

# Leadership Dialectic

The Science of Understanding the Other Side

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**P**lato lived twenty-five hundred years ago, and yet many of his ideas are as useful today as they were then. For example, one of his more revolutionary teachings of the time was the concept that men and women should have the same opportunities in education, industry, and politics.

How revolutionary indeed considering that this is the first year (2008) in American history that a woman has a credible opportunity to be elected to the highest office in the land? Another of Plato's teachings dealt with opinion versus science, which is related to the idea of dialectic. He wrote that a person must ascend from opinion to science or else "he apprehends only a shadow [of reality], if anything at all, which is given by opinion, and not by science..." While this may not seem like a big revelation to us now, we must remember that this was written two thousand years before the Enlightenment! How much of what we do and say even today is still weighted heavily toward opinion?

**D**ialectic...  
*...an escalation of the mind from opinion and reaction to clarity and understanding.*

**S**cience is no stranger to industry. Leaders have long recognized the need to make more rational decisions that extend beyond subjective tastes and opinions. In terms of leadership, business managers utilize scientific tools to make better hiring decisions, aid in conflict resolution, and drive cultural alignment. However, Plato's notion of science extended beyond these mere tools. Plato taught leaders a discipline utilizing the faculties of the mind to make more objective, effective, and creative leadership decisions—especially as they related to the people they

led. This discipline, which is called dialectic, is an escalation of the mind's perception from opinion and reaction to clarity and understanding. Here is how it works:

## PRACTICING DIALECTIC

**T**o practice dialectic one must first hold in mind the authentic notion "I do not know the answer", and yet be truly intent upon finding it. One must also see his or her opinions for what they are--opinions. This may seem simple, but it is actually a very difficult concept. How often do we really consider our "world view" to be an opinion as opposed to "the truth"? The more strongly we feel about our own opinions, the greater the possible results from dialectic thinking. Once an opinion is clearly identified, one must explore deeply and become prepared to argue its exact opposite. At first this creates a difficult kind of tension, because the ego does not want to part with its cherished opinion. But it is through this process that creative inspiration and a more effective and objective outcome are realized. The tensions of the opposing arguments must be thoroughly explored in the mind. After a certain period of time (moments for some, days for others) one begins to have a greater understanding and clarity regarding the question. The outcome of this process can then be put to the test.

## A CASE STUDY

**W**hen first introduced to the concept of dialectic, a senior executive once queried, "Isn't this just about seeing both sides of an argument?" She later answered her own question by saying, "Yes, but I guess we look at the opposite side of our opinions from the lens of our own opinions". She continued, "How do you really ever understand the other side"? The answer is through dialectic. Let's consider a case study.

The CEO of a mid-sized software company came to see us for advisement regarding his team. Sales were waning and our client had observed that people didn't appear very motivated. At our first meeting I learned that he believed a certain sales employee was causing the problems, and was already making plans to terminate him. I asked him to consider holding off firing the employee for a week so that we could examine the issue further. He agreed and we began by practicing dialectic. I asked him to explore his own opinions regarding his decision to fire the employee. After some thought he related to me that his opinions were that a sales person "whom he didn't like from day one" was causing the problem; and that his second opinion was that firing him was the answer. I asked him why he didn't like this salesperson, and he replied that he's "one of those negative types who always complains about the products, who drags the world down with him". Here we identified yet a third and even more emotionally-toned opinion—that negative people are bad, and positive people are good.

We then applied the second part of the dialectic. I asked our CEO to consider the opposite side of his opinions, and to try and argue from that standpoint the next time we met. This would include examining the argument that negative people are good and positive people are bad; that this particular individual was not causing the problem but was in fact helping to solve the problem; and that the employee should not be fired, but promoted. He looked at me in amazement and decried what I was suggesting as being "preposterous—how could being positive be bad?" Here we have the attachment to self-esteem. Our CEO had a very positive demeanor and was taught early in his life that this was the "good" way. I replied that positive was not necessarily bad, but for the purpose of the exercise we were going to consider how negative could be good as well. Reluctantly he agreed to the challenge.

When we met the next week he related how difficult he had found the exercise to be. However, being a competitive person, he didn't give up. What he shared was truly amazing. Having been an exuberant people person most of his life, our CEO began to consider all of the so-called "negative" people he had known in the past. He recalled that most of these people had been very analytical and

had been in engineering roles, business analysis, or finance. He considered that while he hadn't liked many of these people, he did enjoy many of the products they produced. Following that realization he decided to re-interview the salesperson in question. He learned that most of the salesperson's questions were not just baseless complaining, but were actually very precise ideas born from customer contact that could actually improve the product.

The CEO ultimately decided to move the sales person into a job that interpreted customer feedback so that engineering could develop better software. The product was improved, salespeople were again motivated, and sales increased. The former salesperson continued to complain about the product, but now it was part of his job. This was an example of a leader rising to a level of leadership Plato considered essential for growth.

Whether a leader utilizes dialectic as part of his individual thought process or to help facilitate more productive leadership discussions, it is indispensable for arriving at the most creative and effective outcomes. Truly objective decisions can only be made when the walls of our preconceived ideas are explored. Many of us have stumbled upon great inspirations and creative ideas in our life. Yet if we re-examine them, how often did they come after a blow to the ego or at a time when we found ourselves reconsidering our outlook on life? The process that Plato has given us is a way to more consciously evoke those conditions--a process that takes us out of our opinions and into greater clarity and understanding.

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