

# Managing the “Past vs. Future” Paradox: A Transformational Perspective of People Management

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## Abstract

We associate the themes of change management and people management in an analysis based on a dialectical perspective of social evolution. We discuss the paradox constituted by the “past” and “future” dimensions of reality and its harmful effects on change management. Through a case study, we try to contribute to the discussions of the Transformational People Management Model, showing how an organization was able to avoid the effects of the paradox in question by implementing changes through adaptive strategies. We show that the transformational model highlights the dialectic process of construction and deconstruction that provides for evolution within organizations. We suggest that, as change implies a dialectics of order and disorder, it is fundamental to deal with the contradictory aspects that characterize a social reality in constant change.

## Introduction

### Organizational paradoxes and the dialectic perspective of organizational analysis

The theme of *organizational paradoxes* is not a recent one. Merton (1936), for example, stated in his *The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action* that every social action produces contradictory consequences, given that for each desired effect of an action there is a series of unforeseen effects that oppose the effects individuals seek when acting. This work was the starting point for an important theoretical tradition, current dealing with organizational paradoxes, that recovers classic authors to advance criticism of the bureaucracy (Blau and Scott, 1970; Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967; McKinley and Scherer, 2000; Merton, 1950; Selznick, 1955). In addition to this, the work of Vasconcelos (2004) identifies two other relevant currents: (1) studies based on the psychoanalytic and psychodynamic paradigm, several authors who analyze studies by Melanie Klein, Elliot Jacques, Bion, etc, reviewing and updating these works based on the paradoxes concept (Dejours, 1987; Diamond, 1993; Enriquez, 1991; Frost and Robinson, 1999; Gabriel, 1999; Hirschhorn, 1997; Jacques, 1955 and Kets de Vries, 1995, to mention a few) and (2) phenomenology and constructivism studies, based on symbolic interactionism. Based on the work of Goffman (1959), Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1989), among other authors, these studies used the concept of paradoxes to discuss organizational learning and change, identity formation and organizational culture, among other themes (for example, Benson, 1977; Cameron K.S. and Quinn, R., 1998; Lewis and Lehler, 2003; Mascarenhas, Vasconcelos and Protil, 2004; Myeong-Gu and Creed, 2002; Poole and Van de Ven 1989; Sabelis, 1996; Vasconcelos, Motta and Pinochet, 2003; Wood, 2001, Eisenhardt, 2000; Lewis, 2000).

Several authors in this latter theoretical school assimilate Hegelian philosophical elements on analyzing the contradictions inherent to organizational change processes. These authors adopt a dialectic view of organizations when discussing change as an internal movement of contradiction. According to Hegelian philosophy, the paradox is expressed by the proposition “A and non- A”, a logical impossibility of assigning to a single object two opposite, mutually exclusive qualities at once. The dialectic process takes place by means of paradoxes: the subject arises and changes as a result of the contradiction between its predicates, becoming another due to the internal denial thereof. A dialectic analysis perspective studies social construction of reality by means of the social construct, its contradictions, social praxis and the transformation of the original social system. The term *social construct* refers to the system that is produced by the social interactions among individuals in pursuit of their peculiar interests. Such a social system is composed of several groups and structures that interconnect more or less autonomously, producing specific socio-cultural patterns and struggling for hegemony of their world perspectives. One example might be an organization composed of sub-groups, each with its own micro-dynamics or sub-cultures. The contradictions and inconsistencies perceived within and among these sub-groups drive the *praxis*, which is the free and creative reconstruction of the social system. Individuals dissatisfied with the rules are potential agents for change, as organizational sub-groups can move towards questioning the system and its hegemonic rules and taking political action to change them. It is perceptive contradictions that, by causing cognitive dissonance and disturbing these agents, generate the energy to transform the initial social construct of promote its dialectic evolution. Within this analytical perspective of social evolution, we will now deepen the discussion of organizational change processes, conceptualizing the “past vs. future paradox” and showing how this contradiction may hamper the praxis (Benson, 1977; Davis, Maranville, Obloj, 1997; Festinger, 1957; Kojève, 1980; Lewis and Dehler, 2000; Myeong-Gu and Creed, 2002; Poole and Van de Ven e 1989; Sabelis, 1996).

### **Organizational Change and People Management**

According to another proposition, individuals may face changing circumstances with realism in order to find creative solutions, in the arduous task of dealing with the contradictions, paradoxes and self-denial brought about by transformation. This is the *Transformational People Management Model*, according to which the new is generated from the old, in a continuum that includes breaks and contradictions but also deals with such phenomena. According to the transformational perspective of people management, the future is conceived of as an extension of the past, recombining and expanding upon the latter’s contents and dimensions, and dealing with paradoxes and contradictions as part of the evolution process. This is a process of rebuilding the sense of reality, as advanced by authors that have discussed the importance of the meanings of work for individuals (Antunes, 1999; Morin, Tonnelli and Pliopas, 2003). The transformational model embraces internal ambivalence and contradiction, psychic aspects, the complexity of socialization processes, and the symbolic and unconscious phenomena at organizations.

The transformational model highlights the dialectic process of construction and deconstruction that provides for evolution within organizations. This model proposes extending the participation of social actors in the decision-making process, as a greater number of more autonomous and skilled individuals are involved in the evolution of organizational systems. This model’s theorists put forward solutions that consider individual action under a less rationalized perspective than other models. Change implies a dialectics of order and disorder that prevents the authoritarian implementation of strict programs. They propose, therefore, a sort of “disorder management”, dealing with the contradictory aspects that characterize a social reality in constant change, marked by paradoxes. Social observation

actions, projects negotiated ad hoc, the establishment of temporary spaces for social experimentation and research/action are some of this model's propositions (Apel, 1994; Blyton and Turnbull, 1992; Brabet, 1993; Schein and Kets de Vries, 2000; Storey and Sisson, 1989; Vasconcelos and Vasconcelos, 2001).

As regards the conduction of transformational change, we can stress the need for the management of meanings. Within the context of socio-technical systems' transition, the leader must make sure that the psychic unbalance caused by environmental transformations has minimal consequences for individuals. This requires managing the meanings of organizational changes, that is, how the changes are to be interpreted by individuals and how they will influence the construction of new identity patterns. This is the process according to which the leader influences the definition of the followers' reality. This process is characterized by the articulation of the social group's shared experiences and meanings in such a manner as to enable certain modes of action. In this process, the relationship between leader and follower is marked by existing need or by requests from the potential follower. This type of leadership is characterized by the leader's awareness of the follower's intrinsic needs in order to enable the motivational satisfaction that allows for action (Bergamini, 1994, 1998; Smircich and Morgan, 1982). Analysis of the case ahead lets us advance in the discussion of relationships between people management and change management, under the assumptions of the transformational model.

### **Research Methodology**

This research was based on the case study method, applied to an organization whose HR area was undergoing a broad change process by means of reconfiguring structures and implementing an information system for human resources management processes. The case study was defined by Yin as "an empirical questioning that investigates the contemporary phenomenon with its real-life context, where the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clear and where multiple sources of evidence are used" (2001: 32). This strategy was chosen based on the criteria defined by Yin (2001): for the purposes of this research, it is not possible to control behavioral events at organizations and emphasis is given to contemporary events and to their context, with possible access to people, documents and process observations.

The *inductive methodology* was used for this research, that is, the attempt to contribute to theory from field data and observations. Therefore, the case study was used to articulate between a specific set of evidences and more comprehensive theoretical propositions, in such a manner as to problematize and enrich them. This case study was not originally designed with the present discussion in mind. However, during data gathering, the people management dimensions analyzed here proved to be extremely relevant to understanding the change process within the organization, justifying additional information gathering. With these data in hand, it seemed useful to discuss them in a specific paper articulating them with a consecrated theoretical reference that might yield contributions (Echeverría, 1989).

The researcher dedicated himself full-time to data gathering for four weeks, in September 2002, as part of the field research for a full master's dissertation. This involved 18 semi-structured, taped interviews that lasted in average two hours. The interviewees were selected during the field period, as the relevance of the processes in question became clear for the researcher. Documents were also analyzed, including internal communications, projects, executive presentations and training materials. In addition, in order to apprehend behavior and interaction patterns among the involved social agents, several processes relative to the change project were observed during the field period, such as decision-making meetings and

user-training processes. In the case presented ahead, we sought to understand the change process in its essence by means of historical reconstruction, made possible by the insertion and intense interaction between the researcher and organization members for the duration of the research. We investigated the interpretation and reactions of organizational actors as a means to build an understanding of that reality: which were the relevant organizational groups, how they conceived of and reacted to change, how actors interpreted them; whether there were instances of resistance to change and how these phenomena were avoided; whether there were contradictions between discourse and action at the organization and the effects thereof; these were some of the questions that guided the researcher. The research was conducted at an initial moment of evaluation of the results of the change process, which had begun approximately 18 months earlier.

According to Yin (2001), the case study model should be capable of undergoing a quality judgment. An early criterion pertains to the validity of the study's construction. In this study, evidences from three analysis units were analyzed, enabling understanding the phenomenon at hand from several angles. These units were (1) HR area executives' perceptions; (2) other HR area employees' perceptions; and (3) the perception of other employees, at several hierarchy levels and departments. In addition, several sources of evidence were used, as quoted in the previous paragraph, which were mutually reinforcing, preventing the use of biased or equivocal information. In addition to these factors, the preliminary case study report was read and discussed by the identified critical informers in the three units of analysis.

## **Case Study**

### **The Automation of People Management Processes at Daimlerchrysler, Würth.**

The DaimlerChrysler unit in Würth, Germany, produces commercial and special vehicles at a pace of approximately 82 thousand units per year. It has approximately 9 thousand employees, 450 of which at managerial level. Its HR area, the subject of this research, has about 150 employees and was traditionally regarded as an operating area, involved in bureaucratic administrative processes that added no quality to the relationships within the organization and to internal processes. HR professionals interpreted their insertion in the organization as being contradictory: while they advocated the need for innovation and flexibility, they performed mechanical activities and assumed traditional roles. A change in top management in the end of the year 2000, however, triggered a process of comprehensive changes whose goal was to reorganize people management in such a manner as to give HR professionals' a new identity. These changes included deep modifications to the area's social organization, in addition to implementing technology as a support for management processes.

The RYB.com (Reinvent your business. com) project started by initiative of the new HR manager, a newcomer from other areas of the company, who brought with him ideas about a new way to consider people management activities, less oriented to technical and operating aspects, and more focused on the development of the manager-subordinates relationships and the encouragement of a more autonomous, questioning and politicized employee profile. The new manager's ideas arose from the perception that people management processes should be the responsibility of team leaders, as these processes were inherent to the relationship between leaders and team members. This perception was widespread among team leaders, as one of them put it:

*“In the old days, technical area executives like me were concerned solely with production-related issues, our core-responsibility. It was normally a relationship among specialists in the area. Now, this executive profile is outdated and we take on more responsibilities, spending more time*

*dealing with human relationship matters, with more subjective issues that influence the pace of our work.”*

The HR area’s operation, therefore, was not to be characterized by mediating and centralizing all processes, as was the case until then, as this leads to the impoverishment of the relationship between team leaders and team members at the several departments. There was a need to effectively transform people management processes to allow them to be an integral part of organizational groups’ dynamics. In this process, the HR area was also to take on new responsibilities. As one HR analyst put it:

*“The philosophy was that the HR area should not be important just for being there, but for actually adding quality to the relationship between managers and employees and the company. Therefore, HR area was to act not as a center for people management-related activities, but as a facilitator. These processes are inherent to managers’ routines and should not be the sole responsibility of the HR area. Empowering clients [other departments in the company] and acting as specialized support was a means to enable HR to operate in a way that added more quality to people management”.*

Implementing this new philosophy advocated by the top management required broad and profound changes to all HR area structures and processes, implemented starting on early 2001, and at an initial assessment stage when these data were gathered. The area’s processes were completely reconfigured, with emphasis on the consultative operation of HR professionals. A broad self-service system was used as a tool to informate people management administrative processes, releasing HR analysts from these repetitive tasks (Zuboff, 1989). This system also generated a new information flow that was used by HR professionals for the purposes of special people management issues support, now organized in a sophisticated service-center. In sum, human resources administrative processes were automated, HR ceased to mediate the operation of people management services, which became the direct responsibility of team leaders in their interactions with team members. The self-service system became the tool for these people management activities, while the HR area started to render specialized services in support to processes operated by team leaders. Through its reorganization, the HR area encouraged the exchange of information and the negotiation of personal and organizational interests within teams’ contexts, enriching relationships, shortening the distances between individuals, and promoting a more politicized, autonomous employee profile within the organization.

## **Case Study**

### **The Change Process**

The RYB.com project was an initiative of the new HR top management. This initiative, however, responded to the dissatisfaction of an important portion of the area’s employees, the older ones, that were not satisfied with the meanings traditionally associated to their tasks. According to these professionals, their operations were often limited to bureaucratic and mechanical procedures in which they saw no relevant signification. This group had a negative interpretation of their insertion into the organization, associating it with the maintenance and operation of secondary support processes. As put by one of the area’s employees:

*“For quite some time the older professionals in the area complained of how HR was organized. These employees constitute the area’s foundation;*

*they are the ones that directly influence the work of newer ones or of those that are temporarily stationed in the area”.*

Noticing this dissatisfaction, one of the new HR manager’s first acts was to create the position of *strategies and processes supervision*, answering directly to him and in charge of coordinating and implementing the strategic changes he envisioned for the area. The manager selected for this position the individual that stood out as the spokesperson of the dissatisfied share of HR employees, who were discontent with their area’s bureaucratic profile. This individual had emerged as leader of the discontent group due to his abilities as a political articulator and a technology expert. He, in fact, had for some time been lauding the potential benefits implementing self-service could bring to people management and to the HR area in particular. His role was essential as regards managing the meanings of the changes, that is, the ways individuals would interpret the changes. These should not be regarded as a sudden break from the organizational past, but rather as an opportunity for everyone to make an effective contribution, by means of their skills, to the transformation of their roles in the organization. According to one of the HR analysts interviewed:

*“The project was not introduced to the team as a downsizing solution, which helped and motivated them to accept the idea. It was introduced as a means to transform the nature of the team’s work from bureaucratic and centered on continuing processes to a more consultative action, dealing with the solution of problems by means of the information made available by the new systems”.*

The choice of the informal leader in charge of the project was crucial to emphasize the organization’s openness in regard to listening to individuals and giving them space to take part in the project. Despite the broadness and depth of the changes, the people management reconfiguration process at the organization was characterized by the willingness of the HR area groups – those most affected – building a new insertion into the company and transforming their jobs. During the process of planning the changes, which took place in the first ten months of 2001, numerous seminars and meetings were held where the new organization patterns were discussed and negotiated to exhaustion. The fact that they were able to take an active part in the change process, forming workgroups and negotiating meanings, jointly defining new work profiles, methods and processes, was crucial for the construction of their insertion into the organization. The way the project was conducted allowed the construction of new meanings to be associated to the work at the HR area, as a result of intense negotiation of interests and perspectives among the many relevant social actors. The HR management in fact let interaction and negotiation among individuals to form the basis for the identification of the area’s new organization parameters, entitling them to a voice and to effective involvement.

*“After the boss gave green light to implement the project, we made some screens and presented them at an area workshop where supervisors were responsible for generating ideas and mapping processes and improvements that might be accomplished via IT. After a 4-6 week period, when the teams had a better idea of their processes and possible improvements, we sought out people capable of programming screens and systems.”*

While HR professionals negotiated the area’s new tasks, processes and profiles, there was a need to enable implementation of the technology to support the new work profile. The HR team asked the company’s IT area to provide the support needed for the development of the technology. To everyone’s surprise, the company’s IT area refused. By this time, the

importance of the project was recognized by HR professionals, which forced them, as a whole, to seek out professionals elsewhere and come up with an IT-HR team capable of implementing the project. The fact that they had to develop the project as a team and overcome the implementation hurdles created by the IT area united these individuals around common goals and further reinforced the importance of negotiation processes in the pursuit of solutions for the area. The area then began to seek out skilled students from outside to form a specialized parallel team.

*“The automation processes was enabled by means of intense participation of the area’s older employees, who are ‘opinion makers’. If these employees were unhappy with the new tools, they would hardly be successful for the entire team. These people partnered with the IT-HR team [a team comprised of IT and HR personnel, established specifically to conduct the project] to come up with tools that effectively facilitated work in the area. In this process, these employees also encouraged others to take an active part in the changes. With their involvement, it was easier to demonstrate the potential of the tools and to introduce them effectively into the team”.*

The outcome of the people management transformation process at the organization was a fully reconfigured work model. The involvement of all relevant social actors with the planning and implementation models enabled the construction of new meanings for the work performed at the HR area. These meanings represented, for those individuals, a significant gain as compared to the meanings associated to their work in the past. From an area regarded as operational and bureaucratic, the HR professionals built a new insertion into the organization, based on the specialized skills to support people management activities. In the new work context, they could effectively innovate and contribute to organizational dynamics, getting acknowledgement for it. As summed up by HR analysts:

*“The Personal portal [self-service system] is a great tool that currently provides all kinds of information both the HR area and to clients. It was all paperwork before. Now there is not as much bureaucratic, repetitive work, except for some more specific processes, like the ones relative to the Union. My work revolves around (...) consultative matters, such as compensation management at areas, career development, etc.”*

*“There was no major resistance to the RYB.com project. The project was received with enthusiasm because HR professionals felt the need for change. The area had long been considered a problem for the company, regarded as a costs center. The HR area is now seen as one of the most innovative and this is good for the employees, for team motivation. But the situation was extraordinary for us. There was a latent feeling in the area, a desire for change, as it was clear that the organization was mistaken.”*

## Conclusions

### **The Past vs. Future Paradox and People Management**

The organizational change described earlier can be analyzed by means of the dialectic perspective. On regarding the organization as a social construct, we can see that it is made up of several autonomous, but interconnected, groups. HR professionals comprise one of these

groups and interact constantly with others so as to produce specific cultural interpretations, such as the meanings they ascribe their work and their insertion into the organization. We can see that these interpretations generated perceptive contradictions amidst HR professionals, and these contradictions drove the praxis. Regarded as an operational, bureaucratic area, these professionals faced the *discourse vs. practice paradox*, as they advocated the need for innovation and flexibility and, at the same time, took traditional stances and performed mechanical activities. We can also say that the highly skilled employees in the HR department faced a *'learning vs. mechanization of work paradox'*, as they suffered with everyday repetitive tasks that didn't allow the development of their whole potentials. These perceptive contradictions made individuals uncomfortable and drove the reconstruction of that social system. Social actors thus became involved in a system-transforming process, in such a manner as to decrease the level of discomfort generated by these perceptive paradoxes.

In social system transformation processes such as this, the appearance of the *past vs. future paradox* can hamper praxis and individual action. Faustian organizational change projects promote abrupt breaks with the meanings constructed by social actors and attributed to their experiences. By ignoring consolidated socio-cultural patterns, such as traditional power arrangements and identities, and imposing top-down guidelines for change, these projects exclude relevant social actors from the process of continuous deconstruction and reconstruction of the social systems of which they are part. According to a different proposition, the future can be generated from the past, in a continuum that involves breaks and contradictions, but deals with these phenomena as part of the dialectic evolution process. In fact, depending on the premises adopted, people management can encourage or hamper the organizational evolution process.

The case discussed earlier provides important elements to consider the relationship between organizational change and people management. According to the *Transformational People Management Model*, change is regarded as a non-regressive crisis that is overcome by the consolidation of a new social system built from the earlier construct, which offers the unique human experience required and necessary to consolidate the new one. From this perspective, the past is not necessarily opposite to the future: rather, the former is the basis for the latter's construction. In the change process described in this article, the organization permitted the usage of an adaptive strategy that implied a prior diagnosis of the social system, based on which a *transitional space* was prepared. This space is a transitional structure that allows social actors to reconstruct individual and collective meanings for work based on the previous context, by means of intense negotiation of interests and interpretations.

The *transitional space* created in the organization at hand is an example of adaptive strategy. By means of such a structure, resistance to the new model is reduced as individuals are given opportunities to build the "new" from their old skills. The definition of new profiles and tasks, the design of new structures and processes, were all discussed and defined by the collectivity. Individuals were dissatisfied with the previous profile of their area and their work, but, based on their earlier skills, they were able to negotiate structures and redesign their new context, progressively adapting thereto. In this process, they also had to negotiate and manage conflicts involving implementation of their project when the IT area refused to help.

The case discussed in this article suggests the importance of encouraging the establishment of a structure where the social patterns required by the context under construction can be totally negotiated. In this case, the past of the organization, which is regarded in Faustian changes as the fruit of an obsolete system that must be destroyed, is considered the source of human and material inputs that allow the construction of the new system, even faced with circumstances where practices widely different from the earlier ones have been consolidated. The past and the set of skills and relationships the organization

developed along its history, therefore, provided the strategic assets needed to build its future. According to this change management model, attention to informal social interaction and power networks also plays a crucial role towards the success of institutional change programs. *Anomie*, or the inability to constitute a new universe of norms and interactions, is frequently the consequence of a radical change to the power structure and everyday work relationships, often leading to the failure of Faustian organizational change programs. Unable to consolidate successful political alliances in the new organization as they did in the former one, social actors would not accept failure and would resist in order to preserve the social means for maintaining their success.

Through analysis of the change described here, one may suggest the importance of leadership patterns to this process. The organization chose an individual that was notoriously a political leader and spokesman for the HR employees to be in charge of the project. In the case at hand, this individual's action drew close to a transformational pattern, characterized by the leader's influence over the definition of the followers' reality. The process was characterized by the articulation of the group's motivational needs, its initiative and experience, so as to enable new actions and the establishment of new meanings. This leader managed the formation of the new work context by allowing the individuals interpret the changes as opportunities for the group's professional growth, so to enhance its value for the organization. In this way, under a transformational leadership, the *transitional spaces* allowed positive interpretation of the changes, thereby reducing the perception of polarization between the past identity and the uncertain one to be formed in the future.

The transition from the industrial to the post-industrial socio-economic context has caused people management to become closely associated with the theme of change management. Analysis of the case at hand suggests that issues such as the reconstruction of meanings by individuals within the context of changes in their working conditions should be given great importance in discussions concerning people management in organizations. In fact, it is no longer possible to discuss change management without paying attention at the relations between change processes and the social construction of meanings. Based on the concept of organizational paradox and on the dialectic perspective of social change, we have suggested that the dissonance between the organization's *past* and *future* and its deleterious effects on change management can be minimized by adopting assumptions from the *Transformational People Management Model*. Our discussions about effective change processes can also be improved with the development of our understanding of how individuals and groups interact and negotiate meanings for the construction of new organizational dynamics.

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