

The Paradox of Leadership: Cooperating to Compete, Following to Lead

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For most of my adult life I lived at the foot of the Rocky Mountains (the Colorado ones), and I have frequently led family, children, and others on hiking, ski touring, and mountain biking trips. I wasn't mostly the formal leader (and others in my family may dispute this characterization), but I often felt that it was my responsibility to make sure we got to where we intended to get to, when we intended to, safely. Almost always, the best position for me to take to make sure we stayed together, that those who needed help or encouragement received it, and that the needs of the group were attended to, was at the back of the pack.

“Leading from behind” is a natural approach in the outdoors. It is natural in organizations too. It may sound like a passive or ineffective way to approach the challenge of being an effective leader, but I found, both in the outdoors and in organizational leadership positions, that this is the most powerful way to guide a group. The idea of leading from behind is not a new one for organizations or for communities¹, but learning how to do this, particularly in a hierarchical structure, is no easy matter. One key dimension of this is defined by our approach to conflict. How we set the stage for the effective use of conflict and how we respond to conflict is critical to our effectiveness as leaders and to our capacity to “lead from behind.”²

Why lead from behind? Why conflict?

You can't be an effective manager if you do not see clearly what is going on and if you do not have the perspective that allows you to keep a group together and heading in the same direction. Leaders play a critical role, of course, in setting the direction, the goals, and the strategies for attaining them, but unless they can keep the group moving in a concerted and effective way toward these goals, the best laid plans of strategic planning management consultants will accomplish nothing. Unless we can empower people to deal with problems that arise along the way, to face difficulties, to recognize and adjust when strategies are not working or are impossible to implement, to help those who are struggling, to handle the inevitable tensions and conflicts that challenging work engenders, and to maintain a positive attitude about that work, we cannot build a truly effective team, unit or organization. And we can't do this if we are always ahead of the pack, looking forward (with maybe an occasional glance or report from behind). The nice thing about the back of the line is that you can still see what is ahead, but you see what is happening with the team as well. When we are effective at leading from behind, we can help the stragglers, the disenchanted, the discouraged, we can deal with problems as they arise, not just when they finally are reported to us, and we can provide

¹ Hill, L.A. (2010, May 5). Leading from behind. Retrieved July 26, 2016, from <https://hbr.org/2010/05/leading-from-behind/>. See also Gerzon, M. (2006). *Leading through conflict: How successful leaders transform differences into opportunities*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School.

² This article is based on the concepts presented in the author's latest book: *The Conflict Paradox: Seven Dilemmas at the Core of Disputes* Jossey-Bass/Wiley and the American Bar Association, 2015.

ongoing coaching and counseling. Of course, we can always charge to the front of the pack when and if we need to provide energy, fortitude, or direction and when we need to make unambiguous decisions along the way.

But for this approach to work, we have to be able to deal with the small and large conflicts that inevitably arise and we have to do so in a way that not only contains conflict, but also uses it to the team's advantage. The mistake so many managers make (and conflict professionals too) is to identify their goal in conflict as prevention, containment, or resolution. Those all have their place, but the more important challenge is to create the space for conflict to occur in a constructive way, for people to raise difficult and contentious issues, and for leaders to be exposed to often uncomfortable disagreements. Otherwise, problems fester, important views are squelched, and effective communication is inhibited. This does not mean that abusive or defiant behavior is ok—such behavior is in fact one of the ways that important differences are suppressed. Instead, the challenge for an effective leader is to promote a constructive conflict process, one in which people are able to have at it—and even to get emotional about their differences—but to do so in service of building a more effective organization or team and to maintain the relational foundation upon which groups are built even as disputes are aired.

Leaders and managers do not accomplish this on their own, and they certainly do not promote a “conflict competent” workplace by remaining above or apart from the action. Open door policies are fine, but not enough. Leaders have to walk through that door and into the action to be effective. They have to be engaged in not only the substantive decision making process but the interactive and emotional life of the teams they are leading.

The Paradox of Leadership

Embedded in this challenge are several essential paradoxes about leadership, followership, power, and conflict. Effective leadership requires being a good follower. Giving away power makes us more powerful whereas holding tightly onto our power makes us less powerful. Encouraging conflict detoxifies conflict, while suppressing conflict breeds deeper conflict. Cooperation is necessitated by competition and effective competition requires effective cooperation. The capacity of leaders to embrace these paradoxes is critical to their success, and the most important outcome of effective management training (and training in conflict resolution) is to enhance participants' capacity to take this on. Let's look at each of these paradoxes.

- **Leadership and followership**

We tend to divide people into simplistic categories and these take on a life of their own. Someone is either a manager or a worker, an employer or an employee, a leader or a

follower, white collar or blue collar. Of course there are significant differences in the power and privileges that different roles confer on people. But every employee is sometimes a leader, sometimes a follower, or perhaps more accurately at all times both a leader and a follower. Designated leaders are often most effective when they demonstrate their capacity to be led by the group and when they are able to empower a group or its members to exhibit and exert leadership. If I have promoted the capacity of a group to make its own decisions about how to respond to a problem or forge a new path in the face of new challenges, even though this may at times make it difficult to go against the will of the group, then I am likely to be a more effective leader with more powerful followers.

- **Giving away power to be powerful**

A corollary to this is that the more I am able to give away power, the more powerful I become. The more completely I hold onto power, the less powerful. There is of course a style of leadership that holds onto the reins of power very tightly and controls what occurs to the greatest extent possible. Sometimes this works. Just because we don't like a particular style of leadership, does not mean that it is never effective in accomplishing certain organizational objectives. But in the larger picture and over time, such leadership is less likely to be effective in managing complex organizational systems, in dealing with complicated challenges, and in adapting to an ever changing environment. Of course this does not mean that teams can do whatever they want, go off in any direction they see fit, or flaunt organizational policies or decisions. But within those frameworks, many decisions and adaptations are made and when a group is empowered to make these adaptations, the leader in fact becomes more powerful in being able to provide overall direction. Consider, for example, how to promote a desired change in the culture of an organization—about almost anything (e.g. innovation, diversity, productivity, communication). You don't accomplish this by simply insisting on it, although that may be necessary. More effective is to lay out the parameters, the direction, the goals, and the values and then to allow those involved in the change to work on these directions and goals, to struggle with them, to refine them, and to figure out how to move forward to achieve them. Groups that are empowered to do this are the ones who make their leaders more effective and more genuinely powerful.

- **Encouraging conflict detoxifies conflict, suppressing conflict escalates it**

If a conflict arises from something other than a passing irritation (although even those can escalate into deeper disputes), then suppressing it will only breed longer term resentment and resistance. Eventually these will manifest themselves through angry eruptions or outbursts, passive aggressive interference with team functioning, and lower productivity. However, despite the awareness that most of us have about this, our fear of conflict leads us to avoid confronting differences, to minimize them when they arise, and to contribute to an

atmosphere in which directly confronting our disagreements violates strong but usually unstated norms. And yet if we openly address a conflict, we generally ease the tension around it. On numerous occasions, when I have been asked to work with people who are stuck in a tense interpersonal conflict, I have found that simply identifying the fact that those involved don't really like working together or don't like each other very much has in fact lowered the temperature considerably. On that at least they can agree—and the “elephant in the room” has been named.

- **To compete we have to cooperate, cooperation is promoted by competition**

This principle is basic to all evolutionary processes. We succeed because we compete effectively for limited resources, and the need to do so requires that we learn to cooperate or our competitive capacities are diminished. This is true for organizational evolution as well. Most organizations operate in a competitive environment or at least one characterized by limited resources. In order to obtain the resources or rewards that will allow us to flourish, we need to be realistic about the competitive nature of the environment, but we must learn to cooperate in order to operate effectively in this environment. Leaders must understand that a purely competitive approach is not sustainable, but neither is one built on the premise that “all we need is love.” Building the capacity to cooperate with others in order to engage in a healthy competitive process is an essential challenge for leaders in business (and sports).

The essential challenge for leaders, as for mediators, negotiators, and peacemakers, is paradoxical. How can we work with these seemingly opposite goals with the understanding that we must always accomplish both—and that in fact you can't have one without the other? Leaders face this in the practical everyday challenges of their organizational life, when for example:

- They articulate and promote important strategic directives while realizing that in order to accomplish these they must turn loose the creative energies of their subordinates.
- They must hold the line on expenses while encouraging innovation and experimentation.
- They try to negotiate clear and reasonable collective bargaining agreements which are fiscally responsible while promoting a positive work environment that encourages the loyalty and commitment of employees.
- They must confront problematic job performance while remaining optimistic about the potentials for employees (and employers) to grow.
- They endeavor to encourage open, honest and direct communication while insisting on a respectful workplace.

The effectiveness of leaders in handling these challenges is at the heart of their mission.

Understanding the paradoxical nature of the challenge is a necessary first step. We confront these

every day of our working (and non-working) lives. Surprisingly, given the apparent complexity of the challenge, we are often pretty good at rising to the task. Our biggest enemy is wanting simple solutions to complicated problems, but the more we embrace the complexity of the challenge, the simpler the road becomes.

About the Author



Bernie Mayer is a Professor of Conflict Resolution at The Werner Institute, Creighton University and a Founding Partner of CDR Associates in Boulder Colorado. Bernie has mediated or facilitated the resolution of labour management, public policy, ethnic, business, family, community, and intergovernmental conflicts for almost 40 years. Bernie is internationally recognized as a trainer and an innovative leader in applying mediation and conflict resolution to human service arenas and particularly to disputes between public agencies and involuntary clients. He is the author of many books and articles, including *The Conflict Paradox: Seven Dilemmas at the Core of Disputes* (Jossey-Bass, 2015), *The Dynamics of Conflict: A Guide to Engagement and Intervention, 2nd Ed.* (Jossey-Bass, 2012), *Staying with Conflict: A Strategic Approach to Ongoing Dispute* (Jossey-Bass, 2009), and *Beyond Neutrality: Confronting the Crisis in Conflict Resolution* (Jossey-Bass, 2004). He received his M.S.W. degree in 1970 from Columbia University in psychiatric social work and his Ph.D. degree in 1987 from the University of Denver in social work, with an emphasis on conflict resolution.

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