

Contradiction or Field of Tension?

Preach innovation, but then structurally punish failure? Say A and do B? Demand feedback and then, when it is given, reject it? Invite lateral thinkers and then, when they arrive, get upset with them because they mess everything up?

Double binds, breaks in the consistency of the signals one sends, contradictory impulses: they are annoying, demotivate, damage trust in leadership and in each other, unsettle, and in the worst case they are breeding grounds for cynicism in all its corrosive effect.

Leaders are therefore well advised to avoid contradictions as much as possible. All well and good and right. But the feeling of having to do justice to very different impulses will not disappear with that. What can really help, however, is to distinguish between contradictions and fields of tension.

It is a contradiction when two forces are pushing in different directions and at least one of these two forces does not support the greater direction of leadership. It is a field of tension when two forces point in different directions, but both are in the service of the greater interests of the whole. For example: On the one hand, a separation process must be slow enough to give the person concerned a fair chance; on the other hand, it must be fast enough to separate within a useful period of time before great damage is done, for example in the case of destructive behaviour.

The decisive difference is this: contradictions can be avoided or resolved, fields of tension can only be balanced. So we cannot spare ourselves the feeling of tension – "We are sorry to inform you that this hope is in vain".

There's nothing wrong with that; it only gets really stressful when you confuse the two things. Not much good comes out of either way:

- You think a field of tension is avoidable, and you struggle at random to make it go away, but this has no chance of happening and is therefore tiring and frustrating.
- Or you try desperately to find a balance in a contradiction, but you can't because it is a contradiction. Also tiring and frustrating...

Distinguishing one from the other is very useful, although not always easy. Quite often, something that appears to be a contradiction on one level turns out to be a field of tension on a higher level. Catchword matrix: a matrix is the formal mapping of fields of tension. If the representatives of matrix axes regard their interests as absolute, they impute the balance of these fields of tension to the intersections of the matrix and at the same time make it impossible – good luck with that. Certainly not a contribution to the popularity of matrix organisations...

But if it is possible to minimise contradictions and balance fields of tension in ongoing dialogue, then energy is invested in the right and value-creating discussions in an organisation, and then they are not a burden at all. The only really annoying discussions are those that produce nothing.

So fields of tension won't go away. We must accept that. If you can do that, you will have less stress.

And anyway: isn't a tension-free life like a tension-free game? pleasant at the beginning, but sooner rather than later completely uninteresting. So, let's hope that things stay thrilling.