

## Leadership Training and Other Contradictions

by David A. Schmaltz

A Harvard University survey found that while Fortune 100 companies rank leadership as their key strategic imperative, each admits that their training programs fail to produce the leaders they need. How does your company resolve this critical contradiction?

### Walking Contradiction

The 2 o'clock meeting in the Mariana III building on Apple Computer's Cupertino, California campus might be held in the Military Intelligence, the Wise Fool, or the Apple Forecasting conference room. Apple named their conference rooms after contradictions to acknowledge two eternal features of life inside their company:

First, contradictions abound. They are everywhere.

Second, acknowledging with a little self-deprecating humor helps. They bring along some whimsy when they step out over the edge.

Apple sets itself above their myth by fully acknowledging their contradictions. You see, Apple has never succeeded upon the goodness of their forecasting. They acknowledge this feature by naming a conference room Apple Forecasting in homage to this otherwise unsettling truth.



Apple has a history of overwhelming itself with its successes and nearly destroying itself with its failures. No rational design guided the introduction of iTunes or the iPod. What grand design could have guided these introductions? Each seemed like a good idea at the time, but no one predicted the magnitude of either these successes or any of the dozens of failures which failed to destroy the company. Consequently, much of the organization operates in permanent catch-up mode, struggling to service the demand or recover from the trough no one foresaw. Leadership resolves what management could never predict. They are, as Chris Christopherson's old song explained, "A walking contradiction, partly truth and partly fiction."

Consequently, Apple has been both a wild success and a dismal failure, just like your company. I marvel at how Apple could have missed becoming the OS of choice for PCs. But they did. History's landfill is overflowing with better mousetraps which couldn't attract enough mice. Successful companies have spotty histories, punctuated with other than unending success, though only the stories of their grand successes seem to stick. The resulting legends obscure the many, many contradictions which leadership resolved along the way. We focus upon the management side of this portrait without fully acknowledging the leadership edge, even though the picture makes little sense without acknowledging how both sides balance the middle.

I suspect that Apple will shrivel and die if it ever catches up with itself.

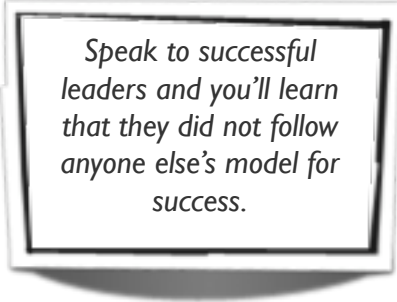
### **The Most Abiding Contradiction in Business Today**

Leadership training remains the most abiding contradiction in business today. Speak to successful leaders and you'll learn that they did not follow anyone else's model for success. Each headed out on their own with little more than their own intentions, clear only that they were improperly provisioned for the trip. Fully acknowledging this fundamental contradiction, they proceeded anyway.

I was invited to participate in an in-house Harvard University conference on the future of their leadership training. One clear contradiction emerged from those conversations. Harvard reported that every one of their client companies classify leadership as their key strategic imperative. The principle researcher of Harvard's leadership training organization reported that real leaders only emerge from some personal transforming experience and confided that Harvard has no idea how to create such experiences. Further, she reported that the people who enroll in Harvard's leadership training program are among the most poorly suited to fulfill leadership roles. She was referring to their MBA candidates.

Harvard MBA candidates, she disclosed, have to get over their management training to become leaders. They are more interested in professional advancement and tend to focus more upon making a lot of money than the typical social scientist, for instance, yet these poorly-suited candidates are where Harvard focuses most of its leadership training energy. How curious.

Our companies send us off to leadership training, where we are stacked up like cordwood in some hotel conference room and



*Speak to successful leaders and you'll learn that they did not follow anyone else's model for success.*

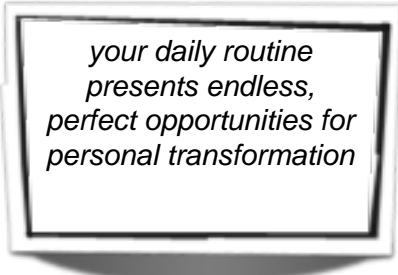
spoon fed someone else's rational model for how we are supposed to lead. Have you ever had a profound learning experience while stacked up like cordwood in a hotel conference room? I know I haven't.

### **What Do You Do When You Don't Know What To Do?**

Though I've for over a decade been facilitating leadership workshops which leaders say elicited transforming experiences, on closer examination, I have to admit that I don't know how to create anyone else's personally transforming experience any more than Harvard does. Transformation, if it is the key to developing leadership (and I believe it is), isn't in anyone else's hands. Transformations, like contradictions, surround us. We cannot avoid them—and we gratefully miss most of the opportunities for upsetting our carefully ordered apple carts. We encounter the possibility for transformation on those rare occasions where we truly lose our balance, but even at these times, we seem more concerned about recovering our rational status quo than moving into any new paradigm.

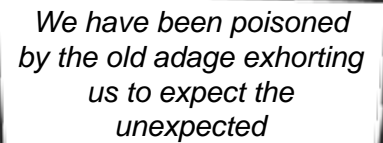
As unlikely as it might seem, your daily routine presents endless, perfect opportunities for personal transformation. If you want to become a more powerful leader, pay attention to what you do when you don't know what to do. Your experience is trying to teach you. Simply acknowledge it. There's really no need to head off to a hotel conference room and stack yourself up like cordwood to find the opportunity for personal transformation, though these side trips might later spark your most meaningful learnings. Should you mistake someone else's model, insight, or experience for your own, you might later stumble over a personally transforming moment when you discover that you've been leading by following rather than by taking your own lead.

Take a tip from Apple Computer and more fully acknowledge the contradictions surrounding you. Consider your most profound learning experience. Where were you? Who else was there? What came just before and just after? When did you recognize it as profound? Now, consider another extreme moment and compare the two. What did they have in common? Chances are pretty good that the only thing they had in common was that they blind-sided you, happening at the least convenient time. Could they have been transforming otherwise? Probably not.



## The Most Important Things Happen At The Least Convenient Times

Yet, if you're anything like me, you might catch yourself trying to create profound learning experiences without fully acknowledging that you never created any of the ones you've had so far. Or anyone else's, either. This is a humbling admission. We have been poisoned by the old adage exhorting us to expect the unexpected. As a contradiction it fails to fully acknowledge the paradox it carries. Of course, it is wisdom incarnate. But even fully acknowledged, this sage advice offers little direction. How do I expect the unexpected?



*We have been poisoned  
by the old adage exhorting  
us to expect the  
unexpected*

Transformation, like all of the most important experiences in life, happens at the least convenient, most unexpected times. There could be no real preparation for such events. Because of this, how we respond might matter more than how we prepare. What do you do when insight blindsides you with broader perspective?

Here's what I do, and perhaps you will recognize a bit of your own favorite strategy within mine. I deny obvious truths for as long as possible. What a contradiction! The longer I spend in denial, the more powerful the transforming potential of the eventual acknowledgment. Rather than fully embracing these events, I ignore them. I hum louder and tap dance faster until I fully exhaust every alternative except acceptance. Then—only then—do I ever begrudgingly release what I can no longer grasp and embrace what ever's been embracing me. This is how transformation works over here.

I won't tout this as the recipe for your success, but I can acknowledge (on my best days) that I have paved my path to my own expanding professional competence with just such behavior. What paves your path?

## Catching Yourself Being Yourself

Self help books embody the same deep contradiction as leadership training. We can become self-helpless when we read another's book in the hope of discovering ourselves there. Surprisingly, we sometimes do discover ourselves there—in others' stories. But we should never mistake another's transforming experience for our own, lest we lose our best leverage over our own transformations.

Your interaction with the book creates your transforming experience. In discovering yourself in the author's story, *you* discover yourself. The author does not discover you any more than your teachers create your transforming experiences. You remain in the driver's seat. Where ever and from whom ever you take your

inspiration, *you take your inspiration*. You are unavoidably the author of your own unexpected insights. And you can choose to learn from whatever you do then.

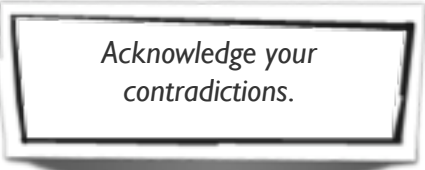
The key transforming experience in my own leadership training did not happen in a hotel conference room. No teacher was present. No clever exercise guided my discovery. I just caught myself being myself, and in that moment, I recognized a deep and unshakable contradiction. I realized that my teams always performed better when I was not present. I won't suggest that I did not, in the period immediately following this experience, try everything in my meager power to shake this blinding acknowledgment. I failed to shake it, and in failing, found myself, eventually, working a whole lot less, leading ever more capable teams.

### **No Freaking Idea**

A colleague of mine who served on Hewlett-Packard's Board of Directors confided his secret of leadership. "Whenever one of my subordinates came to me with a big, hairy problem, I responded, 'I have no freaking idea what you should do.' This created the conditions within which my subordinate could figure it out for himself and become a great leader. Had I taken responsibility for resolving his difficulty, I would have undermined my primary responsibility as a leader." How's that for a dandy contradiction?

The transforming experiences which become the foundation for powerful leadership occur in just such unexpected ways. We approach the powerful only to find that they cannot help us. How we respond will determine whether we become the leader our company desperately needs or just another disenchanted follower. Only in the face of such contradictions do real leaders ever appear.

If you are in a management position, the chances are pretty good that your organization will send you off to some hotel conference room for leadership training. Take a tip from software guru Gerald Weinberg, who, attending a class designed for "the 25 smartest people at IBM," asked the instructor if he was one of those 25 smartest people. When the teacher replied, "No," Jerry asked, "Then what are you doing here?" The students chased the instructor out of the room, designed their own curriculum, and conducted their own class, demonstrating their true leadership potential by fully acknowledging the contradiction before them.



Acknowledge your  
contradictions.

Acknowledge your contradictions. Each one carries the potential to become the next transforming experience your leadership practice requires. When you next find yourself stacked up like cordwood in

## Pure Schmaltz

a conference room being spoon-fed someone else's rational model for leadership, rather than fall under a self-helpless trance, acknowledge the contradiction. Then watch what you do next. Whatever you do could become the teacher you innocently expected the fellow in front of the room to be.

Become a walking contradiction, partly truth and partly fiction. No one finds their leader lurking within another's rational model for leadership. You won't find yours there, either. Only when you acknowledge this paradox and choose to take responsibility for discovering the leader lurking within can your company ever hope to satisfy their most pressing strategic imperative.

© 2009 by David A. Schmaltz - all rights reserved

### **Bio:**

David A. Schmaltz is a walking contradiction who facilitates workshops with his mouth mostly shut. He wrote *The Blind Men* and *the Elephant-Mastering Project Work* (Berrett-Koehler 2003). Contact David at [David@ProjectCommunity.com](mailto:David@ProjectCommunity.com).