



COVID 19 – A dialect moment in time - Embracing paradox is key - You are the tool

COVID19 PRESENTS US WITH A PARADOXICAL CHALLENGE

Two possible outcomes of the pandemic are discussed in public – the negative idea of complete destruction and the developing of something new and better. The results of the pandemic seem to oscillate between the two opposing developments of either the **apocalypse** comes over us or a newborn and thus better **phoenix** comes out of the ashes. Interestingly both images are Christian symbols once connected with the Bible, however they have left that context and entered ordinary language. They represent on one side night and destruction and on the other side sun and resurrection - the world will go under or the world will completely renew itself. We can call this a **paradoxical** or a **dialect moment in time**.

Before we start to look at **how to deal with paradoxical problems**, I would like to share my observations about the two opposing perspectives.

The conversations around COVID19 are characterized by extremes – extremes of opinions, of evaluations, of feelings and of psychosocial defences. Some people think, the pandemic results of hysteria and at the same time they are afraid of millions of deaths. Images are conjured up like the stock exchange crash 1929 and the subsequent depression in the 1930's - the possibly greatest recession the world has ever seen, with many insolvencies, huge unemployment rates, riots, despair and famine. Denial and despair tear people apart within themselves. Both more or less irrational reactions come from psychic stress caused by huge, often unconscious anxiety when thinking into the future characterized by an enormous uncertainty because of the pandemic.

Yet at the same time people in the western hemisphere (only) also start to see a new opportunity in the shut-down of physical social and economic life. They start talking about a better world surfacing when the crisis is over – more real connectedness, less running around or being in the rat race, more social politeness, more care for each other and for the weak and vulnerable. It seems that some people are willing and even looking for a different perspective on their lives and their work. They are somehow glad to have been presented with an opportunity to re-adjust their value system. Also, on a societal or economic level



some innovative solutions will emerge and eventually improve life – as you can see right now automotive companies start building ventilators, cosmetic companies produce disinfections and apparel producers turn to making masks – which later might develop in something else. The creative destruction, as Schumpeter has coined it in 1942 and which he even understood as the base for capitalism, might bring about not only new products, but later also a new societal order.

But do we have the **choice only between complete disaster or a wonderful new world?** How opposing are these two perspectives in reality and how to deal with their dialectical tension?

GREAT UNCERTAINTY CAUSES GREAT ANXIETY

Already in normal times, leaders as strategic decision makers are under the stress of not knowing what the future will bring and which route to take. Already ordinary strategic decision making is anxiety provoking because of the implied inner and outer conflict in choosing one option and giving up the other - not knowing whether you have taken the right path, whether because of this decision you will stay in your job or lose your face, reputation and income. These dangers create anxiety. This is even more overwhelmingly so the case for you as leaders today vis-a-vis the pandemic. In normal times you can estimate which risks you are taking but under the pandemic neither the quality nor the dimension of the risk is clear and calculable. **The incalculable risk causes incalculable existential anxiety** which in turn provokes psychic reactions like tunnel-vision, group think, splitting e.g. scapegoating, racism and all kind of other psychosocial defences such as denial, suppression, forgetting etc..

Especially now under the pressing influence of COVID19 our world seems to be characterized by these opposing perspectives of what appears to happen in the here and now (and might continue forever and thus lead to disaster) or the flipside of the coin – what might happen instead and what might lead to resurrection. Most of us are stuck in the denial or negative vision of the future like a great recession.



THE FIRST QUESTION IS, HOW TO GET TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE PARADOX

Only some people are already seeing or hoping for it, most have difficulties with this imagination. One way of getting to the other side of the coin is using for example “retro-polation” (von Oetinger) or “RE-gnosis” (Horx). Both techniques think back from the future. You imagine yourself let us say in next spring – how do you experience yourself sitting out there on a chair in the sunshine with a coffee in front of you? Pictures come up which seem to be like the old, but something has changed, you see yourself with friends, sitting in a restaurant, traveling, talking to colleagues, enjoying being with your family. You feel well connected with the people around you, the company you are working has integrated local suppliers, you have developed new product and service ideas, you know that many people around you have shown agency and you are proud of them, cooperation between your company and others and within your company has developed ... What you see is the paradox of life – what today seems to be the end of the economic world, total globalization (also at threat), victimism, nationalism, fear and social distancing might result one day – maybe not in three months but in a year – in the development of new products and companies, localization of some aspects of your company, agency, confidence and cooperation. These are all paradoxical tensions difficult to imagine.

HOW TO DEAL WITH PARADOXES – ALWAYS HOLD BOTH SIDES IN MIND

What you need now is the capacity to actively look for these seemingly opposing developments within yourself and within the company. And you need **to hold the “other idea of the future”** as well in mind as you do with the negative projections coming up and frightening you and your colleagues all the time. So, what is needed from you today is “complex or Janusian thinking”, because in reality the world is never black nor white, it will neither disappear nor change completely. This is **my second point**.

You can use three different ways to deal with a paradox:

1. **Stay in the “either-or mode”** – you decide for one side and against the other - that results in selection, splitting and might cause stress and vicious circles – Example: you do not believe in a product proposition of your colleagues and choose not to go for



market entry and might end up in losing an emerging market opportunity instead of going the new product way.

2. **Develop the “both/and” mode** that results in back and forth thinking and often in integrating solutions which might mean compromises - this might cause resistance against integration and problems in the long run- Example: the R&D unit gets money to develop new products whereas other parts are working short time. However, this is already the first step of embracing the paradox.
3. **Strive for transcending the perceived paradox by reframing and playfulness** to develop a new third, a not yet known solution which develops by holding the tension. For many people this is very difficult but can be exercised together – Example: the board has a continuous dialogue around a) future scenarios, b) around what you can (and should) do today but c) stays really open for everything that unfolds – Example: automotives developing today also ventilators (both/and) and with this new approach into a very different product world will then be set in motion to playing with ideas of what else can be developed (the new not yet known idea).

It means in short accepting the paradox, which causes emotional tension, holding it in mind, embracing it - to later transcend it into a new third solution or idea or development. Something else is hidden in this third approach – a willingness to understand and **strive for wholeness** – in your soul and in your company with your colleagues.

FOR ACHIEVING WHOLENESS, YOU ARE THE KEY FACTOR

The strive for wholeness points into the direction of what you can do as a leader. What I am proposing is not about operationally better decision making. Because **the biggest difficulty in dealing with paradoxes lies in holding the emotional tension**, it is about **you as “the tool”** for dealing with this tension. This is **my third point**. It is about your **emotional** and **moral capacity** and **standpoint** as leader, it is about your **personality** and your **capacity for self-reflection**, because the paradox causes an emotional (inner) and outer conflict (with colleagues, investors etc), which first leads to anxiety and second results in premature choices for one aspect or the other. Holding the tension needs self-containment and



containing others. It encompasses fear **and** confidence, feeling bad **and** having the confidence for something new, going for social distance **and** for emotional connectedness.

It is not your strength of execution but your strength of **personality and rootedness** in yourself - in having **a firm moral standpoint** and the capacity to **being flexible and open for new ways of thinking** which counts now. It is about walking with one foot in crisis-leadership-mode today and with the other foot into a positively different future in which you will find a new place for your company and yourself. And I am not talking about escapism, I am talking about being in the here and now managing actual problems while at the same **time imaging a future you will create together with others.**

Practicing paradox today can make the world a better place, so that when the phoenix has risen, the world might be a different place for human beings, where mere technological answers and digitization are no longer the total remedy of all our problems.

I take the liberty of making this appeal to you as a leader as President Elect of ISPSO (International Society for Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations). I speak from my professional experience as economist and psychoanalyst having witnessed the effects and reactions triggered by feelings such as fear and anxiety on the corporate and social level as well as on the level of the individual.

Please stay healthy and take care of others

Claudia

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/covid19-you-lead-out-paradox-dr-claudia-nagel>