

Exploring the role of NLP in the management of organisational paradox

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Abstract

Tensions and paradoxes are becoming ever more prevalent in the business environment and this research is an exploration into the nature of such tensions and paradoxes. This research aims to establish if and how paradox actually affects people in organisations, if paradox in organisations is recognisable, if and how paradox can be managed and also if and how neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) might aid in the management of paradox. The primary research reported here involves a qualitative study of the perceptions of eighteen managers from three different organisations: a charity, a council and a food manufacturer. The findings indicate that paradoxical situations do exist and that they have a range of causes, effects and solutions. Beyond that, the study also establishes particular language patterns and metaphors that may be indicative of paradox and tensions. Further findings of relevance to NLP are also discussed.

Keywords

PARADOX, DILEMMA, DOUBLE BIND, ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

Dilemmas, tensions, double binds, conflict and vicious circles: each a potential cost to business, manifesting in the forms of stress, indecision and dissatisfaction in the workplace. In an environment where the pace and amount of work increases there is likely to be increased pressure, conflicting priorities and dilemmas that need to be resolved quickly. Today's management 'find themselves pulled in more directions than ever before' (Stroh and Miller 1994, p. 28) and 'spend much of their time living in the fields of perceived tensions' (Quinn 1990, p. 3). Polarities, tensions and vicious circles can be summed up in one word: 'paradox'. This paper, along with a glossary at the end, explains and demonstrates these terms.

In order to survive now, organisations (including their leaders and staff) need to be able to understand and work with paradox. Cameron (1986, p. 545) suggests that: 'To be effective, an organisation must possess attributes that are simultaneously contradictory, even mutually exclusive.'

Paradox management is a new and potentially exciting field in organisational development (OD). According to Van de Ven and Poole (1988, p. 25): 'Addressing organisational paradoxes ... is an issue on the edge of organisation and management theory, and one that will spawn new ideas and creative theory. Looking at paradoxes forces us to ask very different questions and to come up with answers that stretch the boundaries of current theories.' And

Allen and Cherrey (2000, p. 115) argue that 'embracing paradox is an antidote for either-or thinking. Paradoxes invite us to live with polar opposites in peaceful co-existence.' If more people within organisations understood the nature of paradox, how to recognise it and how to manage it, perhaps there would be a reduced level of stress and dissatisfaction and hence a reduced cost to the organisation.

This article is based on a larger piece of research, where the main objective was to explore the notion of paradox management as an OD intervention. An OD intervention here might include change management, learning and development, problem-solving and conflict resolution. The sub questions of the research were: 'Does paradox actually affect people in organisations and if so how?' 'Is paradox in organisations recognisable?' 'Can paradox be managed and if so how?' and 'How might NLP aid in the management of paradox?' It is the last question on which this article is primarily focused.

The field of NLP began in the early 1970s with research into what made particular people good at what they did. From that time, the field has expanded with a range of understandings, processes, tools and techniques, most of which are beyond the scope of this report. What is of particular interest are the possible connections between NLP and the management of paradox. Bandler and Grinder (1990) discuss various techniques that can help to resolve internal tensions and also discuss a process of 'reframing' that may help people who are in disagreement. So might NLP bring strategies and tools to the larger system of organisational paradox?

Beyond reviewing the literature on organisational paradox, the primary research of this study was designed to provide new qualitative data (through interviews) about how people perceive that paradox actually affects them. As far as the author can establish, this had not been done before, as commentary on the effects of paradox on people has previously been from the researcher's perspective (e.g. Vince and Broussine 1996). So this paper aims to provide an interesting comparison between the subjective perceptions of the player and the literature on organisational paradox.

The interviews also provide new data about the participants' perceptions on how they dealt with paradox and paradoxical problems. This may give some personal insights into the manageability of paradox in the workplace.

Literature review

Defining paradox

In order to make the claim that paradox is manageable, it is essential to define the term 'paradox'. There is stark disagreement in terms and definitions of paradox, ranging from the simple: 'an apparent contradiction' (Quinn and Cameron 1988, p. 290) to a more hard-line approach where paradox necessarily contains self reference, contradiction and vicious circularity (Hughes and Brecht 1978). This hard-line approach is known as a 'logical paradox', for example: 'This statement is untrue.' This, as a statement, is self referential, contradictory and goes round in circles because if it is true, it is false, which means it is true (ad infinitum).

Poole and Van de Ven (1989, pp. 564-5) suggest that: 'the paradoxes in management are not, strictly speaking, logical paradoxes ... Organisational and management theories involve a special type of paradox – social paradoxes [which] tend to be looser: the opposing terms are often somewhat vague, and instead of logical contradictions, tensions and oppositions between incompatible positions must be considered ... This opens the possibility of dealing with social paradoxes not only through logical resolutions, but through taking into account the spatial and temporal nature of the social world.'

Ford and Backoff (1988) postulate that combining the spatial and temporal aspects creates four forms of paradox:

		Directional dualities	
		Horizontal	Vertical
Time dualities	Synchronic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • same level, same time (e.g. two managers ask a staff member to do two equally important tasks now) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • different level, same time (e.g. a manager asks a member of staff to do something that contradicts company policy)
	Diachronic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • same level, different time (e.g. a manager changes their mind and says 'no' when they said 'yes' earlier) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • different level, different time (e.g. a director asks a member of staff to do something that conflicts with what their own manager told them to do earlier)

Figure 1. Time and directional duality quadrant. (J. Cheal 2009)

It is conceivable that a problem that has a different level and/or different time duality would be easier to resolve than a problem that sits at the same level and at the same time. The directional and time dualities model is a useful distinction in that it may help to understand the dynamics of a paradox.

NLP and paradox

Logical level (or logical type) frameworks can help to separate out the layers of a paradox which in itself can help to resolve a dilemma or double bind. This is done by shifting away from 'either/or' and allowing 'both/and' to be true at different levels. The concept of logical levels is used within NLP to bring a hierarchical or categorical order to a person's thinking, particularly if they are thinking in a one dimensional 'either/or' manner. It could be argued that the 'neurological levels' model (Dilts 1990) may play a role in paradox management by separating an organisation out into the layers of 'spirit' (who are we here for), identity, beliefs and values, capabilities, behaviours and environment. This might demonstrate, for example, that an organisation can hold particular values and yet people behave in a manner that apparently contradicts those values. Although this may still be a problem that still needs addressing, the 'levels' model helps to remove the 'paradoxical' element.

Paradox is, in part, about internal and external conflict (e.g. of beliefs and values). A particular strength of NLP is its tools and techniques for resolving intrapersonal (internal) and interpersonal conflicts. The 'visual squash' and 'six step reframe' techniques are classic examples (see Bandler and Grinder 1990), as is the negotiation process (see Dilts and Delozier 2000b).

Another aspect of NLP that may aid in the understanding and management of paradox is in studying the language patterns that people use. NLP helps to focus on the subtleties of language by understanding how language affects and reflects a person's neurology (i.e. the brain and nervous system). Might people place or hold themselves in paradox by the language they use (e.g. I don't know whether to laugh or cry) and might they signal paradox unconsciously in what they say (e.g. I feel caught between the devil and the deep blue sea)?

NLP uses two major language patterns, the 'meta model' and the 'Milton model' (Dilts and Delozier 2000a). The meta model is designed to take a person into the details, finding out specifically what they mean (e.g. how do you know that your manager doesn't like you?). The Milton model takes the person in the opposite direction, allowing them to make helpful generalisations (e.g. the fact that you are reading this means that you are curious about paradox management). These language patterns may provide some insights into paradox management. For example, if two people are arguing about a proposal, it may be that by getting to the specifics, they can see

a workable way forward. In addition, by seeking generalisation, it may be possible to help them see that they actually agree on a bigger picture level, in keeping the organisation in business perhaps.

The core function of NLP is to model useful behaviours. If one person is effective at something, how do they do it? What can be learnt about how they do it and how can that be taught to others? The method for modelling is not just to observe the person's behaviour but also to understand the person's internal 'strategies'. In order to complete a strategy, someone will tend to go through a loop that ends when they achieve their outcome. To explain this loop, NLP borrows the concept of 'Test-Operate-Test-Exit' from Miller, Galanter and Pribram's TOTE model (see Dilts et al. 1980). For example, if deciding to buy a book, the strategy might be: See a book and ask myself 'Is this of interest?' (Test), then look at the cover and through the book (Operate), get a positive feeling and an internal 'yes' (Test) and then decision is made (Exit). When a paradox is in action, it could be said to be running a strategy or process and if this is the case, it could be mapped out using the TOTE model. With paradox, particularly the looping kind, the TOTE has no Exit, so the paradox strategy runs TOTOTO ... An example of this might be a member of staff who is stuck in a loop: 'I want to go home on time to spend time with my kids, but everyone else works late everyday and so it would make me look bad, so I'll stay late at work, but I want to spend more time with my kids ...' A looping TOTE could be called a TOTO, or as O'Connor (1997) calls it, a TOT.

Although some of the models, tools and linguistic analysis may prove helpful, it is important to note that aside from work by Andreas (2006), there has yet to be an in-depth study into the nature of paradox and the role of NLP in its resolution.

Polarity, either/or thinking and paradox

The notion of paradox appears to trace back to Aristotelian logic which, in turn, has influenced Western thinking to the present day. This has become known as 'either/or' thinking (Johnson 1996) and it appears to create polarities (for example: either right or wrong, either win or lose). Why does polarity lead to paradox? A common description and/or definition of paradox is that it 'describes a particular relationship between opposites. It is, in its simplest form, a statement or state of affairs seemingly contradictory but expressing a truth.' (Berg and Smith 1995, p. 107) Polarity equates to two contradictory opposites, and in formal logic, this is expressed as either X or not X. In formal logic, as soon as a position is taken on something, there will be a negation, an opposite, a contradiction and hence a paradox. The concept of not (or negation) may be at the heart of paradox. Andreas (2006, p. 58) suggests that 'negation is an easy way to create an oversimplified world of 'either/or' categorical opposites, limiting choice to one of the two.' The negation of X (i.e. not X) can mean an apparently mutually exclusive, specific, logical opposite (e.g. on or off), a notional opposite (e.g. autocratic or democratic, manager or leader, option A or option B) or a general opposite which could be anything other than X.

Taking the exploration of 'polarity as paradox' further, from an NLP perspective paradox can be considered a nominalisation. Nominalisations are part of the major language patterns of NLP (meta model and Milton model), where a process (verb) is turned into a thing (noun). This can cause confusion because the resulting nominalisation (e.g. 'leadership') will likely mean very different things to different people. Not only is the word 'paradox' itself a nominalisation, but possibly any nominalisation will prove to be one side of a polarity paradox. When examining a list of polarities in organisations, all of the examples appear to be nominalisations (as in Quinn and Kimberly 1984, p. 301; Pascale 1990, p. 53; Peters 1992, p. 473; Stroh and Miller 1994, p. 31; Marsh and Macalpine 1999, p. 645). A sample list appears below in **Table 1**. Perhaps one thing that distinguishes a nominalisation from a 'non-nominalisation' is that it has a meaningful polar opposite. For example, 'desk' (a non-nominalisation) has no meaningful polar opposite, whereas 'empowerment' (a nominalisation) does. A list of values is also a list of nominalisations and 'nearly all values have a polar opposite value that is also positive' (Quinn and Cameron 1988, p. 292); for example, spontaneity and predictability.

Empowerment	-----	Control
Autonomy	-----	Partnership
Internal	-----	External
Decentralisation	-----	Centralisation
Short term	-----	Long term
Stability	-----	Change
Competition	-----	Collaboration

Table 1: Examples of organisational polarities. (J. Cheal 2009)

A proposed typology of paradox

To date, there appears to be no ‘grand unified theory’ of agreed terms and typology of paradoxes and of the relationships between these types. If paradox management is to become a more mainstream field of organisational development, there needs to be some form of framework for understanding the nature of paradox. Whilst not all researchers in the field will necessarily agree with the author’s interpretation, a framework needs to begin somewhere.

From the varying definitions and conditions of paradox given in the literature, the author has extrapolated the following components or dynamics of paradox.

‘Poles are the underlying contradiction of a paradox and are conceptual and inert. They can appear as ‘digital’ (i.e. mutually exclusive) or ‘analogue’ (i.e. a continuum).

Splits are active and cause the ‘paradoxee’ to feel pulled in two or more directions or decisions. It can also feel that whichever option they take, they lose.

Loops are active and cause the ‘paradoxee’ to feel like they are going round in circles, either ending up where they started or perhaps having lost a little or gained a little.

Flips are active and cause the ‘paradoxee’ to feel like they ended up with the opposite to or negation of what they actually wanted or intended.’

Splits, loops and flips are the active expression of the underlying pole and are how the paradox plays out or is experienced by the ‘paradoxee’. In this sense, splits, loops and flips are perceptual as opposed to conceptual. It is also possible that the components will combine, the most common perhaps being a flip-loop, where the ‘paradoxee’ goes round in circles but keeps getting flipped each time. An organisational example of a flip-loop might be where the leadership is driven by the short-termism of the shareholders to initiate ‘profit enhancing’ change. The change takes place but needs time for the staff to adapt. Because this doesn’t happen quickly enough, the business is driven to change again. This loop continues, but with each change the performance (and hence profits) are inadvertently driven down.

Building on these components, [Table 2](#) shows some key types of paradox gathered from examples presented in some of the literature explored.

Type of paradox	Components	What is this?	Example	Example literature
Polarity	Poles	The conceptual aspect of a paradox, the underlying opposition or contradiction.	Autocratic vs democratic leadership.	Handy (1994) Johnson (1996) Peters (1992)
Double bind	Splits	No win situations, where you are wrong if you do and wrong if you don't (or right if you do and right if you don't).	Go to the meeting and get verbally attacked, don't go to the meeting and get attacked without being there to defend myself.	Wagner (2001) Lawley (2000)
Dilemma	Splits	A difficult decision caused by a tension between two positions or options.	Should we choose candidate X or Y?	Hampden-Turner (1990)
Self reference	Loops	Circularity caused by something referring to itself. For example, a tautology, or defining something by using itself.	Towards the end of an email: 'This email is to be read by those who have not yet read it.'	Ropo and Hunt (1995)
Vicious or virtuous circle	Loops	Circularity driven by a series of cause-effect events that loop back to the original cause.	I am not assertive because I lack confidence and I lack confidence because I am not assertive.	Hampden Turner (1990)
Self fulfilling prophecy	Loops	Circularity caused by the 'paradoxee' expecting a certain outcome and hence looking for the evidence of it. Usually contains a hidden double bind where the paradoxee accepts evidence that agrees with expectations and rejects all evidence that does not. The term 'self fulfilling prophecy' was coined by Robert Merton.	We expect to lose the contract, so we don't put much effort into it, so we lose the contract.	Merton (1996)
Knots	Flips	Creating the opposite to what was intended.	People who are good at what they do get promoted to their level of incompetence (known as the 'Peter principle').	Peter and Hull (1969) Schwartz (2005)
Unintended consequences	Flips	Taking action brings about unforeseen (usually negative) result.	A 'health and safety' initiative is introduced to reduce the amount of accidents. However, more accidents are reported as a result because people's awareness has been raised about reporting accidents.	Merton (1996) Dörner (1997)
Logical paradox	Flip-loops	A statement or event that contains apparently simultaneous contradictory concepts. In order for them to be true they need to be false and in order to be false they need to be true.	A manager tells their staff to 'be more spontaneous'. If they are spontaneous it is only because the manager has told them to be and hence they are not being spontaneous.	Dilts and DeLozier (2000b) Watzlawick et al (1974)

Table 2: Basic typology of paradox. (J. Cheal 2009)Managing Paradox

With regards to the management of paradox, Ford and Ford (1994) discuss three key approaches: formal logic, dialectics and trialectics. Each of these approaches is a logic which ultimately affects the mindset or thinking model of the individual. For this reason, the difference between these logics is an important distinction to make. Ford and Ford (1994, p. 758) suggest that: 'When a person is "operating in" a particular logic, he or she takes its rules and boundaries for granted. Logics pose the problems, provide the language for explaining and understanding them, and determine their solutions. Logics give people their 'reality', the truth, the way things are ... when people are unaware that they are using a logic, or are 'trapped' in only one, this point of view becomes an unwitting limitation to what might be seen or understood, restricting their observations and offering no really new alternatives.'

The three logics are summarised in Table 3 below, with example references that fall within each of these approaches.

Paradox management approaches	What is this?	Example references
Formal logic	Working in the framework of either/or, maintaining a polarity between two seemingly opposing positions.	Johnson (1996)
Dialectic	Creating a 'third way' or synthesis between the polarities (which are known as thesis and antithesis).	Gadamer (1976), Siporin and Gummer (1988)
Trialectic	Shifting outside or beyond the polarity for example by reframing.	Ford and Ford (1994) Carini et al. (1995)

Table 3: Paradox management approaches (adapted from Ford and Ford 1994). (J. Cheal 2009)

Each approach has its problems and drawbacks. Formal logic (or Aristotelian logic) attempts to deal with the paradox by maintaining the either/or frame which means that although it may help to understand a paradox, it does not resolve it. Formal logic has also been criticised for its inability to account for change (e.g. Korzybski 1958), and as such is not necessarily a useful tool for organisational development.

A problem for dialectics is that as a synthesis is formed from the thesis and the antithesis, a new polarity is created at the level of the synthesis (because the synthesis will have an opposite or negation) and hence a new paradox.

Trialectic logic is a rather new and obscure concept that is hard to quantify and hence hard to reproduce. If dialectic materialism could be compared to a Cartesian/Newtonian dualistic, mechanistic paradigm then trialectics would be comparable to a holistic, quantum physics paradigm (Dell'Olio 1983). In organisational terms, this would link with complexity theory and systemic thinking. A tool that appears to reflect trialectic logic would be reframing and this is an area where NLP might add value (e.g. Bandler and Grinder 1982).

Having explored some of the issues of the three logics, an important question from an OD perspective is: can they add anything to the management of paradox?

Formal logic tends to approach paradox in an either/or fashion, where one must choose one side or the other. Classic decision making tools follow this form, e.g. Lewin's forcefield analysis (in Huczynski and Buchanan 2001), exploring the pros and cons of both sides and making decisions from there. Sadly this can sometimes lead to a decision being made by choosing the 'least worst' option. Polarity management (Johnson 1996) takes this a step forward by introducing the idea of movement between the polarities by deciding which of the 'pros' best suits the current situation and then when the 'cons' become too intense, one flips over to the other option until the 'cons' of that option become too intense and then one flips back again. This appears to happen in organisations over long periods of time (e.g. centralise then decentralise then recentralise ...).

Between formal logic and dialectics is 'fuzzy logic' (Kosko 1993) which suggests there is a continuum between the two poles of 'either/or'. This would allow for a midway point solution, a balance or a compromise.

Although a 'from/to' continuum is an improvement on 'either/or' (in the sense that it provides more options), it might still be considered rather one dimensional. For example, if the result of a negotiation could only be somewhere between win/lose and lose/win, then the best result for all parties could only be a compromise; win/win can only occur if a second dimension is added.

If the single dimension is converted to two dimensions, a dialectic construct is created. This is also known as a 2x2 box, a quadrant (e.g. Blanchard et al. 1994, Covey 1994) or Cartesian Co-ordinates (Bodenhamer and Hall 2004). It is also used by Blake and Mouton (1966) in the form of a 'managerial grid'. The idea of dialectics is to think in 'both/and' terms instead of 'either/or' by taking a thesis and its antithesis and then creating a synthesis. In this two dimensional model of a dialectic construct, the four quadrants are: 1) thesis; 2) antithesis; 3) synthesis (both thesis and antithesis); and 4) inverse synthesis (neither thesis nor antithesis).

The trialectical approach might include denominalising and reframing. The process of denominalising is usually linked to NLP (e.g. Dilts and DeLozier 2000b) but is also referred to by Hampden-Turner (1990, p. 131) who suggests that 'by adding ing to ... words we convert the noun form to the present participle; not decisiveness but deciding ... Once expressed in this way, they are process words ... the oppositions are softened and the adversary structure disappears.' Ford and Ford (1994, p. 765) say: 'According to trialectics, there are no "things" in the world other than change, movement or process. Things, such as people, organisations and ideas, are all names given to abstractions of what are identifiable and relatively constant patterns of movement.' Trialectics would therefore imply that paradox is a process and not a thing.

According to Ichazo (1982, p. 74), trialectic logic is about 'the change from one material manifestation point to another' and the movement from one point to another point appears to be that of one frame to another frame. In this sense, reframing captures the essence of trialectic logic. Reframing taps into a rich source of material and hence may provide a useful resource for paradox management. Bolman and Deal (2003, p. 12) refer to frames as 'windows, maps, tools, lenses, orientations, and perspectives' and use four broad frames (structural, human resource, political and symbolic) through which organisational reframing can take place. Bandler and Grinder (1982) propose two types of reframing: content and context, and these have been further developed by Dilts (1999) with the 'sleight of mouth' patterns and also by Hall and Bodenhamer (2005) with the 'mind lines' patterns.

Summary of literature on NLP and paradox

Conceptually, there appear to be numerous links between NLP and the understanding and management of paradox, including the awareness and use of language patterns (e.g. from the meta model and Milton models) and the ability to think in multiple directions (e.g. logical levels and reframing).

What may be new to NLP are the components and typology of paradox and the nature of the three logics: formal, dialectic and trialectic. Of particular significance is the formalisation of these 'logics' and that when a person is positioned in the framework of a particular logic this will inform (and possibly limit) their thinking.

Methods

As there was no hypothesis to prove or disprove, the nature of the research was exploration rather than validation. Theory would come from the data and for this reason, the approach was inductive as opposed to deductive.

It was important that the method allowed the meaning of the phenomena discussed to surface, which made qualitative interviews most appropriate. The author used semi-structured interviews, which allowed for freedom of exploration whilst maintaining a degree of consistency throughout the interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was recorded (with the explicit permission of the interviewee) and transcribed. A level of confidentiality was agreed with each individual involved, for example that the individuals

and their organisations remain anonymous and that their specific responses would not be fed back to their own management.

A handout was shown to the interviewee that contained a list of words and phrases connected to paradox (see Figure 2). The interviewee was then asked if they had experienced any of the terms and if so, which ones. They were then asked questions such as: 'What would be an example of that?' From there, the author asked questions to gain more detailed information; for example, where and when, how it made them feel and what they did to resolve it.

Ambiguity	Groupthink
Blame	Indecision
Competing demands	Interpersonal conflicts
Conflicting priorities	Mixed messages
Contradictory communication	Polarised thinking
Damned if I do, damned if I don't	Procrastination
Dilemmas	Tensions
Entrenched positions	Vicious circles/cycles

Figure 2: Handout shown to interviewees at the start of the interview. (J. Cheal 2009)

A Q-Sort was used to analyse the data because it is a simple and flexible tool to uncover themes. Although Q-Sort becomes extremely complex with large amounts of data (Robson 2002), it worked well with the sample size of this study. As well as spontaneous themes, where possible, the analysis also looked at language patterns and specific examples of how paradox has affected participants and how they have attempted to resolve paradoxes.

Since the research was qualitative, no statistical analysis was needed and hence a small, non-random sample was appropriate. The author sought a specific population who were likely to be affected by paradox in organisations and so the sample was non random. This meant a rather skewed population sample that may not necessarily represent all middle-to-senior managers. For this reason, the results could not be generalised but may show that some paradoxes can be managed.

The population was 18 junior to senior managers from three organisations in different industries (e.g. a charity, a county council and a food manufacturer). Six people were selected from each organisation (by an in-house HR/learning and development manager), three first line managers and three senior managers. This allowed for some loose comparisons of people in the same organisations, first line managers across organisations and senior managers across organisations. Although not enough to be statistically significant, it should have been enough to give some insights into the similarities or differences in the experience of paradoxes in these industries. With regards to access, the author works as a consultant with a range of organisations from the industries mentioned and so had numerous contacts in HR and management. This will also mean that the author had a knowledge of and familiarity with the organisations and industries which allowed for more in depth, probing interviews.

Paradox label	Type	Example	Level	Org type	Cause	Effects on system	Effects on individual	Strategy/ intervention used
Ambiguity paradox	Double bind	To act or not to act. If things go wrong, my neck is in the frame. If I do nothing, people say 'you should have done something'.	Senior	Council	Staff member without line manager, having to act outside level of responsibility.	Potential risk of person acting beyond level of responsibility.		
Can of worms Paradox 1	Double bind	Open can: Issues and stress. Don't open can: hidden issues and guilt.	First Line	Council	Issues exist that have been ignored but someone sees that there are potential issues.	If not handled, issues resurface at bad time.	Extra workload and/or worry.	
Can of worms Paradox 2	Knot	Try to help: can owner thinks I'm interfering and removing their authority. Not try to help: Person unprotected and vulnerable. Either way, sees me as a persecutor. (Drama triangle?)	First Line	Council	If can opened, owner of can becomes resentful, though my intention is to do the right thing and to help them ...	Org shoots the messenger, so people more likely to keep secrets.	Difficult, heart sinks, can be gruesome, feels like grassing people up.	
Cultural difference paradox	Vicious Circle & Self Fulfilling Prophecy	We don't like them because we've never liked them.	Senior	Manufacturer	History, subjectivity and emotion.	Splits, lack of communication.	Feeling in the middle.	Drive and integration programme to remind them they are part of the same company.
Departmental polarities 1	Polarity, Dilemma	Servicing different departments leads to competing demands.	First line	Charity	Divide between departments and planning devolved to individual teams. No one taking bigger picture control.	Damaged relationships.	Stress, can't plan, frustration, feels unfair.	Express point of view.
Departmental polarities 2	Dilemma	Research vs Production	Senior	Manufacturer	Need to give customer choice and new products. But production want standardisation, reduced waste/ cost.	Disruption		Communication, pragmatic approach, compromise or stand up for it.
Efficiency paradox 1	Knot	Needs of customer not being met because of drive for efficiency.	Senior	Manufacturer	Organisation wants both innovation/ customisation and reduce cost/ standardisation.	Departments/ organisation may not get what it wants.	Pressure	Compromise. Do customisation without damaging the other side.
Efficiency paradox 2	Vicious circle and knot.	I'm good at what I do, so I get given more work. This continues until I cannot do my job anymore.	First Line	Council	Work takes path of least resistance.	Inequality of workloads and expectations.	Resentment about other people not doing much.	
Empowerment paradox 1	Double bind	Making decisions without director input leads to 'Why didn't you ask us?' but not making decision leads to 'Why don't you do your job?'	Senior	Manufacturer	Traditionally, decisions are not made until directors have had input.			Diplomatic skills to keep directors happy.

Table 4: A sample of paradoxes experienced by first line and senior managers in each organisation. (J. Cheal 2009)

Analysis of data

Paradox examples

All interviewees reported at least one organisational paradox that had had an effect on them, and the effects mentioned were, without exception, negative. The most common effect was ‘frustration’. Every one of the 18 people interviewed was able to give examples that fitted within the framework of paradox typology. For the sake of space, [Table 4](#) below gives a sample of the study results which identified 52 different paradoxes.

Each of the paradoxes were labelled by the author, which was done for convenience rather than significance. The collected paradoxes were analysed by paradox type (as established in [Table 2](#)) and, where data was available, examples, cause, effects and interventions are shown. It was apparent that some managers had strategies for handling paradox whilst others did not.

Language and thinking patterns

There were also three interesting language/thinking patterns that emerged from the interviews. The first was the use of metaphors, the second was a sudden change of pronoun use from ‘I’ to ‘you’ and the third was a range of other indicators of polarity, tension and other forms of paradox.

The use of metaphor might be an indicator of problems and possibly paradox. [Table 5](#) shows the metaphors used by the interviewees when talking about problems (usually paradoxical) throughout the interviews. Perhaps metaphor may be used as a way of expressing difficult or emotive concepts by disassociating (i.e. emotionally distancing oneself).

Actions speak louder than words Balloon out of control Big gamble Blue flashing light Blow up Blow with the wind Bone of contention Borderline cases Brush it under the carpet Can of worms Chaos on the streets Chase off in different directions Clash of egos Comparing apples and pears Court of the sun king Creaky system Cut any ice Different angles Double edged sword Eggs in one basket Empire building Fingers in ears	Grass is greener Grey areas Grinding your teeth Halos and horns Hands are tied Heart trying to do the stomach's job Herd of elephants coming towards you Juggling Many balls in the air at the same time Mix it up like a deck of cards Move the goalposts Nightmare Old Boys club Old hat on On different wavelengths Open the stable door and let the horse bolt Out of its box (an old issue) Put it on the backburner Queer the pitch Resources are tight	Scrambled egg (head felt like) Round in circles and end up at square one Sailing too close to the wind Same flavour but with less meat on the bones Set of hurdles and we may fall at one Shifting a big rock Silk glove with the iron fist Silo mentality Split the pot Spoon feeding Stabbed in the back Sticking ones head above the parapet Sweating blood Thin end of the wedge Turn a blind eye Unhappy bunnies War (it's a war out there) Wrestling with a difficulty Woolly priorities
Positive, solution focused metaphors ...		
Button it down Clear the air Draw a line in the sand	Flag it up Get it off your chest Play by the book	Put a ring fence up Show them the ropes Squaring the triangle

Table 5: Metaphors used to describe paradoxical issues. (J. Cheal 2009)

There was often a change in the focus of an interviewee's attention from talking in the 'I' form to talking in the 'you' form. Sometimes, this was in the form of stating an opinion or generalising (also known as a 'lost performative' generalisation according to the NLP meta model, Bandler and Grinder, 1975). For example:

- 'As a manager, you then have to make judgements'
- 'I answer based on facts... Base it on facts and you can't go wrong.'

At times, when the interviewee was talking about themselves they used the pronoun 'you', as if they were projecting. For example:

- 'When I sense that it starts happening you have to step back and think about yourself as a cog in the machine'
- 'I just let stuff go because otherwise it would eat you up completely'
- 'He has information and I need that. You have the dilemma of: I need the information but I don't want to ask'
- 'If they take the other half of my job away, I don't know, it makes you insecure.'

There were also a lot of 'you' responses when the interviewee was asked: 'How does that affect you?' For example:

- 'It makes you feel very squeezed'
- 'It does disillusion you'
- 'You feel as if you're not making progress.'

Another combination was:

- 'Sometimes it gets the better of you; sometimes I feel 'grrrr'.'

The change of pronoun from 'I' to 'you' may also be a sign that the person is uncomfortable and wants to 'put it out there' by dissociating. In modern parlance, Western cultures tend not to use the term 'one' (as in 'one sometimes find it frustrating'), so another option would be 'people', but that would still include the individual who is speaking, so 'you' is a more dissociated method of speaking. Alternatively, perhaps the speaker wants to involve the listener in order to gain empathy. This 'I' to 'you' language pattern is a general observation although all 18 interviewees did it. A detailed analysis of this language pattern is outside the scope of this paper and may be somewhat difficult to prove one way or the other. It may however, be worth further study.

Other potential indicators of paradox that were expressed by interviewees are highlighted in [Table 6](#). They have been split into explicit and implied. The explicit indicators give a strong suggestion that there is a paradox being discussed. The implied indicators suggest a possibility that a paradox is being discussed, depending on the context.

It is interesting to note how many words act like the word 'but' (e.g. however, nevertheless, on the other hand, though, whereas, whilst) in that they change the 'emotional' direction (positive to negative and negative to positive). When these patterns are used it is possible to follow the string of reframes from positive to negative to positive and back again. Some words such as 'between' and 'or' act as a splitter, marking out two different sides whereas other words such as 'not' and 'too' act as indicators of polarity in the sense that they imply that there is an opposing factor. Indeed, it could be argued that any time a position is taken on an issue (e.g. I'm right, you're wrong) this would imply there is an opposing position and hence a paradox.

Explicit polarity/tension	Example/notes
Between	`it's between x and y'
• Balance	`strike a balance between x and y'
• Compromise	`compromise between x and y'
• Dichotomy	`dichotomy between x and y'
• Difference	`difference between x and y'
• Divide/Division	`divide between x and y'
• Happy medium	`happy medium between x and y'
Contrary	`what you have to do might be contrary to your values'
Counter	`counter productive', `counter balance'
Either/or	`either x or y'
Versus	`x versus y'
Win/lose	`I win, you lose'
Implied polarity/tension	Example/notes
But	`they will get skills but other people will have to wait'
Don't	`I don't see it as x'
However	`x however y'
Instead	`instead of x, y' (or `if not x, y instead')
Nevertheless	`x nevertheless y' (acts like 'but')
Not x	implies polarity between x and not x
On the other hand	`x, on the other hand, y'
Otherwise	`x, otherwise y'
Ought/should	implies a mismatch between expectation and reality
Rather than	`x rather than y'
Right	Implies there's a wrong (works for any truth value)
So	`x so y' (problem so need/solution)
Though	`x though y' (acts like 'but')
Too	Implies being at the end of one polarity
Whereas	`x whereas y'
Whilst	`whilst x, y'
Without	`talk a lot without any action'

Table 6: Language Indicators of polarity, tension and other forms of paradox. (J. Cheal 2009)

Conclusions

The primary research appeared to demonstrate that paradox in organisations is recognisable and paradox does indeed affect people in organisations, usually in a negative manner (see [Table 4](#)). As to whether paradox can be managed, the answer from the literature and the primary research appears to be 'sometimes'. It appeared that some managers coped with paradox whilst others did not. Certainly, there are ways of understanding and managing paradox conceptually, but this also requires the players to be aware of paradox, to feel they can do something about it and have the motivation to act.

Paradox is a complex concept to grasp and paradox management is a skill that needs to be learnt. It is hoped that by introducing the components and typology of paradox, this may aid management practice in the future. Further research is required to determine how easily paradox management can be taught and learnt as an organisational skill.

Of particular interest to this article, is the question: 'How might NLP aid in the management of paradox?' and the research suggests that although there is further work to do, the areas of linguistic analysis, metaphor, reframing and denominalisation all show promise.

The possible linguistic indicators of paradox are particularly interesting (see [Table 6](#)) as they may give an NLP or OD practitioner clues as to where the heart of the paradox lies, i.e. between what and what? For example: 'It's a compromise between time and quality' indicates a polarity between time and quality as if it is an either/or and hence a paradox.

As [Table 5](#) suggests, the use of metaphor may also give clues about the existence of paradox (e.g. going round in circles). Although not exclusively NLP related, the use and exploration of metaphor may be a promising area for paradox management. As a way of expressing paradox, metaphor might also be useful in its management. Dilts (1999, p. 69) reports that: 'According to Bateson ... metaphorical thinking leads to more creativity and may actually lead us to discover deeper truths about reality.' If a client uses a metaphor to express a problem, an OD practitioner might use a further metaphor for a solution. For example, 'I keep hitting my head against a brick wall,' leads to 'If there was a door in the wall, where would it take you?'

A curious phenomenon is the tendency for interviewees to flip from 'I' to 'you' focus when describing something uncomfortable, as if to dissociate themselves. The author could find no precedent in the literature referencing this phenomenon. Although this may not be unique to paradoxical issues, it is perhaps worthy of further research. Other dissociating language to notice might be 'that' instead of 'this', 'there' instead of 'here' and 'then' instead of 'now'.

It is possible that the most useful paradox management intervention to link with NLP is the concept of reframing; for example, in redefining particular problems to see them from other angles. It could be argued that a problem is only a problem if it is perceived as a problem. Hoebeker (2004, p. 151) suggests 'in organisations there are no problems, only people with problems,' and Ford and Ford (1994, p. 760) consider that 'Boundaries reside in the observer(s), not the observed. A boundary between an organisation (A) and its environment (not-A), for example, belongs neither to the organisation nor the environment, but to the observer.' Horn (1983, p. 21) adds that 'opposition is only "apparent" ... Only in our human conceptions do opposites exist at all.' If this is the case, then when perception changes, the paradox ceases to be 'manifest' and returns back to the realm of potential. Given that NLP has a strong grounding in the nature of reframing, it would certainly be worth exploring some of the reframing literature (e.g. Dilts, 1999; Hall and Bodenhammer 2005) in future research.

As discussed in the literature review, an awareness of nominalisations may be useful (although perhaps not essential). Considering the amount of potential nominalisations in the English language, a practitioner would need to focus on those that are troublesome in a particular context. For example, words like 'empowerment' or 'leadership' could create polarity when there is a lack of an agreed/shared definition. Further study would be prudent to determine if a paradox could be resolved when the polarities were denominalised (i.e. turned back from things into processes).

If paradox in organisations affects people in a negative manner, then paradox management is a worthy cause. This article was designed to raise the readers awareness and understanding of paradox in organisations and then to open the door to using NLP in helping to resolve such paradox.

Glossary of terms

Dialectic	A philosophical model of logic that creates a 'third way' or synthesis between the polarities of thesis and antithesis.
Dilemma	A difficult decision caused by a tension between two positions or options.
Double bind	No win situations where you are wrong if you do and wrong if you don't (or right if you do and right if you don't).
Formal logic	A philosophical model of logic that works in the framework of either/or, maintaining a polarity between two seemingly opposing positions. Also known as Aristotelian logic.

NLP	Neuro-linguistic programming, the study of the structure of subjective experience. Also known as the psychology of excellence and the 'science' of change.
Nominalisation	A verb that has been converted into a noun. Nominalising is the act of turning verbs into nouns and denominalising is the act of converting the noun back to verb form. In NLP terms, a nominalisation is often identified as a thing that you could not put into a wheelbarrow, e.g. love, empowerment.
Paradox	A contradiction between interconnected propositions or concepts that still holds true.
Reframing	Transforming the meaning of something by putting it into a different framework or context than it has previously been perceived.
TOTE	Test-operate-test-exit, a simple algorithm for outcome focused 'problem solving'. A person with a goal will check/test (usually unconsciously) if they have achieved the outcome. If not, they take action (operate) and then test again. If they still do not have the outcome, they act again, until the test matches the outcome then they can exit the feedback loop.
Trialectic	A philosophical model of logic that shifts outside or beyond a polarity for example by reframing.

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