

## A Theory of Concurrent Leadership: Navigating Organizational Dilemmas

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F. Scott Fitzgerald (1945) proclaimed that the test of a first-rate intellect is the ability to hold two opposing ideas simultaneously and still function; in fact, even when things seem hopeless, such a mind retains the ability to see positive possibilities. A common challenge for all leaders is confronting the conflict between contradictory ideas, a tension that makes deciding and leading demanding. All social systems are faced with a myriad of dilemmas, “that is, by choices between alternatives in which any choice must sacrifice some valued objective in the interest of another (Blau & Scott, 2003).” To choose one, however, is to undermine the other. Dilemmas signal not only conflict but also are part of a dialectical process of change: Problems appear, are identified, and in solving them give rise to new problems and learning occurs. In short, leader effectiveness requires successfully accommodating to the contradictions of dilemmas and learning from those experiences.

*Concurrent leadership is the ability of leaders to embrace the opposites of a dilemma and to act by preserving the benefits of each while avoiding the pitfalls of both* (Hoy, 2016). This perspective eschews binary decisions, either-or options, and demands conjunctive solutions that combine opposites in a creative way. Roger Martin (2009) describes this process of integrative thinking as the ability to hold two diametrically opposing ideas in the head and then act by blending the best of both ideas, a hallmark of exceptional leaders. Concurrent thinking enables leaders to flourish in the midst of contradiction, confusion, and conflict; it is a cultivated skill critical to both the success of rational choice and leadership. Creative leaders learn how to take the best in two opposing ideas and blend a solution that is superior to either. Leaders who are skillful at concurrent thinking are most likely to cope successfully with the tensions of the diverging ideas embodied in basic dilemmas. The act of blending the best of competing ideas into a fruitful strategy is the lynchpin of leading.

**Organizational Dilemmas.** Some of the fundamental challenges of organizational leadership are revealed and illustrated next in a series of dilemmas. The idea is to give the reader some sample situations that call for concurrent leadership. Seven sets of opposable concepts are presented. Each of these dilemmas is a basic challenge that leaders will confront in all organizations.

*Control and Autonomy.* The first dilemma is the conflict between managerial control and worker autonomy, a classic problem faced by all institutions (Blau & Scott, 2003). Organizations need some control to coordinate the enterprise and efficiently move activities toward their goals. Control, however, is unlikely to produce the necessary ingenuity, creativity, and extra effort. Autonomy enhances the creative and innovative aspects of organizational life. In institutions such as schools, imagination and inspiration are particularly important. Leaders must be able to analyze the situation, decide on the appropriate balance between control and autonomy, and initiate a strategy that blends the right amount of each so that teachers can generate classroom climates filled with possibilities. The process is dynamic and developmental; as the situation changes so does the blend, and leaders learn how to accommodate, adjust, and cope with opposing ideas.

*Power and Participation.* Another closely related set of opposable ideas is power versus participation. Both are highly desirable, yet as leaders stress power, participation is reduced, and as participation is emphasized, power is diminished. The challenge again is a problem of blending the best of both in a way that fits the existing situation. The question is **not** “Should I involve others in decision making?” but rather, “Under what conditions should I involve them? To what extent should they? What should be their role in participation? and What is the leader’s role in the process?” The answers suggest the development of creative solutions to the power-participation dilemma.

*Consistency and Flexibility.* A related quandary facing administrators is the tension produced by consistency and flexibility. Leaders and followers need consistency to dampen contradictions that impede effectiveness. At the same time, organizations need flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances. Consistency and flexibility pull in opposite directions, but both are needed. The leader’s task is to create structures and norms that provide consistency and stability without impeding the freedom and flexibility. Consistency has its advantages, but it also has its down sides. Consider Emerson’s conclusion that “foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds,” and Harara’s observation that “consistency is the playground of dull minds.” Just as some rules promote produce mindless conformity and dependence others produce mindfulness and creativity. Rules that enable constructive behavior are useful, whereas those that restrict behavior are often dysfunctional. Leaders must master techniques of constructing structures and rules that enable behavior without losing their consistency; they must know when to tighten and loosen the couplings of structure.

Unity and Diversity. Unity is a leader's dream because it produces harmony, purpose, esprit de corps, and galvanizes the group toward its goals with minimum conflict. Its opposite, diversity, often slows progress, yet it is an invaluable group attribute because it provides multiple perspectives. Diversity brings a variety of ideas, of abilities, of personalities, of values, of perspectives, of experiences, of learning—all of which create a milieu conducive to originality and innovation. Leaders must keep both unity and diversity functioning. The challenge is clear, but difficult: Grapple with the opposing ideas of unity and diversity by embracing both, eliminating neither, and discovering the appropriate blend.

Planning and Spontaneity. The need for centralized planning and individual initiative poses another dilemma for organizations (Blau & Scott, 2003). Solutions to some organizational problems can be routinized, but not all of them. Inevitably issues arise that require initiation of action not defined in formal plans. Even though administrators develop elaborate plans to prevent deviation from the "program," spontaneous complications frequently call for new schemes and solutions. There is tension between formal planning and individual initiative because many problems are not routine and cannot be solved in standard ways; they require novel resolutions. Although both planning and spontaneity are important aspects of administration, leadership requires blending these contrasting perspectives by using the best of each. The balance, however, is continually upset by the demand for more order on one hand and the requirement for more freedom on the other.

Coordination and Communication. There are at least three ways in which decisions can be improved with open communication (Blau & Scott, 2003). First, social support lowers anxiety; engaging in discussions with others builds confidence and provides a framework for interactions that mitigates apprehension. Second, open communication cuts down on errors; it is easier to detect errors in others than in oneself. Third, competition for respect in discussions provides incentives for positive suggestions and critique. Thus, social support, error correction, and constructive competition are important features of open communication; they promote sound decisions.

Although open communication enhances problem solving, it impedes coordination. Unrestricted communication generates a myriad of ideas, issues, and problems; it creates a virtual "battleground" of conflicting perspectives and proposals that makes agreement difficult (Blau & Scott, 2003). It is an irony that unrestricted communication makes coordination problematic because both communication and coordination are critical elements of effective decision making. Here is the rub: too many ideas make agreement problematic; administrators find themselves incarcerated in a cage of choices that prevents agreement and enhances disagreement. The leader's challenge is clear: Seize the advantages of open communication while simultaneously maintaining efficient coordination. That is, take advantage of error correction, social support, and competition for respect in the quest for options, but also recognize that a time will come to restrict communication for the sake of efficient coordination, but do not be premature. Be sure that you have ample options at hand before curbing the free flow of communication. Capture the positives of both open communication and effective coordination while minimizing the negatives of each.

Stability and Change. Finally, both stability and change are integral parts of organizational life. Some stability is necessary; extended chaos is simply unacceptable and dysfunctional. Stability enables the organization to move toward the achievement of its goals relatively unencumbered by dissension and conflict. Change, however, is an important goal in itself, especially disruptive change that leads to adaptation and innovation. If organizations are to improve, they must interact and adapt to their external environment in creative ways. In fact, an imperative function of all social systems is accommodation and adaption to the demands of the environment and the mobilization of resources required for continued functioning (Parson, 1960). Both stability and change have positive and well as negative consequences. Both are necessary, yet neither is sufficient. These opposites have much to offer and yet a persistent tension is highlighted once again: to focus on either stability or change undermines the other. The key leadership challenge again is to find the right balance of stability and change.

**Summary.** Leading is a dilemma-bound process; it is virtually impossible to lead without confronting the fundamental tensions imbued in all social systems. All of the examples discussed above are instances of the basic dilemma between order and freedom. The **faces of order** are control, power, consistency, unity, planning, coordination, and stability. In contrast, the **faces of freedom** are autonomy, participation, flexibility, diversity, spontaneity, communication, and change. Both faces are essential to successful organizational functioning even though they are countervailing forces. The key to effective leadership is concurrent thought and action: Find ways to accommodate the order-freedom dilemma by preserving the benefits of each, avoiding the pitfalls of both, and blending the appropriate balance of these opposing forces (Hoy, 2012). With experience, reflection, and practice, the leadership task of blending the appropriate balance

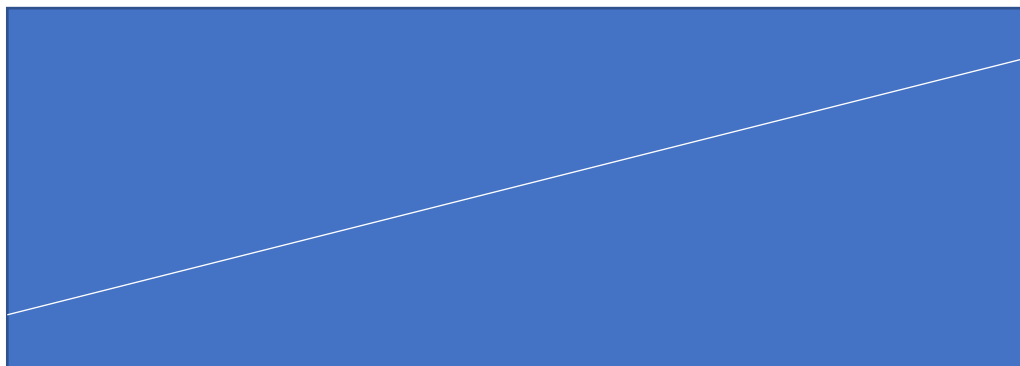
should become more readily within grasp. The figure below provides a pictorial summary of the dilemmas at hand and the blending of order and freedom along a continuum from minimal order to maximum freedom.

### Assumptions of a Theory of Concurrent Leadership

1. Concurrent leadership is the ability of leaders to embrace the opposites of a dilemma and to act by preserving the benefits of each while avoiding the pitfalls of both.
2. All social systems are confronted with a myriad of dilemmas, which can be thought of as selections between opposing alternatives.
3. The fundamental dilemma in all organizations is the conflict between order and freedom. Although both are essential, actions to improve one typically undermine the other--hence, the dilemma.
4. The imperative for order in social systems creates a world of rules, procedures, plans, purposes, and coordinated effort whereas the need for freedom fashions a world of imagination, dreams, innovation, creativity, and hope.
5. Leadership is situational and a function of both art and science. Leaders make judgments based upon their knowledge and experience and the situation.
6. Theoretical and empirical knowledge provides the basis for a reflective mind to develop strategies for action whereas experience offers the opportunity to test and craft those strategies.
7. Effective leadership is the appropriate blending of order and freedom dependent on the situation: Blending is anchored in knowledge and experience (see figure below).

#### Faces of Order

#### Faces of Freedom



Control-----	Autonomy
Power-----	Participation
Consistency-----	Choice
Unity-----	Diversity
Planning-----	Initiative
Coordination-----	Communication
Stability-----	Change

**Effective leadership** is finding the appropriate blending of order and freedom dependent on the situation.