

PARADOXICAL THINKING

The test of a first rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposite ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function....F.Scott Fitzgerald

All behavior consists of opposites...learn to see things backward, inside out, and upside down. Lao Tzu

The Green Tortoise bus line operating with about a dozen old vehicles, made scheduled runs up and down the US West Coast and into the interior at about half the price of the Greyhound. Its owner Gardner Kent gave up trying to compete with Greyhound on price in the low fare business. Instead of hopelessly trying to reduce the journey time he did the contrary—he **INCREASED** the journey duration. –six rather than four days! He used the extra two days to build more ‘fun’ into the trip—games, walks in the woods, fishing etc. His business multiplied and he was able to take over another bus service. His idea, a product of paradoxical contrarian thinking, produced extraordinary results. His fun trip strategy led him to a new segment a niche opportunity made possible by the socioeconomic changes that made travel into a pleasure industry.

Paradoxical thinking involves, among other things, switching to the opposite of what is conventional.

One of the most brilliant displays of paradoxical thinking is by scientist Faraday in the 1830’s. He had observed that a current of electricity passing through a wire could have the effect of causing the magnetized needle of a compass to deflect—that is, move in a rotational direction—when a compass was located close to the wire. This was the basis of his invention of the electric motor. Faraday did not stop with this He took a mental leap—a gigantic one as it turned out. He reasoned that if an electric current could make magnets to move, maybe the reverse could also happen. Could a moving magnet cause electricity to flow? He found that it did. Thus was born the generator.

Typically our NRI relatives buy fancy things including gadgets at duty free shops elsewhere in the world on their way to India. The Government of Philippines had a similar situation at hand—millions of their countrymen and women work all over the world. Noticing the huge gifts visiting Philippines were seen carrying across the arrival hall at Manila airport, the Government opened duty free shops at that airport so that NRPs could buy gifts *after* their arrival home!! At the Manila shop one could buy even

tractors . This shop has catapulted that country into the fourth largest seller of such goods on the world.

The Philippines government reasoned that no matter what the world is doing one may gain enormously by doing the opposite—paradoxical thinking.

Opposites are everywhere .Yet we hardly stop to think about these omnipresent opposites. Because opposites are in the background we do not see them. To be creative, we you have to pull opposites out of the background and put them in the foreground where they will be clearly visible. It is said that a fish does not know that water exists- because the fish takes water for granted. We are like fish—we see so many opposites that we take them for granted and do not notice them anymore. If we notice and handle opposites imaginatively we could all become creative.

Let us look at some commonplace ‘opposites’. Is a straight line the opposite of a curve? But of course one may say. Yet a scientist will tell you that a curve is but an infinite number of straight lines. Is a square the opposite of a circle? ‘Obvious’ is the answer. Yet it can be proved that both are polygons. If you keep adding sides to a square it turns it into a hexagon, an octagon and so on .The more sides you add the more it comes to resemble a circle!!

The two opposite things are deep down the same thing.

Can we learn paradoxical thinking ?Of course we can .Here is how.

Be open in your thinking. Openness , courage and curiosity are essential. Be particularly aware of the so called absurd ideas floating in your mind. Note them down, dwell on them, play with them refine them. Openness also means you are open to learning new subjects unconnected with your profession. Listen, explore, be curious. Pay more attention to things you have been ignoring or taking for granted. When you look at something, say a gadget, visualize how they would look and function if it were different in shape, size etc. Ask yourself –can I change this into the exact opposite? Look at the rug on the floor –how would it be if we had rugs designed for the roof? Look at the lights on the roof and ask how would it be if we had lights on the floor? Recall that such products exist.

It pays to be skeptical. The more skeptical you are the better a paradox thinker you will be. You do not take for granted what others accept as a matter of routine. Examine customs, practices, rituals, conventions, fashions, etc.

Paradoxical thinking is one of eight skills related to intelligence. The others are memory, logic, judgement, perception, intuition, reason, and

imagination. Paradox is perhaps the least used of these skills. It involves the ability to reverse, manipulate, combine, synthesize opposites.

In their path-breaking book 'Built to last-The successful habits of visionary companies' authors James Collins and Jerry Poras write that companies that survive are those, among other things, that do not oppress themselves with the 'tyranny of the OR'—the rational view that cannot easily accept paradox, that cannot live with two seemingly contradictory forces at the same time. The 'Tyranny of the OR' pushes people to believe that things must be either A or B, but not both. The authors have demonstrated that organizations that have liberated themselves from this tyranny go on to grow exponentially and are seen as extremely innovative.

One last example. Is it possible to make a car that is as exquisite as a BMW or Mercedes Benz but does not cost a bomb? Quality and affordability—a paradox is what many thought but not in a Japanese company that came out with the Lexus which was a great example of paradoxical thinking.

THE AUTHOR K.R.RAVI IS A MANAGEMENT GRADUATE FROM XLRI JAMSHEDPUR AND SOUTH ASIA'S FIRST DR.EDWARD DE BONO CERTIFIED PUBLIC TRAINER IN LATERAL THINKING. HE IS A MUMBAI BASED TRAINER AND CAN BE CONTACTED AT createravi@hotmail.com and at 22831878