8

UNCERTAINTY, CONTRADICTION AND PARADOX

So what can managers do?

In the course of this book I have written extensively about uncertainty, contradiction and paradox, and the reader may come away with the impression that somehow I am making an argument against managing. This is sometimes the reaction I get after a presentation to groups of managers about organizational complexity: if I point to the limits of management as a discipline of prediction and control, some managers think that what I am saying is equivalent to arguing that managers do not matter and that they cannot make a difference.

Perhaps it is time to state unequivocally that there is nothing wrong with trying to plan, to lead, to make sense, to order, to make things cohere, to try to control conflict. Perhaps all I am drawing attention to is the way that complex reality constantly breaks out of our attempts to control and define it. In other words, when managers become convinced that they have to control meaning, to impose one culture on the organization, to fix sense-making, then they have overreached themselves and are likely to stifle spontaneity and creativity in organizations and create the kinds of problems that I have pointed to in this book, by calling out the opposite of what they intend.

For example, the notion that you can control people's beliefs so that they 'align' with some idealized notion of organizational values often impels managers to manufacture all kinds of managerial instruments that they and their staff are then obliged to maintain. It is likely to call out gaming behaviour on the part of members of staff, both dividing and uniting, making the whole exercise a hollow one. They can become hedged around with metrics, league tables, cultural 'barometers' and all the other managerial appurtenances putting 'trust in numbers', as Porter (1995) has argued. In recent decades we have seen what Power (1997, 2007) refers to as an audit explosion as one reaction to organizational uncertainty. Alternatively, attempts to manipulate and control can lead to the creation of organizational cults which are totalitarian in the way that they operate.

In a way, the whole of this book, and many like it in the critical and process traditions of organizational theorizing, are *para-doxical*, that is to say against the *doxa*, what is taken for good sense or common sense about management (Ten Bos, 2007) by perhaps the majority of managers and academics. In doing so, it strives to create more nuance, more possibilities for thinking, which I will admit are not always welcome in organizations which are rushing forward towards excellence. This is not an argument against every organization aspiring to be the best it can be, however.

I have sketched out two broad approaches to managing organizations, one based more or less on the idea that managers and leaders are capable of predicting and controlling, the other assuming that there is a limit to such managerial powers. Approaching organizational life from these two perspectives leads to very different consequences for managers: what they do and what they think they can achieve with others.

In this chapter I am going to assume that the first position, the idea of management as a discipline of prediction and control, is familiar to the reader. We have explored some of the arguments in the chapters by drawing on orthodox management literature. In doing so I can see how the Cartesian split between an autonomous self and a world 'out there' has an instinctive appeal because it creates a comforting illusion of control. I suppose this accounts for the anxiety in groups of managers I meet when I suggest that they may only have limited control over what unfolds.

I hope it is worth rehearsing my ideas on the importance of paradox in organizational life, not as a means of simply restating them, but as a way of reflecting on them further as a prelude to continuing the discussion about what leaders and managers might do about them.

Understanding the dualism as a paradox

Let us assume that there is no splitting our rational and emotional selves, but rather our emotions allow us to act reasonably, particularly in social situations which require an empathetic understanding of what others are thinking and feeling. In order to act reasonably in social situations we need a theory of mind, that is to say, an insight into what is going on for other people, in order to anticipate their actions. Otherwise we would not know how to behave in the company of others.

We are subjects to other people, who are our objects, but we are also objects to ourselves because we can take their perspective on us. If we take the view that we are socially formed, able to call out in ourselves what we anticipate calling out in others, realizing ourselves through the recognition of others, then it would then be impossible for us to leave our values and our commitments at the door. We are caught up in the game of social life because it matters to us: we are absorbed in it because being part of the game is constitutive of our sense of self, our identity. And, paradoxically, we have values about having values (Frankfurt, 2004).

Whilst logic is an extremely useful method for framing problems, it is insufficient for understanding the dimensions of complex social reality with which we are

faced where we interact with thinking, feeling, imaginative human beings. We are capable of eliminating contradictions with logic, but as the ancient Greeks observed our minds are also capable of conceiving of one thing and then its opposite – the mind can overreach itself. Paradox is a helpful way of construing complexity, but it comes with the downside that there are no solutions that do not call out further paradoxes (Chapter 2).

Next, rather than assuming that we are discrete individuals cognizing the world 'out there', taking paradox seriously involves exploring those theories developed in particular by the pragmatists and process sociologists (Elias, Bourdieu) that we are forming the world at the same time as it is forming us. We are born into a world of activity and meaning which is already 'in' us, and we are entangled with it (Mead, 1934: Chapter 1; Barad, 2007: Chapter 7).

A moment's reflection on our own circumstances will bring to mind how our habits and categories of thought, our ways of being in the world, are framed and guided by the particular society and time we are born into, the language that we learn and the cultural habits, the *habitus*, we accept as natural. At the same time by re-enacting this culture, by reflecting on what we are doing and thinking about how we are thinking and acting, we recreate it in slightly different ways. We take up general themes in particular circumstances creating the potential both for repetition and renewal both at the same time.

Instead of assuming that we think, then act, on the basis of accurate representations of the world in the shape of models, perhaps our engagement with 'brute reality' through action provokes thinking, another form of action, which in turn informs further activity. Our taken-for-granted ways of acting in the world only become conscious to us, according to the pragmatists, when we encounter an obstacle which momentarily makes our habits and prejudices clearer to us. Prejudice and habit is paradoxically both helpful and unhelpful, as the English essayist William Hazlitt observed:

> The best way to prevent our running into the wildest excesses of prejudice and the most dangerous aberrations from reason, is, not to represent the two things as having a great gulf between them, which it is impossible to pass without a violent effort, but to show that we are constantly (even when we think ourselves most secure) treading on the brink of a precipice; that custom, passion, imagination, insinuate themselves into and influence almost every judgment we pass or sentiment we indulge, and are a necessary help (as well as hindrance) to the human understanding; and that to attempt to refer every question to abstract truth and precise definition, without allowing for the frailty of prejudice, which is the unavoidable consequence of the frailty and imperfection of reason, would be to unravel the whole web and texture of human understanding and society.
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> *(Hazlitt, 1839: 93)*

This is a sentiment later echoed by John Dewey a century later, that our habits and prejudices are helpful shortcuts to getting things done in the world. At the same

time, and paradoxically, they can prevent us from seeing what we need to see to overcome our practical difficulties: they stop us noticing. The entanglement which Hazlitt, the pragmatists, Barad (2007) and Pickering (1993) write about obliges us to think differently about what it means to be scientific about the social if we assume that there is no standing outside ourselves from an objective position. We are part of the social relations we seek to study and we have a stake in the game.

Abstract models about social life will only take us so far because they are abstract and lack the precision, the fine-grained detail for us to know how to take them up in our own particular circumstances. They may only be true in general and for the most part, and we can never predict when they will apply and when not. Collecting evidence is problematic because there is no agreed way of doing so that is above contestation.

Paradox in some key areas of contemporary management discussion

The discussion of entrepreneurial leadership in Chapter 3 poses a split between leaders and managers, and puts a particular obligation on leaders to act in an entrepreneurial way, encouraging their staff to do the same. Taking a longer-term perspective, we might understand this as an old idea showing up in a new context, since it borrows extensively from the transformational/transactional dualism created at the end of the 1970s/early 1980s. To a degree the idea has continuity over time and is perpetuated, simply repackaged in new contexts. But there is no inevitability that it need simply continue if we can bring together the paradoxical perspective of the airman and the swimmer, understanding time as both diachronic and synchronic.

Noticing how we are caught up in longer-term processes which are instantiated in the moment requires reflexivity to pay attention to how this particular social object is taken up by everyone in this context, and which presents opportunities which can be seized or missed. Dewey (1958, 2008) in particular brought out the paradoxical implications of reflecting on one's involvement in social life in this way. We can only become more certain by investigating uncertainty; when we have cause to doubt this can lead to a line of definite questioning; and we can be more objective about social life if we include our subjective experience.

There is much to recommend reflection and reflexivity to managers to prevent rushing in to taken-for-granted organizational practices which are neither automatic nor inevitable. It allows for the exploration of the ethical implications of what we may have taken for granted and offers a chance to act differently. However, reflexivity also has paradoxical properties: it does not automatically lead to the good but can also disrupt, provoking feelings of shame, guilt and anxiety. It can also produce trivial insights.

In Chapter 4 we began to think of culture as emerging from what we all do together rather than assuming that culture is something an organization 'has', which the leader is split off from, can analyse and reorder. The appeal to culture is also an appeal to conformity and obedience, and is often policed by standards and

measurements of behaviour. This is because it is impossible to change people's beliefs directly, although this is what leaders may be trying to do when they appeal to shared culture by invoking symbols, figureheads or, in the national context, flags. In doing so, however, they often provoke strong feelings in people which can have paradoxical consequences. They will include and exclude and create insider and outsider communities: they will unite some and divide others.

Additionally, Elias argues (1997), strong feelings provoked by cultural symbols are capable of producing a self-amplifying dynamic, which defies the control of even the most powerful leaders and groups. There is a strong invitation in some organizational literature to create a 'cult-like' culture in organizations, which Tourish (2013) demonstrates can have disastrous consequences.

Thinking of culture as what we do, or the *habitus*, implies no position outside of culture: we form it, and it forms us both at the same time. This would mean that in organizational life it is impossible to balance cooperation and competition, align values and converge differences, at least, not without creating totalitarian conditions. Rather, what we do together would provoke the inevitable contradictions between self and other, pro- and asocial behaviour, abstract ideas taken up in a local context:

> Our codes of conduct are as riddled with contradictions and as full of disproportions as are our forms of social life, as is the structure of our society.
>
> *(Elias, 2000: 443)*

A number of authors have borrowed from Aristotle to term the skill of wrestling with these contradictions, like particularizing general standards, *phronesis*, or practical judgment. Exercising good practical judgment requires both political and moral sensitivities, assuming that working with any group of people involves different conceptions of the good and fluctuating relationships of power. What gets in the way of people acting creatively, morally and *phronetically*, Gadamer (1993) argues, is the imposition of abstract standards derived from rationality alone, where the paradox of abstract and contextual is lost in favour of the former. The rational development of culture based on abstract standards paradoxically creates organizational irrationalities. Benchmarking, standardizing, disciplining, can have unintended consequences of driving out the very creativity with which staff deploy the work with the paradox of the abstract and the particular, the local and the global.

The innovation discourse, which we explored in Chapter 5, builds on an argument of dissatisfaction, splitting the inadequate present from an ideal future. With a sense of urgency organizational employees can be encouraged, cajoled or inspired to innovate more and more and thus enhance each economy's competitiveness endlessly into the future. Innovation can be led, planned, predicted and controlled, and it is implied that it is always good. An alternative understanding of innovation raises the paradox of stability and change, questions how distinguishable they are, and asks who it is that decides. Whether an innovation is considered 'good' or not implies an ideological position.

Taking an alternative view questions the assumption of predicting the future if we are as unpredictable to ourselves as others are to us, and if we are subject to fate and unintended consequences. If we accept the argument set out above, that employees constantly innovate to take up generalized prescriptions in particular circumstances, then when are they innovating and when are they not? A longer-term, processual view of innovation would understand it to be a discourse arising from certain historical conditions and reflective of particular power relationships between different groups in society. Social innovations too result from the struggle between groups for advantage and sometimes produce consequences which nobody wants, as we have recently experienced in Western economies.

We could offer a similar critique of an orthodox conception of conflict to the one we rehearsed on culture above. Management theory based on assumptions of prediction and control imply a detachment and a splitting of the concerned manager from the conflict he/she seeks to resolve. If we were to assume instead that there is no view from nowhere (Nagel, 1986), and that the manager has a stake in the conflict too, then conflict cannot be avoided, but has to be entered into. If we turn to Mead, we may learn that conflicting tendencies arise in us as individuals, since engagement with others calls out our pro- and asocial tendencies. He does not make the case that the former is good and the latter bad; rather, he suggests that our asocial tendencies make us the individuals we are and we are left with the constant dilemmas surrounding how to work with our individuality in social contexts.

There are tensions too within a group and between groups. A number of ethnographic studies of contemporary organizational life point to the fact that it often comprises what Karl Mannheim referred to as 'tendencies and strivings in a constant state of flux' (1936/1972: 103). From a manager's perspective, areas of social life which are not settled are intensely political situations best explored with full participation, because they are constantly in flux, constantly emerging depending on the balance of forces involved in the struggle. Rather than denying and dismissing the political manoeuvring, which arises inevitably from our membership of particular groups with a particular view of the world, the question is how managers might bring all the perspectives into the open, including their own.

Refusing to relinquish paradox, allowing the process of thinking to move to its opposite, makes the world more problematic and complex because there can be no assumption of detachment and control, nor of harnessing contradictions for the good of the organization. The move to resolve contradictions in organizational life can simply provoke more contradictions.

So what are managers to do?

One strong thread of argument throughout has been the necessity of thinking systematically about managing, but I have also pointed out the limitations of doing so based on logic and rationality alone. I have made the case that there is a great deal about organizational life which escapes an appeal to a narrow understanding of what it means to be scientific about the social because of the paradoxes in human

activity and thinking, the number of factors which come into play. In the parallel field of education, Gary Thomas (2010, 2012) makes some similar arguments about the irreducibility of practice in the classroom and the limitations of assuming that there is one best scientific method to capture 'what works'. At one point in his 2012 paper he summarizes his argument thus:

- Systematic enquiry in different domains rarely follows the same methodological avenues, nor even does it adhere to the same precepts.
- Not all science is about generalization; it is certainly about explanation, but explanation does not always require generalization from the few to the many.
- The cumulation of know-how knowledge differs from the cumulation of know-that knowledge.
- Education's cumulation is by the cultivation and sharing of practical understandings, not an accumulation of facts (2012: 40).
- The methods used in a scientific endeavor must *emerge from* questions; they should not be prescribed in advance.

I find this a helpful summary of some of the arguments in this book which treats management, like teaching, as a practical discipline which takes place between people in a particular place at a particular time. The practical disciplines need their own particular forms of research and enquiry.

However, undertaking one's role unthinkingly, not asking too many questions, getting on with the job, doing what most other organizations are doing, also contribute to organizational life. They make it more stable and produce social regularities, what GH Mead (1938) referred to as social objects; the generalized tendencies of large numbers of people to act in similar ways. As I hope I have made clear throughout the book, drawing in particular on the pragmatists, we cannot doubt everything all of the time otherwise we would never get anything done. Doubt arises in particular when we are confronted with practical problems which impede our progress. There remains, then, the dilemma about what to do with doubt.

One of the main themes of this book has been the importance of thinking, reflection, reflexivity and critique in unfreezing what may be frozen, particularly the unhelpful categories of thought which are consistently brought to bear on contemporary organizational life. I mentioned Hannah Arendt in Chapter 3. In a later article on thinking, a development of her position in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she argues that thinking is not, and should not be, just the preserve of the intelligent: there are lots of examples, she argues, of highly intelligent people who are unable to think. If society were dependent merely on the highly intelligent, or on professional thinkers such as philosophers, then society would be in even more of a parlous state.

This insight has particular poignancy for Hannah Arendt herself since her first supervisor and subsequent mentor, the philosopher Martin Heidegger, a professional thinker, had Nazi sympathies. Clearly, there is nothing about being a professional thinker that necessarily leads to justifiable conclusions about the world. But thinking is a crucial part of what makes us human and enables us to make moral and

aesthetic judgments. Questioning and thinking do not necessarily lead anywhere, Arendt argues, but unravel what we are thinking about. Whilst she warns us against simply turning things upside down so that the reverse of the current situation is true, she nonetheless maintains that:

> When everyone else is swept away unthinkingly by what everyone else believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding, because their refusal to join in is conspicuous and thereby becomes a form of action. The purging element in thinking, Socrates' midwifery, that brings out the implications of unexamined opinions and destroys them – values, doctrines, theories and even opinions, is political by implication. For this destruction has an effect on another human faculty, the faculty of judgement which one may call, with some justification, the most political of man's abilities. It is the faculty to judge particulars without subsuming them under those general rules which can be taught and learned until they grow into habits which can be replaced by other habits and rules.
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> *(Arendt, 1971: 445)*

So for Arendt, thinking and judging draw on two different human faculties but are interrelated and inseparable, as are thinking and acting: thinking deals with 'invisibles', things which are absent. Meanwhile judgment, inextricably linked to thinking, is demanded in particular circumstances of particular things allowing us to say, 'this is beautiful' or 'this is wrong'. Just as thinking allows us to be conscious of our difference, and leads to conscience as a by-product, so judging manifests itself in the world as action as a manifestation of thinking, which in turn leads to more thinking. Arendt's hope is that this uniquely human capacity will help to prevent catastrophe 'particularly when the chips are down' by becoming a habit. It will help us constantly to call into question and make judgments about what we are doing so that we are never in the position of Eichmann, claiming that we were just doing our job.

I would like to stay with Arendt's sentiments but to enlarge upon them to reflect further about what the activity of thinking might mean for groups of managers and staff presented with everyday organizational dilemmas, contradictions and paradoxes. The difficulty with Arendt's position, as an admirer of Kant, is that it puts enormous responsibility on the individual. Of course, Arendt is aware of the paradox of the individual and the social and one of the central themes in her work is the importance of political activity as a way of bringing power into the public domain. Nonetheless, her challenge merits further exploration in organizational contexts to seek better ways of dealing with uncertainty and contradiction.

On the art of reflecting together

What follows is my attempt to make sense of the way we work with managers who attend the Doctor of Management programme at Hertfordshire Business

School in the UK, to offer some parallels and suggestions for working with paradox. As I described in the introduction, on the Doctor of Management programme we meet face-to-face in a variety of fora during four-day quarterly residentials. The students, who are all senior managers or leaders, or senior consultants, from all sectors of the economy are invited to talk about their work, to write, to reflect, and then to discuss further. For these four periods during the year we are a temporary organization which gives rise to its own uncertainties, contradictions and paradoxes. There are relationships of power between faculty members and students, and within the student group itself between those, say, who are deeper into the programme and those who have joined more recently. Joining and being part of the group raises all the paradoxical dynamics which we have described throughout this book: students would like to be a member of the research community but maintain their individuality at the same time; they may feel silenced by the high level of discussion they are joining; the intense desire to belong may provoke feelings of exclusion.

We encourage them to develop their reflexive ability to become more detached about their involvement in the group, and about their practice in the respective workplaces. Despite everything that we send students in advance of their joining in the way of brochures or information, despite what management literature they may have read, and despite the two interviews that we give them before they come, nothing can prepare them for the experience of being in the group until they become part of it.

On three occasions during a residential we meet in the tradition of the Institute of Group Analysis (Foulkes 1948/1983, 1990), which means that for three sessions of an hour and a half we meet without an agenda and discuss whatever members of the research community want to discuss. The meeting stops when the time is up, rather than when we have reached a predefined end point: there is nowhere to get to because we are meeting with no end in view. These sessions can be very anxiety-provoking, particularly for those coming from organizations which have meetings that are highly agenda-driven, or perhaps even where there is an expectation that you set an objective for the meeting before you even start. The point of these particular meetings is to pay attention to what is important for us, now, in this moment, and the dilemmas that arise for us in the task that we are all engaged in.

I am by no means suggesting that organizations can run themselves the way we run a particular research programme which has a very specific purpose. But what is it we think we are doing, and how might this be helpful to managers?

The programme is deliberately offering an alternative to rushing around not thinking, but seeks to find ways of reflecting in common. Discussion and reflection is primary, rather than problem identification and resolution. Of course, the doctoral students do have to identify an organizational 'problem', otherwise they will not come up with a research question, but just as important is why it is a question and why it matters to them.

This draws on a very old tradition of practice dating back to the ancient Greeks. One of the conditions that Aristotle sets for deliberation and dialogue to take place,

according to Eikeland (2008), is sufficient time, time freed from the immediate need to act. There is no suggestion that actions or solutions may not emerge as a by-product, but this is not the primary purpose of deliberation. Rather, it turns on a better understanding of what we are dealing with and who we are in dealing with it: so understanding what we are doing together is inextricably linked to self-understanding. Deliberation and dialogue involve exploring the similarities and differences emerging between the group members. In this sense it provokes a critical discussion and encourages different perspectives:

> We deliberate about things where there are many ways of proceeding, where different means might produce similar results, where outcomes are uncertain even though they for the most part follow general rules, and where what and how we contribute (or not), makes a real difference. In relation to questions like these, then, we also deliberate continuously wherever what we interact with are other thinking minds and logos-users able to listen and understand.
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> *(Eikeland, 2008: 88)*

Deliberation is less interested in things which we cannot affect, abstractions or large scale phenomena over which we have little control, but is rooted in the concerns of what confronts us now, as a community of mature people. Because other people are involved, active participation in a group like this inevitably raises questions of ethics and power, since we end up exploring our interdependencies and our obligations to each other.

In this sense, and as I argued in Chapter 4, we cannot get 'outside' of practice, since practical ways of knowing do not lie outside what we are doing, they arise from it. As Eikeland argues, we are struggling to produce knowledge *from* practice, rather than knowledge *for* practice, although the former inevitably leads to the latter. Better understanding requires deep involvement, participation and practical observation of what is going on, rather than detachment, disengagement and non-interference in the phenomena we are interested in. It requires immersion in similarities and differences, and the inevitable conflicting perspectives that will arise as a consequence.

The other thing which interests me about Eikeland's interpretation of Aristotle is the focus he places on the relationship between master and apprentice. Of course, this has particular significance in the supervisor–doctoral student relationship, but the parallel in the workplace might be the relationship between novice and old-timer, or manager and managed. It is a relationship of power, but one which has the potential for greater equality. What is important in the relationship according to Eikeland (ibid: 432) is that it is about learning, which arises out of interdependence and working with difference:

> They explore together what they might do here and now, what they have done, what it means to do what they do, in spite of any other differences in levels or in fields and kinds of substantial competence, or in any other

> accidental attributes … Masters are there for the benefit of apprentices, apprentices there to become masters.
>
> *(ibid: 431)*

The learning relationship involves bringing what is understood in common into view, starting the development from what already is, rather than brushing it all aside in favour of some grand and idealized abstract plan. Transferring this insight to strategizing in organizations might suggest focusing much more on the here and now, what we are struggling with in our daily work, asking why it is important to us, rather than imagining an idealized end point and working logically back from there.

On the Doctor of Management programme we work with the intention of creating opportunities to think together and out loud. In contrast, Eikeland (ibid: 467) reminds us of the similarities between Aristotle's understanding of totalitarianism and Foucault's (1991) description of the development of the apparatuses of scrutiny and control in the modern state. The first thing tyrants do, according to Aristotle, is to ban open meetings where people can come together and engage in dialogical exchange. They split and atomize citizens, create an artificial need for a leader, and keep them under constant surveillance. For some staff, working in contemporary organizations must sometimes feel like this. They are pushed from pillar to post without the time to think – in fact, thinking and talking are sometimes regarded as a 'luxury' and an enemy of 'delivery'.

I hope I have not idealized what we are trying to do at the University of Hertfordshire. There is no technique we are using which is called deliberation or dialogue, which is a special method of creating the right conditions for dealing with uncertainty. Although we are practised, we are practised enough to know we are feeling our way. Although we are experienced, we are still surprised by things that happen, including what meeting together calls out in ourselves. We provoke strong emotions in each other, we fall out, then make up; some students succeed and others fail. There is no mystery to what we are doing other than paying attention to the quality of conversational life in the group when we set aside the time to explore the complex responsive processes of relating.

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