

Paradox

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I love paradox!

That sentence is a paradox in itself, because what I really love is understanding things. And I love being able to explain things to others.

Paradoxes, on the other hand, are confusing. So, you might think that I wouldn't like paradoxes.

Yet our world is paradoxical much of the time. About fifteen years ago, I decided I better get comfortable with paradox, and I started learning all I could. I started consciously looking for paradoxes, identifying them, and describing them on a page I carry in my daily planner.

I now have filled several pages of paradox examples. Sometimes when I am stuck in line somewhere or waiting for an appointment, I'll read over those pages and just marvel at the quantity and the illogical nature of some of the situations we all face now and then.

I should probably spend a sentence or two defining "paradox," just so we have a fairly common agreement on what this absurd silliness is. The word paradox formerly meant "a statement contrary to common belief." In today's usage, it is "a statement that seems contradictory, unbelievable, or absurd but that may actually be true."

If we were together and talking about this, I'd encourage you at this point to think of some examples yourself. It takes awhile to start "seeing" the paradoxes around you, so let me share a few simple examples for fun.

- "It's better to give than to receive." (Try telling that to a four-year-old at Christmas!)
- The harder you work to control and constrain someone (a teen, a spouse, or an employee), the more likely you are to evoke resistance and likely drive him or her away.
- If you focus on being humble ("Hey, look how humble I'm being!"), you're not.
- We learn far more from failure than we do from success.
- Improvement is often easier to implement in times of disruption than during times of stability.
- A bank is much more willing to loan money to people who can prove they don't need it.
- America is the most entertainment-oriented country in the world, yet there are more bored people in America than anywhere else!
- Solomon, the wisest man in the history of the world, strongly encouraged seeking the counsel of other wise individuals. (Solomon also messed up his life (and many others) severely!)
- In our daily world, we pay for what we get. The greatest blessing of all, however, eternal salvation and right-standing with God, is available to us free. We simply must respond to the invitation.

You might ask, "Well, Dennis, you normally talk about leadership development. How does 'paradox' fit with becoming a more effective leader?"

As I work with clients in developing their leadership skills, I use an evaluation tool to help assess the various attributes of a leader. One of the characteristics that we evaluate is "dealing with paradox," since leaders often must address issues that are not straightforward and obvious.

In dealing with paradox, it's desirable that leaders be flexible and adaptable, and able to act in ways that seem contradictory. For example, leaders must be objective and demanding, but they also must be compassionate and empathic. Leaders must be self-confident but appropriately humble. Leaders must know when to lead and when and how to follow. They must be individual contributors, but they also must be team players. The best leaders are balanced despite the conflicting demands of the situation.

Readers of my columns typically profess to want to learn and grow. Yet the irony is that such a process requires that we admit we are wrong, or at least incomplete, as we currently are. Ah, paradox--the interesting twists and turns of contradiction in our lives!