

# Paradoxical Thinking

## How to Profit from Your Contradictions

PARADOXICAL THINKING  
JERRY FLETCHER AND KELLE OLWYLER

EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY  
LDRS 591 ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR  
AND DEVELOPMENT

### A Brief Summary

Fletcher, Jerry & Olwyler, Kelle (1997). *Paradoxical Thinking*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

#### Inside this issue:

A Brief Summary	1
What is Paradoxical Thinking	1
The Five Step Process	2
Step 1 - Finding Your Core Personal Paradox	3
Step 2 - Perception Shifting	4
Perception Shifting Continued	5
Step 3 - Defining Your Problem Situation and Setting Your Goal	6
Step 4 - Rating Yourself On Fletcher's Pendulum	7
Step 5 - Choosing Action Steps to Improve Your Self-Ratings	8
Paradoxical Thinking With Groups	9
In Conclusion	9

In Fletcher and Olwyler's book, Paradoxical Thinking, they present a method of using personal contradictory characteristics to achieve outstanding personal performance. They claim that the reader will be able to prepare him or herself for daunting, difficult situations by learning the paradoxical thinking process and applying it when faced with new challenges. By acting in paradoxical ways and focusing on the positive aspect of contradictory personal qualities, you can find a creative answer to seemingly impossible situations, both at work and at home. The book is broken into two main sections: in the first half the authors explain the five step process of paradoxical thinking and in the second half they present various cases where the use of paradoxical thinking has been a success. Throughout the first half of the book the authors apply the process to two particular people and their current problem situations. They also ask the reader to apply each part of the process to themselves so that they fully understand and internalize the steps.



### What is Paradoxical Thinking?



Paradoxical thinking is a process in which you identify and define contrasting personal characteristics in order to bring about their positive aspects. By following their steps and guidelines you will be able to apply the positive aspect of your personal characteristics to make more positive choices that lead to successful outcomes. "Paradox ....involves contradictory, mutually exclusive elements that are present and operate equally at the same time." We all have contradictory characteristics, the key is to find ways that our core characteristics compliment one another and use them to improve our performance in challenging situations.



## Paradoxical Thinking

---

Personal paradoxes can be used to explain successes by athletes, executive business leaders or company CEO's, political leaders, educational administrators, etc. Fletcher and Olwyler share examples in the first chapter of their book proving that people who use their contradictory characteristics can bring about positive leadership and success.

**“Sprinters actually run faster if they can remain relaxed while sprinting... sprinters need to develop an ability to simultaneously engage the exact opposite quality of what their sport seems to demand: calmness and relaxation.”**

The sprinter cannot have a balance between the two states of relaxation and muscle engagement, but must work as hard as they can at the same time as maintaining relaxation in their muscles and mind.



**“Charming and capable of huge fits of anger, humble and arrogant, Bill Gates doesn't make any pretense of being “consistent” in any narrow sense of that word.”**

**“...particular paradoxes and apparent contradictions are *responsible* for the success of certain people. Bill Clinton – boldness and cowardice, sincerity and calculation, loyalty and infidelity.”**

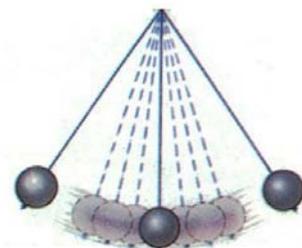
## The Five Step Process

---

### The Five Step Process:

1. Finding Your Core Personal Paradox
2. Perception Shifting
3. Defining Your Problem Situation and Setting Your Goal
4. Rating Yourself on Fletcher's Pendulum
5. Choosing Action Steps to Improve Your Self-Ratings

Fletcher and Olwyler explain each step of the Five Step process in a separate chapter through using two individual examples and by having the reader apply the process to themselves as they follow along.

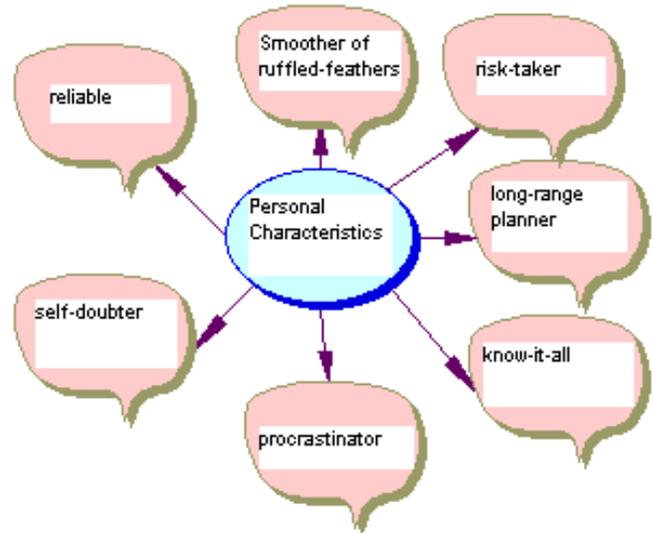


## Step 1 – Finding Your Core Personal Paradox

The first step of the Five Step process involves looking within yourself to identify your own qualities and characteristics. This step is broken down into three parts:

### 1a. List your personal qualities and characteristics

- list as many qualities/characteristics that you can think of that are both positive and negative (minimum 20)
- try to word the characteristic as best as you can (ex. long-range planner)
- mark each characteristic as to whether you would consider it to be a positive quality or a negative quality



“Using an oxymoron to label your own paradoxical qualities can be very helpful in that it “personifies” the inherent conflict or tension between the two sides of your core personal paradox.”

### 1b. Combine these personal qualities and characteristics into paradoxical pairs and oxymorons

- these usually consist of one positive and one negative word which are underlying opposites
- it is easiest to think of an oxymoron as a combination of an adjective and a noun that describes yourself, for example: “silken sergeant” or “gentle warrior”
- examples of created oxymorons: Assertive Doormat  
Hesitant Risktaker  
Insecure Tower-of-Strength  
Lazy Do-It-All  
Competent Self-Doubter



### 1c. Select one combination that describes a central conflict or tension you struggle with

- choose an oxymoron from your list that describes a core conflict or tension that you are currently dealing with
- during this self-analysis you may come up with a more accurate oxymoron that encompasses your inner conflict, in which case you would change it

### Tips for Selecting a Core Personal Paradox and Creating an Oxymoron:

- invent words or phrases
- use animal names
- look for obvious opposite words
- elaborate or exaggerate words
- think metaphorically
- use historical, fictitious or famous people
- pick opposites that are “uncomfortably true”

## Step 2 – Perception Shifting

Step 2 of the Five Step process has six parts which make you look more closely at the oxymoron that you have chosen. Perception Shifting asks you to analyze the qualities you have in order to discover the positive aspects of them. You will most likely have one side of your personal oxymoron that you prefer. For example, if you chose Hesitant Risktaker as your oxymoron you may be more comfortable with the quality of being a risktaker than of being a hesitant individual.

The six steps to part 2 are:

2a. List positives of preferred side

2b. List negatives of preferred side

2c. List negatives of disliked side

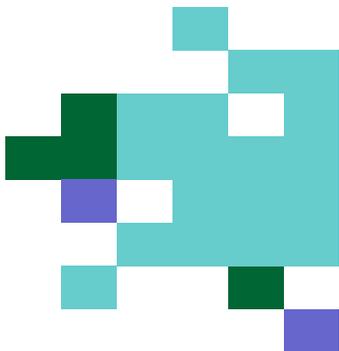
2d. List positives of disliked side

- list as many positives and negatives as you can for each side of your oxymoron
- for example:

Energetic (Positives):	Fun Doer Lively Intense Passionate Enthusiastic Enterprising	Energetic (Negatives):	Overwhelming Energy drain to deal with Insensitive Steamroller Energy-sucker Frenetic Forceful
------------------------	--	------------------------	--

Wimp (Negatives):	Ineffectual Doormat Fearful Passive Coward Worried Weak	Wimp (Positives):	Soft Gentle Careful Moderate Noncombative Unthreatening Doesn't take sides
-------------------	---	-------------------	--

- it is often difficult to think of an extreme positive for your disliked side because you have probably given it a negative connotation which is hard to break



**“If you believe a human quality or behavior is good, you will have the tendency to see only goodness when that behavior is encountered. Similarly, if you believe something about you is bad, you will be hard pressed to find anything positive about it.”**

## Perception Shifting Continued

### 2e. Choose a High Performance Oxymoron

- your High Performance Oxymoron is your most effective state, it is when you use both sides of your contradictory nature simultaneously in the best possible way
- for an example we'll use the oxymoron Self-Doubting Over-Achiever:
  - as a Self-Doubter the most effective state is when you are Thoroughly Prepared
  - as an Over-Achiever the most effective state is when you are an Expectation-Exceeder
  - this would make the High Performance Oxymoron a Thoroughly Prepared Expectation-Exceeder

### 2f. Choose a Nightmare Oxymoron

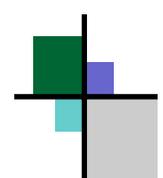
- to create a Nightmare Oxymoron you follow the same theory behind the High Performance Oxymoron except this time you use the worst case scenario for each characteristic
- the Nightmare Oxymoron for the Self-Doubting Over-Achiever would be:
  - as a Self-Doubter the most negative state would be the feelings of Hopelessness
  - as an Overachiever the most negative state would be behaving as a Wheel-spinner
  - this would make the Nightmare Oxymoron a Hopeless Wheelspinner

**“Find the Extremes  
Not the Opposites”**

### Perception Shifting Model

**“Test for Personal  
Truth”**

	High Performance Oxymoron																							
Positive	<table border="0" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; width: 50%;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; width: 50%;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> </table>																							
Characteristics	<table border="0" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; width: 50%;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; width: 50%;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> </table>																							
	+	+																						
	-	-																						
Negative	<table border="0" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; width: 50%;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; width: 50%;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> </table>																							
Characteristics	<table border="0" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; width: 50%;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; width: 50%;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td><td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td></tr> </table>																							
	-	-																						
	-	-																						
	Nightmare Oxymoron																							



**Many people notice that they have been allowing their negative side to work against them instead of learning how to use it in a creative or positive way.**

## Step 3 — Defining Your Problem Situation and Setting Your Goal

This step allows you to accurately define your personal problem so that paradoxical thinking will work to achieve the goal you set out to accomplish.

This step has four parts:

### 3a. Describe your unsatisfactory choices

- the authors found that paradoxical thinking can be applied to any type of problem but that it is most effective in situations when there seems to be no positive outcome to your dilemma
- in other words you are stuck choosing between the “lesser of two evils”
- list all possible choices, especially those with negative outcomes



### 3b. Explain the situation's effect on you

- describe these in personal terms

### 3c. Assess your past efforts

- by thinking about past efforts you eliminate the possibility of repeating the same unsuccessful actions

### 3d. Write a goal statement with a deadline

- complete the following sentence to write your goal statement:

***“I’m going to find a way to ... (changing something to the better) ... by ... (date) ... from ... (the current situation) ... to ... (whatever the goal statement is) ...”***

“In general, a careful review of what has been tried often uncovers a variety of options that haven’t been considered and a preponderance of effort skewed toward a certain outcome.”

“Many times when we start this process, we find people still cling to their beliefs that what they did *should* have worked. It takes repeated reminders that it *didn’t* work before they are willing to look at doing something very different.”

## Step 4 – Rating Yourself on Fletcher’s Pendulum

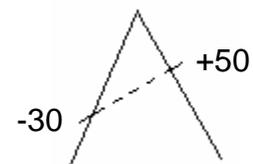
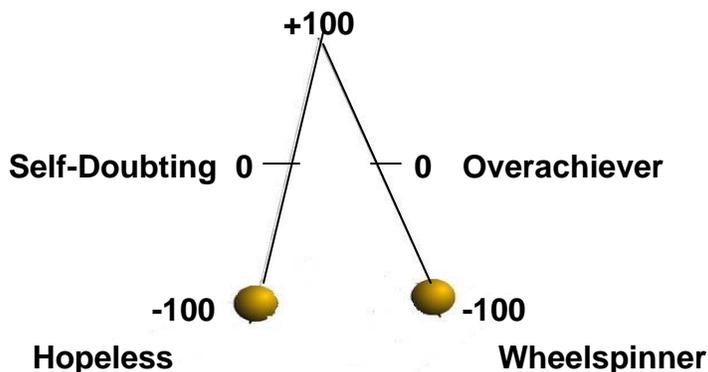
Fletcher’s Pendulum is a tool that is used to track the positive and negative expressions of core personal paradoxes. It allows you to create a visual picture to portray where you have been expressing your two paradoxical characteristics. By making a visual diagram of how you have been behaving, you will be able to see where your behavior needs to be changed in order to create more positive outcomes.

To draw your diagram, you place the High Performance Oxymoron at the top of a pendulum and the Nightmare Oxymoron at the bottom. At the midpoint of each line are your two contradictory characteristics from your original oxymoron. The pendulum is used to represent the swinging of an individual’s personality traits as they go from one side of their core personal paradox to the other; this occurs when they are caught in a problem that doesn’t seem to have a resolution. When you are caught in this swing you are in your Nightmare Oxymoron, going from one extreme of your negative characteristic to the other. As you express each side in a more positive, mature and constructive manner the swinging diminishes. Or in other words, as you move up the pendulum the swinging gets smaller and smaller.

The four parts to this step are:

- 4a. Set up you own personal pendulum
- 4b. Place your goal at the top
- 4c. Define the expression of each side
- 4d. Rate your current actions with respect to your goal
  - analyze how you have been expressing each side of your own personal pendulum
  - this allows you to see which side needs to be “brought-up” or expressed more positively to help you reach your goal

### Thoroughly Prepared Expectation-Exceeder



For this person, in their particular problem situation, they may feel that they are expressing their Self-Doubting side at  $-30$  and their Overachiever side at  $+50$ . If this were the case, the person would draw a diagonal line across their pendulum to graphically show the way they have been behaving. Once you have drawn your own pendulum and rated yourself accordingly, you are ready for the final step in the Five step process.

**The authors found that people who rated themselves highly on one side and low on the other felt frustration. When the self-ratings are low on both sides people swing back and forth between the feelings of anger and helplessness.**

## Step 5 – Choosing Action Steps to Improve Your Self-Ratings

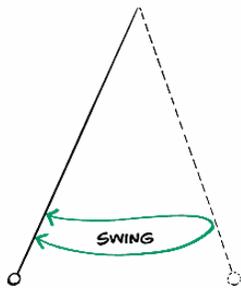
In this final step you are looking for ways to raise both sides of your oxymoron in order to express them in more positive terms. You want to express the most positive aspects in order to produce a high performance outcome.

This step has two parts:

5a. List action steps you will take to raise your self-ratings of your lower side

- by starting with the lower side you can bring up the line across your pendulum to try to make the two sides equal, then you can try to bring them both up together

5b. List action steps you will take to raise your self-ratings of your higher side



“Work to raise your own self-ratings to +100 each. The closer to +100 each side is, the more effective you are.”

“When you are caught in this painful swing between the two sides of your contradictory nature, it is imperative to understand the dynamics of such a swing. Choose actions that will raise your ratings and move you upward on the pendulum and into the mature expression of your contradictory nature.”

“What side of yourself do you need to activate more strongly to create a high performance outcome?”



### Tips for Choosing Action Steps:

- brainstorm with another person – this is especially helpful when you are in the middle of a problem and are having a hard time seeing any positive actions that could be taken
- look at both sides of your dilemma
- express the positive aspect of both sides at work and at home
- strive to have both sides exist simultaneously, without compromise

## Paradoxical Thinking with Groups



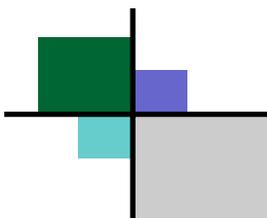
In the second part of their book, Fletcher and Olwyler illustrate individual examples of the application of paradoxical thinking. They apply the five step process to individual cases across a variety of professional and personal problems. This portrays to the reader the effectiveness of their process, no matter what the context or level of problem one might be faced with. The authors also apply their process to a few group situations. The five steps are theoretically the same; however, the group completes each part as a cohesive unit. They analyze their characteristics as a group, create oxymorons and the pendulum as if they are one being.

## In Conclusion: Student Perspective

Paradoxical Thinking is a useful resource for anyone dealing with a conflicting situation, particularly one in which there doesn't seem to be any possible positive outcome. The process that Fletcher and Olwyler present enables self-reflection that requires the reader to truly look within themselves and analyze their personal characteristics. We all have characteristics or qualities that we view in a negative light and it is often difficult to see the positive aspect of those characteristics. With the paradoxical thinking process your interpretation of your core personality is changed in order to view the positive aspect of your potential.



The theory behind paradoxical thinking makes sense, if we choose to express the most positive aspect of our core personal qualities, our relationships and decision making abilities will benefit. Fletcher and Olwyler have taken an evident aspect of human nature, contradictory characteristics, and stressed the importance of applying the positive sides of those characteristics. Any process which requires an in depth analysis of the way you act in a troubling situation, will lead to a more positive outcome. Fletcher's Pendulum is a useful tool for rating your personal attributes, it allows you to graphically represent your personal paradoxes to see how you have been expressing those characteristics.



**In conclusion, Paradoxical Thinking presents a useful strategy for problem solving that requires a thorough self-analysis to discover the most positive ways of expressing your personal characteristics.**