



# FOCUS and the Power of Paradox

**TRANSEARCH**

YOUR WORLD PARTNER IN EXECUTIVE SEARCH

**John O. Burdett**



ORXESTRA® INC.

Orchestra® Inc., © 2021

# FOCUS and the Power of Paradox



John O. Burdett

***“Combine learning-based experience, leadership reach, the ability to ‘think slow’ and practical intelligence and you have a pretty good understanding of what ‘wisdom’ looks like in today’s business environment.”***

Central to our evolution as a species was the invention of the axe. Without it we would have amounted to just another forgotten hominid buried in the dust of extinction.<sup>1</sup> The modern-day version of the axe is language. Language creates imagery and imagery drives our behaviour. Of course, not every utterance has the capacity to orchestrate change. Not every word has the power to transform. And some of the words that do ... slide by without our realising their potential.



<sup>1</sup> There were eight other hominids (the family of humans) that we know of on the same evolutionary tree as *Homo sapiens*.





If you want to be the best, you have to learn from the best. Think of it as an essential step on “the path to mastery.” Over a legendary dinner, Melinda Gates managed to bring Bill and his then rival, Steve Jobs,<sup>2</sup> together. As their respective wives sat back, both men responded to Belinda’s request to write down the one word that best expressed why each was successful. Independently, and with no foreknowledge of the question, both wrote down the same word. It only has five letters. We use it in our speech every day. Like the stone axe it has the capacity to change our environment. But only if, when we pick it up, we know how to apply it. That word? “Focus.”<sup>3</sup>

“Focus” immediately conjures up the image of paying unrelenting and unabridged attention to a single, dominant goal. A magnifying glass focusing the sun’s energy on a single point would be an apt metaphor. Indeed, for a simple, everyday task that is invariably what focus means. It is no less accurate for an employee whose planning time-horizon is measured in days.

For someone in a leadership role, focus is dynamic. It’s recognising that even a small act can cast a long shadow. For those with a strategic mandate, focus has to address both the here and now *and* look to the horizon. It is about initiating action, but also ensuring that the way forward supports the culture the organization needs to create. Focus, for the business leader, thus, becomes a way to think and act that is: (1) rooted in wisdom; (2) shaped by purpose; and (3) immersed in a paradox.

## 1. Focus: Rooted in Wisdom

Faced with a problem or opportunity, the appropriate response is a conversation with one’s self along the following lines. “Is this truly important or is it merely a ‘crisis’ as seen through someone else’s blurred vision?” The ability to answer this central question effectively draws on: (i) experience; (ii) leadership reach; (iii) the capacity, when needed, to think slow; and (iv) a special (and often underestimated) kind of intelligence.

- i. Experience isn’t just what one does. It’s the ability to learn from that experience. It’s pushing to the edge, embracing challenge and assiduously working to avoid repeating the same, stagnating experience year after year. It’s continuously learning how to learn. It’s expanding one’s capacity to learn. It’s a passion to learn. It’s acting on the belief that leaders are readers. It’s taking time out for reflection. It’s the art – and it is an art – of asking great questions. It’s being wedded to the reality that anything less than 100% commitment isn’t a commitment.

---

2 In 1977, when they only had a dozen employees Apple defined its Marketing Philosophy. The second point was focus: “In order to do a good job of those things we decide to do, we must eliminate all of the unimportant opportunities.”

3 Shortly after returning to Apple in 1996, Jobs reduced the number of products available from sixty down to four.



- ii. Leadership reach is the ability to see the problem from different perspectives. Transforming diversity and inclusion from a policy into day-to-day action is a good example. It's also the case that few executives today ply their trade in one homogeneous organization culture. Leadership reach is being equipped with a tool bag of structures, processes, approaches, ideas and a way to act that can be adapted to the challenge (country, culture, context) at hand.

This is not to suggest that leadership reach is purely an individual characteristic. That said, the mere fact that a company is in a number of different countries doesn't make it a true multinational. Many organizations with operations around the world are, at best, multidomestic. Others, who view their international presence as borderless, nurture leadership reach as integral to their story.

- iii. "Be fast or be last" is more than a cliché. Today is the fastest things have ever been but the slowest they will ever be. And at the heart of moving fast? Learning, in critical moments, to think slow. It's knowing that the more frantic things get, the more "stillness" matters. This implies challenging the assumed way forward, moving beyond stereotypes, pushing bias to one side, purging the mind of unwanted distractions, early recognition of patterns and understanding that how a leader acts far outweighs anything they might say. Thinking slow also draws on "systems thinking" – the capacity to see how all of the parts of a problem or opportunity are linked/combined.<sup>4</sup>

Thinking slow means to step outside of the issue and see it through the eyes of: (1) those you are committed to create value for; and (2) as a non-involved observer would. That's how you push aside the extraneous and recognise what is truly important. That's how you see manipulation for what it is. That's how you overcome "decibel management" and start to mute those with an overly loud voice seeking to push their own agenda. In other words, focus means – at the right time and in the right way – saying "No!" The projects that you don't pursue are, arguably, of as much strategic significance as the ones that you do.

- iv. We can refer to the special intelligence involved in masterful focus as "business street smarts" – *knowing how to get stuff done*. It's a combination of know-how, explicit skills, intuition and an innate ability to read the landscape. In a corporate setting, I once heard someone who had this type of intelligence described as being "able to see around corners." And it's different to IQ. There are some very smart people who get lost when it comes to applying that knowledge. Common sense

---

4 A good example of thinking slow to be fast lies with Jeff Bezos. In the early days of Amazon, he was committed to making it possible for consumers to buy from Amazon with one click of a button. Told that it was extremely difficult to integrate the many steps that support the buy experience he, nevertheless, prevailed. Not by pushing harder but by a combination of: (1) convincing his engineers to move past established assumptions; and (2) systems thinking.



isn't that common! Innovation, for example, isn't simply competing on ideas. It's about how quickly and effectively you move from conception (ideas) to execution (value creation for the customer).<sup>5</sup> There is some evidence that this hands-on form of intelligence is a leading indicator of potential success as an entrepreneur. "Practical intelligence" is complemented by the rest of the intelligence suite: cognitive, interpersonal, intrapersonal and ecological. The latter being fully aware of the footprint we leave on the planet – something that indigenous peoples have retained but "highly developed" nations have sadly lost.

Combine learning-based experience, leadership reach, the ability to "think slow" and practical intelligence and you have a pretty good understanding of what "wisdom" looks like in today's business environment.

## 2. Focus: Shaped by Purpose

Purpose underscores *why* the business does what it does. A business without purpose is a ship without a reason to set sail. Purpose on its own, however, amounts to a "why" without the "how." The framework (behavioural container) that defines *the how* are the organization's values. Faced with a range of options, values determine what actions have primacy. They dispel confusion and build consistency. An organization's values aren't rules.<sup>6</sup> They give people – regardless of level or role – permission to act. If purpose establishes the reason to set sail, the organization's values act like a rudder – enabling the ship to maintain the right course. Focus must always be informed by both the organization's purpose and its values.

Most of the decisions made within an organization have little to do with the reporting relationships described by the organization chart. Indeed, if decision-making were limited to the formal structure<sup>7</sup> everything would, literally, come to a grinding stop within hours.<sup>8</sup> The real action takes place in the white space on the organization chart – conversation and decisions that lie largely within the domain of the informal organization. As a result, delivering what it means to be customer-centric – agility, responsiveness, synergy, teamwork, collaboration, a sense of community, and shared learning – draws, in full measure, on the organization's purpose and values. An often-

---

5 It can be argued that the organization itself – and especially its design – is the single most important factor in nurturing and delivering innovation.

6 The default response to the absence of values is "the rule book."

7 As Focused, Flat, Fast, Flexible and Fertile (to new ideas) become the anthem for the 21st century organization, the term "structure," in that it implies hierarchy, is no longer valid. A far more relevant term would be "performance platform."

8 Stalin was very impressed by the integrated business model that Henry Ford's Rouge Complex represented (1917). As a result, Stalin's first five-year plan in 1929 sought to build on the Ford model. Russia got the buildings and design of the assembly line right but never fully understood the workings of the informal organization in the US. Constantly missed targets, ongoing material shortages and systemic inefficiency were the result. Well into the latter part of the 20th century Russia still struggled with this lack of insight.





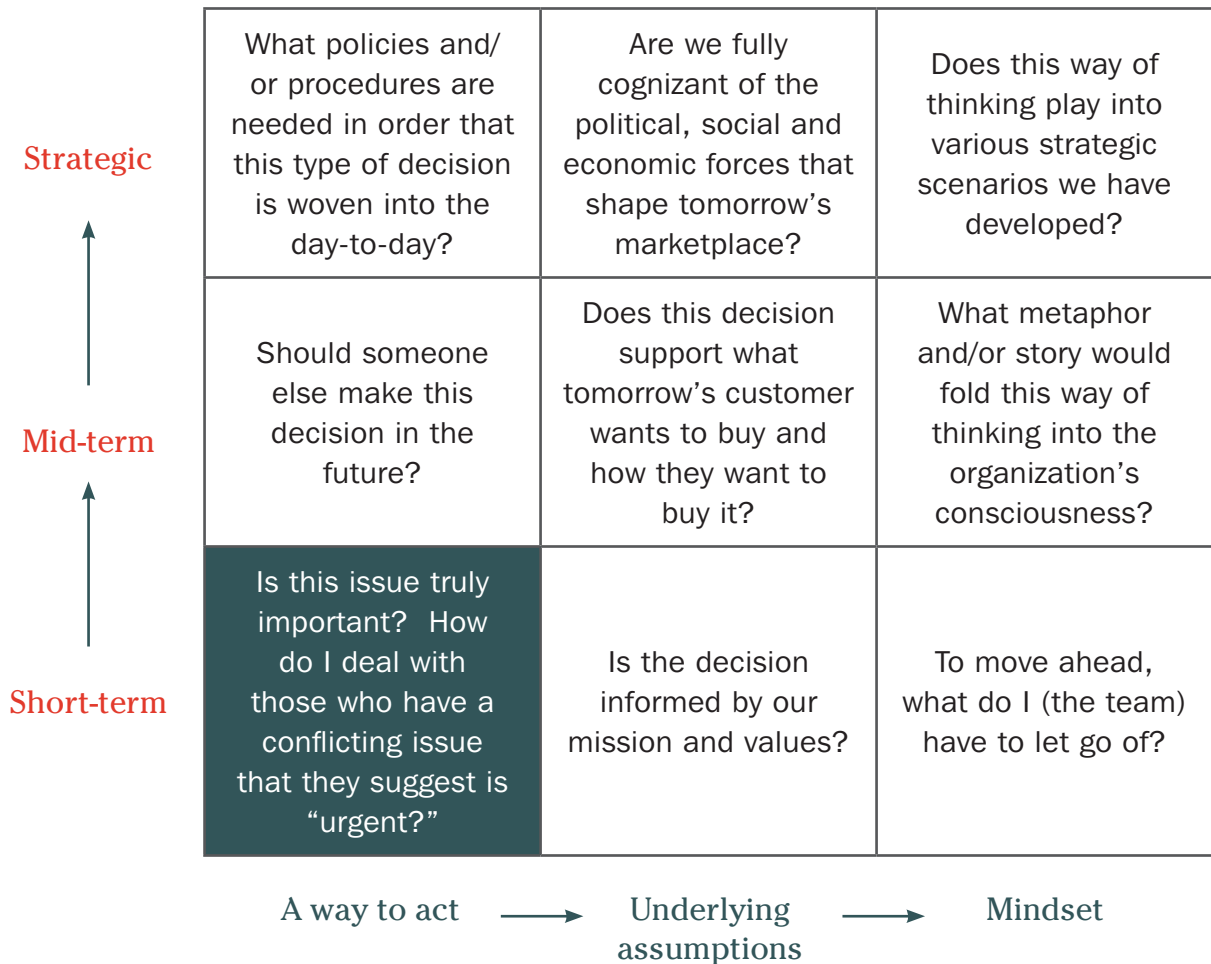
quoted proverb states, “It takes a village to raise a child.” The modern equivalent? “It takes a community to create a customer.”

### 3. Focus: Immersed in a Paradox

The dictionary defines a paradox as, “A situation or concept that, upon first examination, combines contradictory features or qualities.” Niels Bohr, the legendary Danish physicist (1885 – 1962), who made a fundamental contribution to both the atomic structure and quantum theory, was fond of saying, “A paradox, now we can move forward.” The following examples expand on the paradoxical nature of focus.

Figure one

### Focus: the Power of Paradox





- i. The sales executive who, while focusing on the immediate sale, recognises that success, ultimately, lies in building a long-term relationship with the buyer. Even if that means providing services (creating value), without payment, that the client doesn't necessarily, at the time, know that they need. In professional services, for example, it takes five times the investment to win a new client than it does to retain the client you have.
- ii. The coach who is fully cognizant of the need, early in the coaching relationship, to focus on behaviour that could potentially derail the coachee's performance in the short term, but who knows that those early conversations also set the scene for leadership development behaviours to emerge later.
- iii. The hiring executive who sees in the position being filled a way to solve a host of highly frustrating, short-term problems, but who also understands that "fit" with the emerging culture is the ultimate arbiter of hiring success.
- iv. The team leader who, while committed to focusing on the day-to-day problems, constantly brings the team back to why they are there. "How is what we are doing related to what tomorrow's customer wants to buy, and how they want to buy it?"
- v. The executive who knows that while making the numbers is an imperative, if that apparent success fails to serve the wider needs of the business (purpose, values) and the team, the feedback will focus not on the results, but be a candid conversation about the individual's immediate future.

There are clearly times when focus will be limited to one simple, short-term action. "Putting the garbage out." As the world gets faster, more complex and less stable, however, focus purposefully prompts the power of paradox (**See Figure one**).

- Embracing the context becomes at least as important as understanding the "content" of the problem/issue.
- Leadership agility necessitates that focus have an immediate, medium and strategic face.
- An assessment of "Is this issue truly important" has to be flexed against both the underlying assumptions and the mindset demanded.



## Conclusion

It is something of a revelation to realise how much has changed in the last decade. When we factor in the workplace transformation that COVID-19 has heralded in we are describing what amounts to a new way to think. In literally months, we have seen working practices introduced that, in the ordinary course of events, would have evolved over the best part of a decade. To even start to come to terms with the business and societal impact involved, we have to look back 100 years – to the introduction of the assembly line in 1913.

A crisis doesn't create leaders – but it does reveal the qualities, or otherwise, of those who are in power. Revisiting what it means to be customer-centric, drawing strength from adversity, maintaining a sense of optimism and empathy, asking great questions, listening in the way the team has always wanted to be listened to, resilience (not simply bouncing back but growing from the experience), thriving in a virtual environment and shoring up the value chain are the indicators of those who have successfully taken up the mantle of leadership in recent months.

**F**ast is what happens when you take the time to think slow

**O**rganize your time around what's truly important and not what, at the time, appears to be "urgent"

**C**ommitment that isn't total ... isn't a commitment

**U**nderstand how to: (1) build a winning team; and (2) mobilise your constituency

**S**et aside time for reflection

ORCHESTRA<sup>®</sup>INC





What have we learned in these past months? A crisis quickly separates leaders who rely on a head and hand approach from those who, as part of their natural leadership approach, also engage the heart and enrich the spirit. “Empathy,” for example, is no longer simply a word in the dictionary that comes after “emotive.” We know that trust is essential, that vulnerability opens the door to candour and that when the team only meets in virtual space psychological safety is a must.

The crisis has also highlighted that choice, as in “Do you want to work from home in the future?” is high on every employee’s agenda. It has become clearer than ever that uncertainty has a corrosive effect on even an outstanding team and that being able to clarify the end game as soon as possible pays dividends. We have learned that, like a major league batter (baseball), you don’t have to get your bat on every pitch or that every pitch you do hit doesn’t have to be a home run. Conversely, there are some pitches that you must make contact with!

Is there a theme that runs through the ongoing crisis management challenge? Is there a pattern that, upon reflection, we can pull from the strategic debris? That we can take into the future? That we can build on? That informs us about what it means to be a masterful leader? There are, no doubt, a number of lessons. There is one capability, however, that would appear to stand out. One leadership competency that separates the real leaders from those who, at best, merely talk a good game. And guess what? That brings us right back to our five-letter word: FOCUS.



## 10 WAYS TO IMPROVE FOCUS

1. Ensure that your strategy is limited to one (at a stretch two) pages. How to achieve that strategy is a support document.
2. Be it launching a new product, developing the customer base or introducing processes aimed at improving productivity – know that hope isn't a plan.
3. Set goals and review those goals as your first action of the day. That said, if at any one time you are chasing more critical objectives than there are digits on your right hand, you won't succeed.
4. Measure the important stuff – organization culture (today and tomorrow), team effectiveness, why your best people stay.
5. Hire people who are better than you. Work with an outstanding coach. Mastery isn't an outcome, it's an ongoing process. It's a journey, not a destination.
6. Ask for feedback regularly – especially from the customer.
7. Learn to be in the moment. Conversely, recognise that multitasking is the enemy of focus.
8. Develop a beginner's mind. The more mundane the topic, the more valuable curiosity becomes.
9. No matter what the event, activity or meeting – be the best listener in the room. Always!
10. Build in time for reflection. Without reflection there is no learning.

“Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication”

– Leonardo Da Vinci



John Burdett has worked in over 40 countries as an executive and as a consultant for businesses that are household names. He has consulted on and continues to support leadership development and organization culture for some of the world's largest corporations.

His ongoing partnership with the Bedford Consulting Group and TRANSEARCH International means that his proprietary work on talent acquisition, in any one year, successfully supports many hundreds of top leadership appointments on six continents.

He holds a doctorate in management development and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

Since 2000, John has published more than a dozen books (a number of them best-sellers) on various aspects of leadership and organization culture. His Talent Trilogy was completed in 2016. The first in the series, *Attract, Select, Develop & Retain TALENT*, was published in 2013. The second, *TEAM: Align, Build, Connect and Develop*, came out in early 2015. *The Empty Suit*, in 2016. *The A-Z of Organization Culture* came out in 2017. *Tomorrow Will Be Different – Will You?* was published in 2020. His five-book Covid series came out in January 2021. Download them from the TRANSEARCH International website.

A number of John's books can be downloaded. Go to any of the major, online bookstores. Access using author's name: John O. Burdett.



Not to be reproduced or copied in any form without the express permission of the author.