part of the belief onto the belief itself, or onto the speaker, or yourself as a listener.	<i>Prescribe the symptom</i>	Deliberately carry out the symptom. For example, give permission to the rebel in a group to be rebellious or encourage a nervous speaker to be nervous.
<i>Intention</i>	Seek the positive intention behind the person maintaining their belief, e.g. to protect themselves in some way?	<i>Positive Intention</i>	Explore the positive intention of the paradox as a whole (i.e. what could be useful/good about the problem?)
<i>Consequences</i>	Explore/utilise the impact of the belief/problem.	<i>Handling Symptoms</i>	Resolve the symptom of a paradox when the symptom is perceived as the key issue or when a short term 'sticking plaster' solution is needed.
<i>Another Outcome</i>	Look for an alternative goal or solution for their situation (or part of their belief).	<i>'Confrontation' to compare and contrast</i>	Bring the polarity out into the open, so that differences can be resolved (instead of avoided).

<i>Chunk Up/Down</i>	Refer them to a higher category (e.g. in which category does this problem belong?) or to a lower category (into which categories does this problem break down?)	<i>Logical Types/Levels</i>	Clarify and separate the levels of the issue and the connections among them.
<i>Hierarchy of Criteria</i>	Challenge the importance level of their belief by comparing it to other things that are important to them.	<i>Seeking underlying values</i>	Resolve through new insights and linkages between conflicting values and demands.
<i>Change Frame Size</i>	Put the issue into perspective by changing the scope (zooming in or out) from 'molecular' to 'planet'/'universe' frame sizes.	<i>Larger Frame</i>	See the problem in a frame with many similar problems in order to 'normalise' the problem and borrow solutions from elsewhere.
<i>Model of the World</i>	Help them re-evaluate their belief by giving another person's perspective or asking who they got their current perspective from.	<i>New perspective</i>	Find a world view that integrates and transcends opposing positions (e.g. Chinese yin/yang philosophy, or Dialectic 'best of both worlds' approach).
<i>Reality Strategy</i>	Establish the evidence they have for their belief. Help them develop a more effective measure.	<i>Change what is measured</i>	Develop effective new measures and get rid of old problematic measures.
<i>Analogy</i>	Use metaphor to challenge their thinking.	<i>Metaphor</i>	Shift to a metaphor, to help make the paradox more tangible and see the pattern in a different way. Create solution at the level of metaphor, then map back.
<i>Redefine</i>	Redefine some aspects of their belief by using	<i>Redefine the problem by seeking the</i>	Create a balanced perspective on the

	terms that have similar meanings but different connotations (e.g. 'mistake' to 'learning point').	<i>'positive of the opposite'</i>	problem by discovering the benefits/advantages of both sides of the paradox, hence redefining the situation.
<i>Counter Example</i>	Look for 'an exception to the rule' or example where their belief is not true e.g. in another context.	<i>Reverse the loop</i>	Counter the problem: show how and where a vicious circle could become a 'virtuous circle' by reversing the direction of the loop.
<i>Meta</i>	Establishing a belief <u>about</u> the belief by jumping outside the frame and taking a disassociated view.	<i>Take meta position</i>	Jump outside the personal frame of the problem and take a system's view.

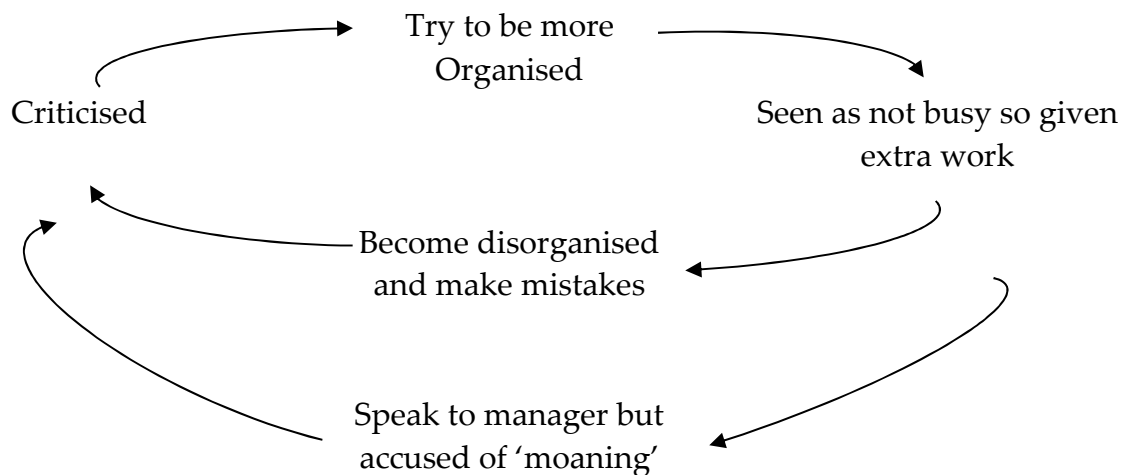
A Working Example

One example of an organisational tension is expecting staff to 'do more for less' (i.e. to produce more/better output with less resources). I often hear employees complaining that this throws them into an impossible, 'no-win' situation which is reminiscent of Bateson's double bind theory (Bateson 1978).

An individual might say:

"Whenever I manage to get myself organised, I get given more work to do by my manager... because he doesn't think I'm busy enough. This continues until I can't cope and I then get totally disorganised... which I get criticised for, particularly as I'm more likely to make mistakes. So, I do my best to get organised again and the whole thing goes round in a circle. It's so stressful. Then, if I try and address it with him, he accuses me of 'moaning' and I get marked down at appraisal time."

Not only is this member of staff caught in a basic double-bind (damned if I'm organised, damned if I'm disorganised), they are currently unable to comment on the problem (i.e. the issue has become 'undiscussable' – see Argyris 1990). Without leaving their job, they appear 'trapped'. If we were to map this problem out into its component parts, it might look like this:



How might the 'paradoxical approach' version of the Sleight of Mouth patterns help us here? What ideas might emerge?

Table 3: Applications of Sleight of Mouth (SoM) Patterns & Paradox Management approaches.

SoM Pattern/ Paradoxical Approach	Description of Paradoxical Approach	Example Solution
<i>Apply to Self/ Prescribe the symptom</i>	Deliberately carry out the symptom. (For example, give permission to the rebel in a group to be rebellious or encourage a nervous speaker to be nervous.)	Actively seek out work from your manager. This way, you appear busy, keen and you take on work under your own terms (and hence feel more in control).
<i>Intention/ Positive Intention</i>	Explore the positive intention of the paradox as a whole (i.e. what could be useful/good about the problem?)	Firstly, it's good to have a job! The fact that there is a lot of work to keep you busy means you are more likely to keep the job! Secondly, make a point of communicating to your manager how busy you are and how much you are achieving.
<i>Consequences/ Handling Symptoms</i>	Resolve the symptom of a paradox when the symptom is perceived as the key issue or is a short term 'sticking plaster' solution is needed.	Address the consequences of the problem through implementing some 'Stress Management' techniques. E.g. meditation, relaxation exercises.
<i>Another Outcome/</i>	Bring the polarity out into the open, so that differences can be resolved.	If this is really about your manager seeing you as busy or not busy, think of

<i>'Confrontation' to compare and contrast</i>		some ways to look busy even when you are organised!
<i>Chunk Up/Down / Logical Types/Levels</i>	Clarify and separate the levels of the issue and the connections among them.	Consider not just your own responsibilities and needs, but also those of your manager and the management layers above him in the organisation. That way, you can deliver the work to their requirements, needs and expectations.
<i>Hierarchy of Criterial/ Seeking underlying values</i>	Resolve through new insights and linkages between conflicting demands	Prioritise items that are most important to you, your manager and/or the company.
<i>Change Frame Size/ Larger Frame</i>	See the problem in a frame across the whole organisation (and other organisations) where many other people have the same problem. This may help to 'normalise' the problem and borrow solutions from elsewhere.	Lots of people are in the same situation. How do your colleagues cope, particularly the highest performers and those that get good appraisals? What ideas can you learn from them?
<i>Model of the World/ New perspective</i>	Find a world view that integrates and transcends opposing positions (e.g. Chinese yin/yang philosophy, or Dialectic 'both/and' and 'best of both worlds' approach).	Advantages of being 'organised'? <i>Feeling in control, productive.</i> Advantages of being 'disorganised'? <i>Seen as busy (hence not getting extra work & stress!), have to be more spontaneous and creative.</i> What alternative 'both/and' solution would give you the benefits of both organised AND disorganised?
<i>Reality Strategy/ Change what is measured</i>	Develop effective new measures and get rid of old problematic measures.	Find ways of measuring your 'busy-ness' as well as (or instead of) your output.
<i>Analogy/ Metaphor</i>	Shift to a metaphor, to help make the paradox more tangible and see the pattern in a different way. Create solution at level of metaphor, then map back.	It's like an athlete who's on top of their game. Once there, how do they stay on top? They have to think of new ways to motivate themselves and stay competitive. So, what are some ways to keep motivating yourself? How might you stay competitive?
<i>Redefine/</i>	Redefine the problem: create a balanced perspective on the	So, appearing 'disorganised' means you seem busier and you get less work

<i>Seek the 'positive of the opposite'</i>	problem by discovering the benefits/advantages of both sides of the paradox.	dumped on you. That would certainly be less stressful! Let's look at some creative ways of achieving that!
<i>Counter Example/ Reverse the loop</i>	Show how and where a vicious circle could become a 'virtuous circle' by reversing the direction of the loop.	Appearing busy gives you more time to be organised, reducing the level of mistakes and criticism (perhaps gaining some praise!), giving you more time to think of ways of appearing busy!
<i>Meta/ Take meta position</i>	Jump outside the personal frame of the problem and take a system's view.	What does your manager need from you? To look busy and not to moan! If your manager asks you to do something whilst you are working on another important task, you might reply: "I'm happy to do that, but I'm currently working on this... which would you like me to complete first?" This approach makes it clear you are busy and that you are 'happy'!

A Final Note

The Sleight of Mouth patterns have traditionally been used specifically as a tool for reframing. It has been my intention in writing this article, to demonstrate that Dilts' patterns can also be used as a problem-solving tool, both in reframing the perceptions of a problem and in stimulating new ideas for practical solutions.

My personal interest lies in the understanding and resolving of paradoxical problems, simply because they are the most difficult of problems to address. It is my hope that the reader will have gained a modicum of insight into the new and developing field of paradox management and also gained a greater appreciation of the Sleight of Mouth patterns.

Biography

Joe Cheal has been working with NLP since 1993. As well as being a master trainer of NLP, he holds an MSc in Organisational Development and NLT, a degree in Philosophy and Psychology, and diplomas in Coaching and in Ericksonian Hypnotherapy, Psychotherapy and NLP. He is also a licensed EI practitioner.

He is the author of *'Solving Impossible Problems: Working Through Tensions and Paradox in Business'*, *'Who Stole My Pie?'* and co-author of *'The Model Presenter: Developing Excellence in*

Presenting and Training', 'The Relationship Dance: A Guide to Loving Gracefully' and 'The Little Book of Persuasion (Updated)'.

References

- Argyris, C. (1990) *Overcoming Organizational Defenses: Facilitating Organizational Learning* Allyn & Bacon: Simon & Schuster
- Bandler, R. & Grinder, J. (1982) *Reframing Real People* Press
- Bateson, G. (1978) "The birth of a matrix or double bind and epistemology" in Berger, M.M. (ed) *Beyond the Double Bind* Brunner/Mazel Publishers: New York. (pp 41-64)
- Bolman, L.G. & Deal, T.E. (2003) *Reframing Organisations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership* Jossey-Bass
- Cheal, J. (2012) *Solving Impossible Problems: Working through Tension and Paradox in Business* GWiz Publishing
- Dilts, R. (1999) *Sleight of Mouth: The Magic of Conversational Belief Change* Meta Publications
- Ford, J.D. & Ford, L.W. (1994) "Logics of identity, contradiction and attraction in change" *Academy of Management Review*, Vol.19, No.4, pp756-785.
- Hall, L.M. & Bodenhamer, B.G. (2005) *Mind Lines: Lines for Changing Minds 5th Ed.* NSP: Neuro Semantic Publications
- Ichazo, O. (1982) *Between Metaphysics and Protoanalysis* Arica Institute Press
- Kosko, B. (1993) *Fuzzy Thinking: The New Science of Fuzzy Logic* Hyperion: New York

