



Paradoxes of Leadership

Reflections from twenty years of managing
a highly participative company

Charles R. Edmunson

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with support from Loren Rodgers

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**This book is dedicated to
the employee-owners of Web Industries
and
my wife, Janet.**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charles Edmunson is that rare combination—a hands-on leader and a visionary. He is intimately familiar with the inner workings of both a slitting machine and the human spirit.

Until his retirement at age 49, he was the Vice President for Manufacturing at Web Industries. Web is a medium-sized employee-owned company headquartered in Westborough, Massachusetts, which provides slitting services to a range of corporate clients.

At Web, Charles started as packer while in graduate school at Boston University, where he was working on a Ph.D. in Philosophy. Having lost his enthusiasm for a career in philosophy, Charles dedicated himself to working full-time at Web, where he could promote the people- and values-centered vision of Robert Fulton, the company founder.

Charles moved up to machine operator, and later department supervisor, in the Web Converting plant in Framingham, Massachusetts. When the opportunity came to open a plant in Atlanta, Charles moved there to serve as sales manager. Charles was soon promoted to plant manager, and then general manager. It was during these eight years as the senior manager of the Atlanta plant that Charles developed and tested many of the ideas in this book. During his last years in Atlanta, Charles completed his Executive MBA at Georgia State University.

In 1990, Charles was promoted to Web Industries' corporate offices in Westborough as a vice president. While he continued to practice his style of management in Westborough, he also expanded his influence to the ESOP community of New England by helping to found the New England Chapter of The ESOP Association. The ESOP Association is a non-profit organization of companies with employee stock ownership plans (ESOPs).

Charles was elected president of the New England Chapter and guided that chapter to a high level of activity, serving as a model for other chapters. Charles was awarded the Outstanding Chapter Officer of the Year in 1995. His service to the

national ESOP Association is also extensive, serving on two Strategic Plan Committees, the Strategic Monitoring Committee and the Board of Directors. Charles co-facilitated the meetings which resulted in the Strategic Plan and the Vision of the ESOP Association. The ESOP Foundation created a scholarship for outstanding employee-owners in honor of Charles: the Charles R. Edmunson Scholarship. Charles has spoken at events across the United States and abroad, including Hungary and China, engaging leaders everywhere in his people-centered approach to management.

Prior to his academic work in philosophy and his career at Web, Charles was a Minister in the Church of Christ in Jackson, Mississippi. Even though now an agnostic, this unique blend of spirituality and business has permeated his approach to management.

Starting in May, 1995, Charles developed a rare degenerative neurological disease that was later diagnosed as PSP (progressive supranuclear palsy). Over four years, the disease has gradually taken away his ability to walk, read, talk, care for himself, and write. He currently lives in Framingham, Massachusetts, with his wife, Janet.

Charles' mission reads:

*I will make a significant difference in the world by bringing grace with integrity into the lives of others. Therefore, through a disciplined focus, I will apply my life to creating **peace** for people who are in turmoil, **healing** for those who are wounded, **hope** for those in despair, and **purpose** for those who are drifting.*

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When one takes a wedding vow "in sickness and in health," one is usually young and healthy. How many of us are tested on this vow, which may be easily spoken, but also easily forgotten? Janet has been tested. She is an extraordinary person who demonstrates that one human can help another reach a dream, even in the face of overwhelming difficulty. For me, this book was a dream which Janet has made possible in countless ways.

Janet: please know that sometimes my disease is stronger than I am, and sometimes it speaks through my mouth. The disease has taken my ability to tell you, and sometimes even my ability to remember, how much I love you. It has not taken my love.

PREFACE

I love the title of this work. Titles are always important to me, because a title serves as the ultimate summary of whatever is said between the covers of a book. It's the triggering mechanism to help me recall what the work was about, what I derived from it, why it was something important for me to remember. In my reader's opinion, writers generally don't give enough thought to entitling their work. But Charles Edmunson has given his words careful consideration, and the title is perfect. In fact, the more I contemplated *Paradoxes of Leadership*, the more I felt drawn to the title and its implications. Let me describe to you why this title is so powerful, and why the work is, indeed, something important to remember.

First of all, *Paradoxes* is intriguing because it reflects a reality that most leaders have experienced, the existence of those happenings which seem to absolutely contradict our common sense views of things. Let's face it: we're all drawn to those little tidbits that challenge the way that we perceive everyday reality. Out of our own experiences, or from the news, or even focused there on the cover of supermarket tabloids, we are at least curious to secretly test what we think we know. Tales of impossible survival. Scientific discovery. Aliens. Human behaviors. Like optical illusions, they tease our senses and stretch our imaginations to consider whether maybe there is another way to see the world. *Paradoxes* provides all of that intrigue by examining many of the "common sense" viewpoints about leadership that most of us have come to embrace during our worklives. For instance, how many of us would readily recognize the concept of strength through vulnerability, the subject of Charles' third paradox?

This work is powerful because it is real-life. Whether from the experiences of Charles himself, well-known leaders of history or ordinary people like you and me, *Paradoxes* is made up of the issues and questions that many of us face every day. I'm curious to know whether the contradictions and conundrums that I face are the same ones with which others struggle. I do sometimes doubt myself, the characteristic which Charles addresses in his fourth paradox. Yet somehow I seem to be comforted when I know that the issues I grapple with personally are similar to those experienced by other

leaders. Like most competitive people, I find a certain satisfaction in recognizing that perhaps I have successfully dealt with an issue that tends to plague others. Also, like most business teachers/preachers I know, I am excited to gain any new insights that provide me with perspective to help others learn truths.

A second reason for the importance of this book is that it is immensely inclusive. Written works often pertain to a relatively small subset of the population, esoteric ideas that fit only a few. Yet most of us assume leadership roles somewhere in our lives, even if limited to, say, our families or immediate group of friends. The perspectives presented here are for anyone, everyone. Inclusiveness on this scale ensures that every one of us is “reading from the same page,” and thus capable of identifying with each and every other reader. I think that there are few works that can make such a claim of potential connectivity.

Whenever a tool with such potential breadth of impact emerges, it is worth noting. It helps us to better recognize the struggles we have in common, as well as common solutions that may exist. It helps us to know that there are far more elements in life that make us similar than those which make us different. *Paradoxes* helps us to recognize the humanness of our leadership selves in relation to others who are traveling in the same direction. The paradoxes of leadership are universal, whether encountered within the demanding environment of my workplace or the (presumably) more relaxed activity of coaching my children’s soccer teams. There is application here to an extremely wide range of my life activities. I like teachings that are so broad as to be used and reinforced throughout my day and week, and that could apply to anyone else I might meet along the way. I am validated in realizing that sometimes I, like so many others, have to get it all wrong before I can get it right, the focus of paradox thirteen.

My third reason for admiring these thoughts and experiences is that this entire work constitutes several paradoxes itself. In addition to the ironies and seeming contradictions contained in the words themselves, the structure, content and history of this book all combine to create an extraordinarily moving and paradoxical story of its own.

At less than one hundred pages in length, *Paradoxes* may be one of the shortest books I have ever read on the massive subject of leadership. Yet the pages contain more introspective instruction and depth than volumes ten times as large. Perhaps Charles has practiced what he preaches in paradox six, where he suggests that less really is more. But that which has been left unsaid has definitely not been ignored. Rather, the unstated has been left for each of us to complete. In the most subtle of ways, Charles has demonstrated his first paradox about having more influence in listening than in telling. I found myself responding out loud to Charles as I read *Paradoxes*, knowing that he would be listening to my self-instruction, of course.

This topic of leadership may be the most written about, dissected, analyzed, debated, studied subject in the whole of Western society. We discuss the leadership characteristics of people ranging from Jesus to Machiavelli, from Ghandi to MacArthur. In

the process, the true leadership traits of these historical figures sometimes become obscured by their other personality traits. The idea of what constitutes effective leadership can become clouded in the mixture. Leadership becomes a very complex issue as a result, as we “students” often resort to simply emulating the personalities and behaviors of these figures. Alternatively, *Paradoxes* drives us inward to seek our own leadership solutions based upon who we are.

Paradoxes helps to direct us. It does so, not by blueprinting or boilerplating, but by positing fourteen observations which we, in turn, must consider and internalize for ourselves. Essentially we become the historical figures under scrutiny as we try to identify our very own unique, leadership strengths. Charles has held out the possibility, the likelihood, that the secret to effective leadership lies within us if we will be introspective enough to discern it. Rather than an immensely complicated field, the topic of leadership in *Paradoxes* is reduced to personal proportions.

As a result of the above-mentioned qualities, the book serves as a learning tool that puts the real burden of teaching onto the student/reader. It seems an ingenious methodology to me, because it bears out another long-standing paradox of life which says that in order to truly learn a subject, I must teach it. Charles did not cite that one in his work, but it is clearly implied by the very approach he has taken to helping us in our learning quests.

Amidst all of these paradoxes within *Paradoxes*, there is one which is the most instructive and moving of all. It is the power of these words delivered by a man who cannot speak. After a lifetime of articulating his own inner beliefs about leadership, and demonstrating through his actions the truth of those beliefs, Charles Edmunson cannot speak now due to an illness that has no recognizable name, no respite and no cure. Charles is now immobilized, as well, the bonds of a wheelchair now restraining the energies of a man who ran for 1,400 days in a row until he was no longer able to rise from that chair. The sheer physical process of committing his values, philosophies and fervently-held beliefs to writing serves as an act of courage and leadership by itself. It is a rare circumstance, indeed, that this book can deliver learning from the author, from the reader and from the sheer presence of the volume itself, as a tangible evidence of the paradoxes of leadership. Ultimately, that is why I love the title and the importance of what it represents.

If *Paradoxes of Leadership* helps even one reader to understand, accept and improve leadership effectiveness, it will be a leadership lesson of the highest order, given from the perspective of a full life, and from the heart of Charles’ Final Paradox: A Full Life Is Achieved Not By Grasping, But By Giving. Charles has given us a gift for the new millennium, and beyond....

Stephen C. Sheppard

Northfield, Minnesota

November, 1998

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INTRODUCTION

*"It's a five o'clock world
when the whistle blows
no one owns a piece of my mind."*

—Allen Reynolds, 1965

from the song "Five O'Clock World," performed by The Vogues

In our corporate office, there is a smoking room where all the smokers go to get their cigarettes. The smokers tend to get close to one another, spending their lunches together and building their own culture, talking frankly about their own situations. The Coke machines are also there, and I'm addicted to Diet Coke. When I went to the vending machines one time, I overheard a woman saying "my self-esteem is being tortured in this job because I'm not using my potential."

I do not remember what she looked like. I do not remember her face or how her voice sounded. I would not recognize her in the smoking room today. But her phrase—"my self-esteem is being tortured"—echoes through my mind like the motto of a generation. Partly because I do not know her or the details of her situation, she has become almost an archetype to me.

Too many people are selling their lives away for a paycheck. This woman is one more example. There are people like her in the company where you work.



Why should a business leader care about the quality of work life? Some will say that the business of business is business. People are selling their lives for a paycheck, but maybe it is a fair deal. They choose to do it every day, after all. Even if employees are alienated from their work, the money they earn still lets them live the life they want to after working hours.

You should care about alienation in your work force for one simple bottom-line business reason: an alienated work force is a half-engaged work force.

Alienation can be “classic”—like someone repeatedly pounding a series of rivets. Alienation can also be more modern—someone who is mindlessly following invoicing procedures they know they could improve on. Alienation can also be more subtle: imagine someone who cares passionately about her job, but has no interest in how it fits into the company as a whole. Or someone who does good work, but cares about his job evaluations more than customer satisfaction.

These people are not using their full self at work. To some extent, they have all left their brains at the door, or at least part of their brains. Alienation is another way of saying that a person’s potential is being under-used. And your company cannot afford that anymore. Alienation is now too high a price to pay. It is what keeps you from getting more out of your human resources.

Alienation on the job is the relic of a previous time, a time when the only way to coordinate a large group of people in a single task was to fix each person’s role in the task and then fit the whole system together like a puzzle. Pieces could not change in the middle of the task, because one piece would no longer fit with the others. The strength of this system is that one cog does not need to know what is happening with another cog. They are independent. Changes in the market are processed at the top and dictated to the bottom. This rigid system worked like magic, coordinating people into rational organizations, efficiently producing the goods that fueled the American century, winning a world war and building a commercial empire.

Technology played a crucial role in building our modern world and our modern corporations, but no one interested in business should forget that one of the most important innovations of the last two centuries is not technical, but an “engineering” style of management. Theodore Levitt writes:

The real significance of the nineteenth century is not the Industrial Revolution, with its shift from animal to machine power, but the managerial revolution, with its shift from the craftsman’s functional independence to the manager’s rational routines.

The nineteenth-century principle of rational management was perfected in the twentieth century. Efficiency experts helped companies divide tasks into the smallest replicable units possible, then measured how quickly each person did his task. The goal was to eliminate the mental input of the worker into the job. Instead, a limited number of professionals and managers was charged with any responsibilities to design, create, innovate, and change.

These last paragraphs may feel out of date and irrelevant to you and your company. The images are of lumbering factories. Your organization may not share much at all with these factories of yore. The machines, if there are any, are newer, safer, quieter. The work day is shorter. Pay is higher. Your Information Technology (IT) may be top rate and actively used by all employees in their day-to-day work. The closest thing to

child labor is a college internship. The mindset of the Industrial Revolution may seem distant and irrelevant.

But the management style of the nineteenth century is with us still. When technology changed from steam-driven to electric and internal combustion motors in the 19th century, it took decades for people to adapt systems to exploit the new opportunities these machines created. Even architecture took decades to move from the multi-storied approach that could best use steam-driven motors to the assembly-line approach electricity allowed. In the 20th century, it has taken decades to use computers as more than fast adding machines. If architecture and machine function take decades to catch up to technology, imagine how difficult it is for attitudes to catch up to the new conditions.

Many managerial reflexes, reflexes that feel inherent and natural, are holdovers from the old revolution. The principles of nineteenth-century rational management are taught in the operations management classes at business schools, or they were until recently enough that they are hardwired into the structures of our companies. These principles live on, slightly modified but fundamentally unchanged, in the management culture of America.



There are more books on the massive changes in the business world than a single person can read. Here, I just want to focus on two of the features of the new business environment, which help frame the basic subject of this book.

1. *Information technology has grown up.* In previous decades the only way to coordinate a large number of people towards a single goal was to give them carefully designed and fixed roles. This is no longer true. Organizations can share information precisely and quickly enough to allow each employee to adjust her actions to the changing demands of the day. We have the ability to move beyond rigidly engineered structures.

2. *Globalization.* With the full maturity of an ever-increasing number of countries, and the blossoming of world trade, each individual producer is under mounting pressure to create the most value from each expense dollar. Companies from an ever-expanding number of countries are entering markets with low-price, high-quality products. So businesses are getting squeezed in two directions at the same time: more customer delight—quality, turnaround, customization—for fewer dollars.

Logically speaking, your company needs more revenue per dollar of expense. And that includes labor dollars.

Corporate America has tried downsizing. It has succeeded in some cases and failed in others. But downsizing is an inherently limited solution: eventually you run out of employees to remove from your payroll. The real solution is a company full of work-