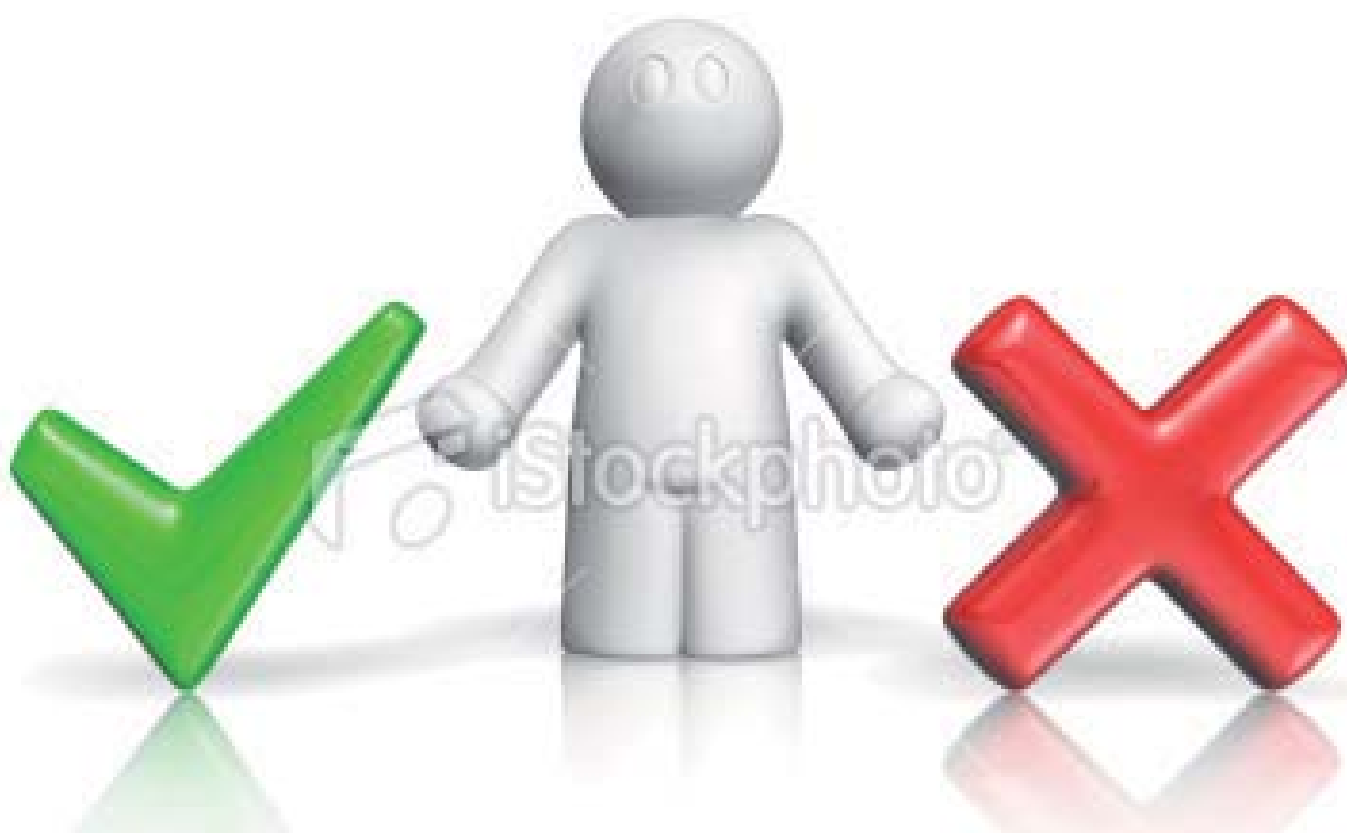# Living Through Paradox

By Joe Cheal

Have you ever been caught between a rock and hard place? Have you felt that you were damned if you did and damned if you didn't? Have you ever found yourself going round in circles? Have you ever ended up with the opposite to what you actually intended?

Welcome to the weird and wonderful world of Paradox!

For many people, the word 'paradox' conjures up the kind of philosophical puzzles and linguistic playthings that make one's head spin. Paradox can be confusing and contradictory and yet very simple, for example:

Don't read this sentence.

In order to know what the sentence says, you have to read it, and then you find out that you are being told not to read it. Consider the road sign that reads: "This sign is not in use". What are we meant to make of that?

Beyond the curiosities of philosophical paradox there is something more significant that tends to affect each of us through life. We journey now to the realm of 'social paradoxes' and for many, these paradoxes are not at all amusing. Consider the person who doesn't like their job but won't leave in case they cannot find employment elsewhere. What about the husband or wife who stays in a less than pleasant relationship because they hope each day that their partner will be nicer. How about the divorced parents who both insist on trying to get their child to take sides?

When it comes to everyday life, we have a rather rich vocabulary to describe these 'social paradoxes'. We have words like: dilemmas, quandaries, double binds, contradictions, tensions, competing demands, conflicting priorities, mixed messages, incongruities, polar opposites, vicious circles and interpersonal conflicts to name but a few.

Our metaphors can also be a sign of paradox. Better the devil you know than the devil you don't, bone of contention, catch 22, between the devil and deep blue sea, out of the frying pan and into the fire, double edged sword, on different wavelengths and at loggerheads. Do any of these sound familiar?

But is paradox always negative? This is obviously an important question. One of the presuppositions of NLP is that every behaviour has a context in which is useful. Surely paradox can be useful too? Of course, we have 'win/win' which is a positive double bind and we have 'virtuous circles' which are constructive rather than destructive. The

thing to be careful of is that paradox, by its very nature, tends to limit options. A virtuous circle may be a positive merry-go-round but it is only truly helpful if we have the freedom to get off. The ecology (i.e. the thing to remember) here is that a paradox can be positive but it must have an exit route, otherwise it becomes another trap of limitations.

Moving through paradox

The first step in resolving a paradox is to understand it. Most paradoxes start with the polarity of an either/or; for example, to change career or to stay where I am. If you are unsure what the two opposing sides of your own polarities are, ask yourself: "What is this a tension between and how are those things different?"

If you hear someone say: "It's the gym or the sofa", the word 'or' is the split point. If they say: "I ought to go to the gym but the sofa looks appealing", the word 'but' indicates the two sides of the paradox. People will often use a different voice tonality and body language when talking about the two sides.

Without identifying the two sides and resolving the paradox as a whole, we will tend to try and solve one side or the other. The problem with paradox is that when we try and resolve it this way, it will loop and flip and split and bring us back to where we started.

The second step in resolving paradox is deciding what to do with it. Some paradoxes can be resolved by making a decision. For example, faced with two job opportunities you might choose one over the other because although it pays a little less, it is more local. However, other paradoxes may prove less easy to resolve by decision making and it may be that there is another solution that you hadn't yet considered.

Using the dilemma of 'change career or stay where I am', here are two techniques that might help you in exploring and resolving your own paradoxes.

1)The Continuum

When someone gets themselves caught in 'either/or' they tend to see themselves limited to two options:


By using the idea of the Continuum we allow for a range of possibilities in between the 'either/or', by changing it to 'from/to'. This means rather than seeing the problem in terms of 'black or white' we can explore the grey areas in between. Write your own paradox

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down as above, placing each side in a circle some distance apart. Now draw a solid line from one to the other.


What does this immediately give you? What connections does this make? What other options are available to you now? How might it be for you that the two sides are interconnected and part of a greater whole?
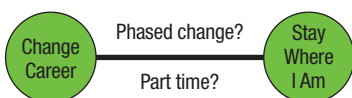
What of the 'change career/stay where I am' continuum? What ideas does this stimulate? Could it be a phased change, using the job I'm doing now to get training for my new career? Could I stay where I am part time while establishing my new career?

2) The Synthesis.

Another way of shifting beyond 'either/or' is to use 'both/and'. The idea of the Synthesis approach is where we take a 'thesis' and its 'antithesis' (opposite) and transcend both to create a third way. Where the Continuum is one dimensional, the Synthesis creates a second dimension, allowing for even more possibilities.
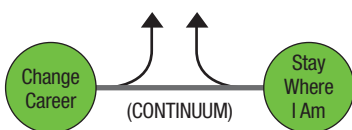
There are many ways of creating the Synthesis and in NLP of course, we have the visual squash (a technique for creating a third option that meets the positive intentions of both sides). An alternative is to get a blank piece of paper and answer the following question for each side of the dilemma, writing the answers randomly around on the paper:

> Variety Re-invigoration
> Independence Teamworking
> Friendships Security
> Good Atmosphere
> Creative Problem Solving
> New Challenges Easy Journey

"What would I gain from this option?"

By answering the question for both sides, you are capturing the full set of positive intentions. By intermingling the answers, you are leading to a synthesis. What alternatives does this give you? What other options are available to you now? What third solution might meet the positive intentions?

If necessary, score each of the positive intentions on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is less important and 5 is most important. Then look at your 4s and 5s to generate a third way.

And what about our original example, how might I stay where I am and change my career? Might there be other opportunities in the same company I work for?

The important thing to remember is that these 'paradox management' techniques are designed to stimulate more options, rather than solve the problem for you. They are the 'strike pad' for your match… to ignite innovation.

If a problem won't go away, it is likely to have a paradox underlying it. By understanding the nature of social paradox and methods of resolving it, we can clean up some of the most stubborn of issues. ●

The Author

Joe Cheal has been working with NLP since 1993. As well as being a licensed trainer of NLP, he holds an MSc in Organisational Development and Neuro-linguistic Technologies, a degree in Philosophy and Psychology, and diplomas in Coaching and in Ericksonian Hypnotherapy, Psychotherapy and NLP.

Joe is currently writing a book about paradox management called "Solving Impossible Problems" and the key findings of his MSc dissertation have been published in the journal: Current Research in NLP: vol 1 - Proceedings of 2008 Conference. Other research and articles on paradox and NLP can be found at www.gwiztraining.com.

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