Dialectical Constructivism

Idea In Short

Managers hear opposing demands all day: move fast and be careful, centralize and empower, protect the core and explore the new. A common response is to pick a side or to split the difference. Dialectical thinking offers a third response. It treats a thesis and its antithesis as partners in a process that can produce a synthesis, an idea richer than either starting point. Constructivism adds that people build such syntheses actively, through dialogue and experience. This article explains the approach, draws on research about paradox in management, and offers a practical method for turning opposing truths into workable new designs.

A software firm argues about its roadmap. The product team wants a stable platform that customers can rely on. The innovation team wants rapid experiments that may break things. Each side has data and a story about the firm's future. A vote would leave half the company unhappy, and a compromise would give both teams a weak version of what they want.

From opposition to synthesis

The dialectical tradition, running back to Hegel, describes thought as moving from a thesis to its antithesis and then to a synthesis, which in turn becomes a new thesis. Management scholars have borrowed the pattern to explain how organizations deal with contradictions.

A paper by Miguel Pina e Cunha, Joao Vieira da Cunha, and Stewart Clegg opens with a claim that fits daily experience: increasingly, managers live in a world of paradox, and a synthesis is required between contradictory forces such as efficiency and effectiveness, planning and action, and structure and freedom.1

The word synthesis is key. It means a new arrangement that holds what is true in each side. It is different from picking a winner, and it differs from the splitting that leaves everyone dissatisfied.

Three ways of handling tension

Researchers describe three common responses. A review of organizational paradox in the journal Systems lists them as dilemma, dialectic, and paradox. In the dilemma approach, the decision-maker weighs pros and cons and makes a definitive selection, while the dialectic approach follows the Hegelian pattern in which a thesis and an antithesis evolve into a synthesis.2

The same review frames social paradox not as a logical contradiction but as a form of tension between incompatible positions and tendencies. It adds that what linear thinking treats as marginal or harmful becomes, in complex thinking, a source of value for the organization.

For managers, the first step is to name which kind of situation you are in. A true dilemma, such as a choice between two job candidates, calls for a decision. A persistent tension, such as speed and quality, calls for ongoing balance or synthesis.

Constructing the synthesis

Constructivism holds that knowledge is built by people, not delivered to them. In practice, a synthesis is built in conversation among those who hold the opposing views. Nobody can hand it down from above and expect it to be owned.

The working paper by Pina e Cunha and colleagues proposes a dialectical view of strategy and organizations built from four principles: simultaneity, locality, minimality, and generality. A catalog record of the paper describes these as the tools for achieving the synthesis.3

Simultaneity means holding both sides at once, not alternating between them. Locality suggests looking for ways to serve both in particular places or moments. Minimality favors small moves over sweeping ones, and generality asks whether a local solution can inform wider practice.

A method for teams

Start by stating each side in its strongest form. Each camp writes the case that its opponents would accept as fair. The exercise lowers defensiveness, since each side sees its view

treated with respect.

Next, find the truth in each position. Ask what each side protects. The product team protects trust and reliability, and the innovation team protects learning and growth. Both are real needs of the firm.

Then design for both. Ask, "What arrangement would serve reliability and learning at once?" The software firm might create a stable core platform with a sandbox for experiments and clear rules for promoting successful trials into the core. The synthesis keeps the benefits of each approach and reduces their costs.

Test and revise

A synthesis is a hypothesis. Run it as a pilot, and define what success looks like for each side. Review the results with both camps together.

Expect new tensions. Writers on paradox logics note that a synthesis can create a new polarity at its own level, and hence a new paradox. The point is not a flaw. It reminds teams that the work continues.

Scholars who study dialectics in management stress the central role of transcendence, in which oppositions are carried into a fuller or more adequate mode of thought.4

Treat the process as ongoing. A summary of research on paradox management states that the capacity to engage with tensions is not about solving dilemmas once and for all but about persistent, interrelated challenges requiring ongoing, dynamic responses.5

Ambidexterity as a practical case

One well-known example is the effort to explore and exploit at once. The same research summary lists ambidexterity, the simultaneous pursuit of exploration and exploitation, among its core themes, alongside dialectical approaches that embrace dialogue and synthesis. It reports that firms across industries use paradoxical thinking to navigate digital transformation, mergers, sustainability commitments, and rapid growth.

The pattern appears in many forms. A retailer balances low prices and high service by

redesigning its supply chain. A bank balances control and speed through automated checks. In each case, leaders did not choose one value and drop the other.

When you face a standing tension, ask whether a design exists that treats both values as requirements and not as trade-offs. Often the answer is a redesign of the process.

Role of leaders

Leaders shape whether dialectical work is possible. If they punish disagreement, the opposing view never reaches the table. If they decide too early, the synthesis never forms.

Create space for productive conflict. Set ground rules that separate people from positions, and give each side time to speak. Ask questions that invite both-and thinking, such as "What would have to be true for both of these to work?"

Also protect the process from endless debate. Set a time frame for design and a date to decide. The aim is a better option, delivered in time to matter.

Dialogue habits that support synthesis

Dialogue is the workshop in which a synthesis is built. Practice listening for the need behind a position. "We must freeze the platform" may mean "we cannot afford another outage before the audit." Once the need is clear, options multiply.

Use questions that open the space. "What are we trying to protect?" and "What would a good result look like for you?" move people from defending to designing. Write the answers where everyone can see them, and refer to them as the design develops.

Capture agreements and open points in plain language, and share them after each session. People who see their concerns recorded are more willing to stay in the process, and the record guards against later claims that a concern was ignored.

A hypothetical example

Imagine a hypothetical regional airline in which the operations team wants tight schedules for punctuality, while the crew team wants buffers for fatigue and safety. Each side has

strong arguments, and negotiations have stalled.

A facilitator has each side state the other's case. They discover that delays arise mostly from a few tight turnarounds, and fatigue arises mostly on late rotations. The synthesis adds buffers only at those points and uses spare crews on late rotations. On-time arrival improves, and fatigue reports fall. The case is invented, but it shows how finding the truth in each side can produce a design that serves both.

Cautions

Do not use synthesis to avoid hard choices. Some conflicts are about facts or ethics, and a blended answer may serve neither truth nor justice. Test whether the opposing views both hold something real.

Avoid forcing a synthesis where one side lacks a legitimate claim. Treating a harmful demand as equal to a reasonable one is not wisdom.

Finally, watch for pseudo-synthesis, in which a vague slogan covers an unresolved fight. A real synthesis shows up in specific changes to processes, roles, or rules.

- 1Management: thesis, antithesis, synthesis
- 2Complexity and paradox in organizations
- 3Management: thesis, antithesis, synthesis, catalog record
- 4Dialectics in organization studies
- 5Paradox management in organizational change

Summary

Dialectical constructivism helps leaders handle opposing truths by building a synthesis through dialogue, and not choosing a winner or settling for a weak compromise. Research on management paradox describes contradictory forces such as efficiency and effectiveness, planning and action, and structure and freedom, and it suggests that persistent tensions call for ongoing responses. Leaders can state each side fairly, find the truth in each, design a new option that serves both purposes, and test it. A synthesis creates

new tensions in turn. Pick one standing conflict in your team, write the best case for each side, and draft a design that keeps what each side values most.