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# LEADING THROUGH STRATEGIC PARADOXES

**This organisation had a desire to be seen as a challenger to the market leader in its market place but was limited in achieving this ambition due to a poor dynamic between sales and marketing functions on its executive team.**

Leading a challenger brand is paradoxical in its nature. Leaders need to both uphold regular management controls to enable everyday business to continue in a financially viable manner and, at the same time, disrupt and disturb every day habits of thinking and behaving in a way that enables transformation.

The tension inherent in such a position is what causes organisations to slow down and revert to the safety of the past when times get tough. Our workshop was about engendering leadership that leads through the paradox. Not leadership that avoids it or protects itself by asking others to provide a 'right answer'.

We began with some provocation on the strategic paradoxes facing the organisation, with real examples and Financials.

- Short term and Long term
- Core strategy and challenger strategy
- Revenue growth and profit
- Competition and Co-opetition
- Centralisation and Decentralisation

In turn we put one of these paradoxes at the centre of the team conversation and created a picture of how the paradoxes were affecting this leadership population.

Typical leadership responses to paradox are to avoid, agree or antagonise. Avoidance steers clear of the conversations that matter or defers them to a higher authority. Agreement is often based on a lowest common denominator and falls apart when the complexity of the real world is engaged. Antagonism results in strong attachment to either/ or positions that are defended to the hilt and often have a dramatic quality about them. The leadership population worked with these distinctions and applied them to the paradoxes previously mapped out.

- Where was avoidance, agreement or antagonism being played out in Sales and Marketing interactions?
- What were individual innate leadership preferences when faced with a paradox?

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The next stage was to utilise some way of thinking that allowed more affiliation to take place. This is a state that allows for integration of perspectives, listening, understanding and confronting of each other. It comes when space is allowed for risk to be taken and the difficult conversations to be had.

The inquiry would be based on questions such as:

- What am I very strongly attached to? How is this inhibiting my leadership? How is it keeping us stuck?
- Where is my anxiety or that of my team reducing our ability to see clearly?
- If I replaced 'but' with 'and' what would that open up?
- Where am I lacking in courage to do the right thing?
- How might my need for control be limiting my ability to lead through the paradox?

By the end of the workshop we had produced a series of leadership statements of what the leaders of the organisation stood for, a compass that guided choices, a source of stories to engage and lead others by. These statements were publicly articulated and acknowledged as the link to the next stage of the work.