PARADOXICAL PRACTICES IN PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS: THE CASE OF A COMMERCIAL AND INDUSTRIAL ORGANIZATION[i]

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Abstract:

Public sector organizations are by nature complex multifunctional entities, attempting to reconcile partially conflicting objectives and considerations (Perrow, 1972). The advent of new public management (NPM) has only increased the number of paradoxes to be faced, since these new managerial requirements, focused on performance, efficiency and even profitability, were added to those, very present, linked to the essential principles of public action. In this study, we address the paradoxical nature of the daily work of proximity managers and identify strategies for managing the paradoxes they face. Our results confirmed two key points: 1) the presence of organizational paradoxes that affect the daily work of proximity managers; and 2) that proximity managers can respond to paradoxical tensions by applying different defensive and active approaches. They must then show a behavioral complexity that allows them to manage the paradoxes in order to take into account the multiplicity of tendencies that are expressed within the organization.

JEL: M12, J53, M54

Keywords: public organization, paradoxical, local framework

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[i] PRATIQUES PARADOXES DANS LES ORGANISATIONS PUBLIQUES : CAS D'UNE ORGANISATION A CARACTERE COMMERCIAL ET INDUSTRIEL

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Résumé :

Les organisations du secteur public sont par nature des entités multifonctionnelles complexes, qui tentent de concilier des objectifs et des considérations partiellement contradictoires (Perrow, 1972). L'avènement du new public management (NPM) n'a fait qu'augmenter le nombre de paradoxes à affronter, puisque ces nouvelles exigences managériales axées sur la performance, l'efficience voire la rentabilité, venaient se rajouter à celles, bien présentes, liées aux principes essentiels de l'action publique. Dans cette étude, nous abordons la nature paradoxale du travail quotidien des cadres de proximité et nous identifions les stratégies de gestion des paradoxes auxquels ils sont confrontés. Nos résultats ont permis de confirmer deux points essentiels : 1) la présence des paradoxes organisationnels qui se répercutent au niveau du travail quotidien des cadres de proximité; et 2) Ces derniers peuvent réagir aux tensions paradoxales en appliquant différentes défensives et actives. Ils doivent alors montrer une complexité comportementale leur permettant de gérer les paradoxes afin de prendre en compte la multiplicité des tendances qui s'expriment au sein de l'organisation.

Mots clés : organisation publique, paradoxe, cadre de proximité

1. Introduction

Public sector organizations are by nature complex multifunctional entities, attempting to reconcile partially conflicting objectives and considerations (Perrow, 1972). The advent of new public management (NPM) has only increased the number of paradoxes to be faced, since these new managerial requirements, focused on performance, efficiency and even profitability, were added to those, very present, linked to the essential principles of public action.

It is common for organizations to simultaneously deal with competing demands such as exploration versus exploitation (Smith & Tushman, 2005), stability versus change (Farjoun, 2010; Stoltzfus, Stohl, & Seibold, 2011) and collaboration versus control (Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003), paradoxes are now considered inevitable. Paradoxes then appear at the heart of managers' problems, as one of the central forms of management.

Little research has focused on the analysis of paradoxes in Moroccan public organizations. This research has regularly highlighted the different forms of paradoxes faced by public managers (Hood & Peters, 2004; Trosa, 2017). In addition to identifying the nature and forms of these managerial paradoxes and the factors that foster their emergence, our research work will be devoted to identifying the issues at stake in these paradoxes, the actors involved and the regulatory mechanisms for managing them.

Among these actors, proximity managers seem to be more exposed to paradoxical tensions. Their intermediate position means that they are forced to juggle an increasing number of incompatible demands. They are under constant pressure, leading to a

deterioration in their well-being at work (Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter, 2001; Truchot, 2004).

This article begins with a review of the literature on the different types of paradoxes and a synthesis of coping strategies to deal with paradoxical tensions. We then present our methodological approach before moving on to an analysis of our case to show how paradoxes are perceived and managed by proximity managers. We then summarize the active and defensive strategies used by them to cope with paradoxical tensions, each accompanied by detailed explanations. This chapter ends with a discussion and recommendations on the practical and theoretical implications.

2. Dialectics, Dilemmas and Paradoxes

The notions of dialectics, dilemmas and paradoxes have all been identified as central elements contributing to organizational change (Cameron and Quinn, 988; Ford and Backoff, 1988; Van de Ven and Poole, 1988). They enable us to apprehend and understand social phenomena and their structuring. However, these different concepts are often mobilized in a similar way in the literature that refers to them (Das and Teng, 2000). However, the conceptual distinctions between the terms are often ambiguous, giving the illusion of perfect substitutability between them.

The dilemma refers to an opposition between two options, each with advantages and disadvantages (McGrath, 1982). According to Ehnert (2009), dilemmas are characterized on the one hand by a situation where a choice must be made, and on the other hand, the choice must be made between competing alternatives with advantages and limitations. Whereas dialectic is a continuous process of resolving contradictory tensions through integration, in which A and B are contradictory (thesis and antithesis) are merged in a synthesis leading to a new thesis C which gives rise to an antithesis D (Smith and Lewis, 2011).

Watzlawick et al. (1972), define paradox as "*a contradiction that comes at the end of a correct deduction from consistent premises*". According to Cameron and Quinn (1988), paradox implies, indeed, the simultaneous presence of contradictory and mutually exclusive elements operating at the same time.

According to Talbot (2003), the organizational paradox is a lasting, even permanent contradiction between elements that apparently exclude each other but coexist in spite of everything. For Smith and Lewis (2011), the paradox is a set of contradictory elements that cohabit with each other and persist over time. These authors explain that paradoxes are made up of "*underlying tensions*", i.e. elements that seem logical individually but juxtaposed, they become contradictory and are part of an "*absurd logic*".

The paradox therefore refers to a situation in which the contradiction cannot be resolved by choosing one option over another. The solutions reject each other, leading to endless circular reasoning (Perret and Josserand, 2003).

We can see that dilemmas, dialectics and paradoxes overlap. According to Smith and Lewis (2011), a dilemma can be paradoxical when a time horizon is longer and the

choice between A and B becomes temporary. Contradictions reappear, suggesting their interrelation and persistence.

Similarly, dialectic is paradoxical when the contradictory and interdependent relationship between thesis and antithesis persists over time. The synthesis emphasizes the similarities between opposing elements, but by neglecting the valued differences, this integration is short-lived.

2.1 The proximity framework in the face of contradictions

Our study is more particularly oriented to the strategies or tactics of local executives in the face of contradictions. It is then essential to better understand the distinctive role of this actor in the management of paradoxes.

There is a multiplicity of managerial functions within organizations. Management activities are generally distributed vertically. While managers are generally concerned with the strategic steering of the organization, proximity managers are considered to be "*the final link between the hierarchy and operational staff*" (Autissier and Vandangeon-Derumez, 2007: 115). One of the particularities of the proximity manager's role is his or her focus on the short term. Mintzberg (2006: 126), for example, stresses that "*his role is more focused and his main concern is to ensure that work is done without interruption*".

According to Autissier and Vandangeon-Derumez (2007: 115), proximity managers also have a key role in driving change. The authors specify that this role "*depends in particular on the ability of front-line managers to appropriate and deploy change in their local environment*".

This intermediary position places the proximity framework at the heart of the tensions inherent in the management of organizations. All unresolved or unresolved management problems at higher levels fall to him as the last link in the managerial chain and subject him to numerous role conflicts.

Proximity managers are therefore at the heart of the paradoxes, in a context where downsizing and restructuring are becoming increasingly frequent. Their work tends to become more complicated. Because of their central position within the organization, they regularly face incompatible demands.

According to Letondal (1997: 211), the proximity manager is considered to be a "*shock absorber of contradictions and turbulence experienced*". He is a central player in organizations, very often able to take into account the paradoxical tensions that are exerted on the organization with a view to efficiency and performance.

In the case of the public sector, the context of public leadership is inherently paradoxical because public organizations are seen as hybrid organizations that, unlike private companies, must confront a paradoxical dual purpose. They have to reconcile the public service purpose and the value-for-money purpose, as the two are often antagonistic.

3. Reactions to Paradoxes

Paradox theory is a relevant perspective that allows us to understand the emergence and management of these paradoxes. When organizational actors address paradoxes, they consciously or unconsciously apply a number of paradoxical tactics.

3.1. Defensive reactions

Defensive reactions are behaviors, usually unconscious, that aim to escape the disruptive effects of paradoxical responses that provide short-term relief. They may enable actors to overcome paradoxical tensions but do not provide a new way of understanding or living with the paradox (Jarzabkowski, et al., 2013).

These defensive responses include separation (Poole and Van de Ven, 1989), selection and repression.

3.1.1 Separation tactics

Separation approaches are about accepting differences rather than seeking to homogenize practices.

Organizational actors may opt for the separation of opposites. This is a fundamental and generalized response in dealing with paradoxes, and there are several variants of it. The logic of separation then consists of providing an organizational model that separates functions, roles and responsibilities. This usually assumes that conflicting objectives can be rationally separated between actors in a hierarchy oriented towards common overall objectives for the organization.

There are three separation tactics: in time (temporal), subjects (domain-specific) and space (spatial).

3.1.2 Temporal separation

Opposites can be separated temporally. This tactic is related to the idea that organizations need to prioritize and focus on selected elements, whereas they may, over time, return and take over other organizational needs.

Temporal separation consists of managing contradictions by treating each of the terms at different times, in an alternating manner. Choosing one pole of a tension at one moment and then changing it. This tactic assumes that the opposite poles of the paradox are expressed at different periods of time and that each pole can influence the other by its prior action.

3.1.3 Spatial separation or compartmentalization

When organizational actors are called upon to simultaneously engage opposites while spatially separating them into different units, we speak of spatial, structural, functional or organizational separation.

Spatial separation or "compartmentalization": consists in trying to resolve the contradiction by considering that each of the two terms of the contradiction concerns a

different level of analysis, for example, a micro approach for one and a macro approach for the other, or global versus individual, short term versus long term or in different physical or social locations. For example, Option A is chosen for the upper echelons of an organization, while Option B is chosen for front-line workers.

Special separation is a basic tactic adopted in various situations (Gebert et al., 2010; Gulati and Puranam, 2009; Stewart, 2006). For example, it is common to spatially separate development activities from the rest of the organization.

3.1.4 Selection tactics

Selection tactics consist in creating value by choosing one of the opposites of the paradox. There are tactics underlying selection where the opposites are neglected or ignored. The paradox is treated as a dilemma with a choice situation (Seo et al., 2004).

Organizational actors may neglect opposites in a more or less intentional way, for example when they feel obliged to give priority to one element and not to another which represents a conflicting position. Selection tactics are often linked to environmental factors such as scarcity, change and plurality (Smith and Lewis, 2011), which lead actors to conceive of paradoxes as dilemmas. Actors will therefore seek to choose one of the two poles in tension to the detriment of the other. However, the paradox could very well rebound because the eliminated pole begins to exert a tension on the organization and needs to be taken into account. Selection tactics can be observed in groups where the informal culture of the organization may require behavior that does not respect formal organizational procedures.

3.1.5 Repression

Repression is a denial, a refusal to acknowledge the existence of the paradox. By ignoring the paradox, however, individuals do not make it disappear. The paradox continues unconsciously to influence their behavior. To repress the paradoxical tension is to avoid being in contact with the paradox (Tracy, 2004), by blocking from memory the unpleasant experiences of (Vince and Broussine, 1996).

Removing the relationship of contradictions and maintaining false order may temporarily reduce anxiety, but will lead to the reinforcement of cycles that perpetuate and intensify tension (Lewis, 2000).

3.2 Active responses

It is generally not viable to continually treat paradoxes as a dilemma. As a result, avoidance is often seen as a destructive tactic in the short term.

In contrast, active responses, recently renamed strategic responses (Lewis and Smith, 2014), seek to act, cope and thrive despite tensions.

Activation tactics play a particular role in the search for value, as they allow the actors in the organization to activate and retain more aspects of paradoxes. The literature of paradox suggests three active responses, namely, to accept, confront and transcend.

3.2.1 Acceptance or opposition

Acceptance involves learning to live with the paradox. Accepting the paradox means avoiding confronting the complexity of the paradox and engaging in debates likely to give rise to and sustain conflict. Unlike compromise, acceptance does not imply a weakening of the poles.

According to Poole and Van de Ven (1989), the aim of this strategy is not to confront tensions but to make them coexist by seeking ways to respond in parallel to these competing and divergent demands and in a sustainable way. Organizational actors can openly give priority to an opposite through opposition tactics that constitute a kind of reticent coexistence between paradoxical opposites. The tactic has the potential to reduce divergence and increase clarity, but unaddressed opposites may return.

3.2.2 Confrontation

Confrontation consists in letting the opposite poles express themselves. According to Poole and Van De Ven (1989: 567), "*it can be a first step in taking contradictions into account*". In contrast to acceptance, confrontation aims to encourage debate, with the objective of arriving at a better understanding of the paradox. According to Ford and Ford (1994: 759), "*by communicating, the actors in the organization expose their way of thinking to criticism and thus increase their chance of escaping from being trapped in the paradox*". The choice of confrontation does, however, imply managing the emotions related to conflicts that arise from opposing positions (Lüscher and Lewis, 2008: 232).

Confrontation involves the juxtaposition of the contradictory elements of a paradox in order to socially construct a proof of understanding or an accommodating practice (Lewis, 2000). According to Lüscher and Lewis (2008: 232), confrontation can attempt to remedy its own defenses through the intervention of someone who is not caught up in emotions but is able to empathically defuse tensions with the actors involved.

3.2.3 Transcendance

Transcendence implies another way of understanding the paradox, which leads "*to consider the poles of the paradox as interdependent rather than divergent*" (Lüscher and Lewis, 2008: 229). This can be achieved by "*reframing the paradox, by asserting that the opposing poles are equally valid and by adopting a paradoxical way of thinking*" (Lewis, 2000: 764).

Actors can apply transcendental tactics when trying to overcome paradoxical tensions. This involves creating a new unity, a synthesis, which fully integrates the conflicting elements, or defining paradoxes in such a way as to transcend the opposites (Seo et al., 2004).

The advantage of this solution is that complexity is integrated in its entirety, and potential synergies or global solutions can be found (Smith, Binns & Tushman, 2010).

By recognizing paradox as a natural condition of work, active responses (acceptance, confrontation and transcendence) lead to positive and virtuous reinforcement between the opposite poles. First paragraph under each heading or

subheading should be flush left, and subsequent paragraphs should have a five-space indentation. A colon is inserted before an equation is presented, but there is no punctuation following the equation. All equations are numbered and referred to in the text solely by a number enclosed in a round bracket (i.e., (3) reads as "equation 3"). Ensure that any miscellaneous numbering system you use in your paper cannot be confused with a reference [4] or an equation (3) designation. (10)

4. Methodological approach

The phenomenon studied is complex and poorly understood. Indeed, the study of paradoxes in public organizations is being explored. A qualitative approach is recommended for this type of problem (Ragin and Becker, 1992). The research is comprehensive (Charreire-Petit and Durieux, 2007) and is part of an exploratory approach. The case study therefore seems to be a method consistent with the research objective. This method makes it possible to apprehend a phenomenon that is still little studied, at different levels of analysis, without being constrained by a prior choice of tools or types of data (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003).

4.1 Case study

We conducted a case study in a commercial and industrial public establishment called ONCF which deals with rail transport in Morocco. This organization has a railway network of 2220 Km of track and a total staff of 7535 collaborators distributed as follows: 1222 executives (16%), 2233 supervisors (30%) and 4080 technicians (54%). It is structured around three central divisions and regional divisions.

In line with its customer-oriented development logic, this organization has been implementing a reform program since 2002 that aims at transforming itself from a bureaucratic system to a market model. These reforms consist of putting the customer at the heart of its concerns, making activities accountable for their commercial performance, optimizing means and resources, strengthening decentralization to increase efficiency and productivity, and giving more weight to research and development to adapt to new market-driven requirements.

4.2 Data collection

The research is based on empirical material consisting mainly of qualitative data. Empirical data were collected mainly from semi-structured interviews with 19 proximity managers (belonging to 3 different central directorates), participating observations (participation in team meetings and management committees) and internal documents (intranet, job descriptions, organization charts, etc.), in order to triangulate the available sources of information.

My permanent presence in the field has enabled me to meet with proximity managers and hold discussions with them about their daily work. In line with our

exploration approach, the interviews were conducted individually, and the majority were face-to-face. Detailed notes were taken during the interview.

Throughout the study, we stayed in constant contact with several proximity managers in their daily working life, which allowed us to analyze their specific work. We also had the opportunity to take part in a training course of a "dimension mangers" module for proximity managers, the main objective of which is to prepare them to support their team and strengthen their behavioral and managerial capacity.

In addition, our participation in internal meetings has helped to identify issues of concern to proximity managers and has provided many opportunities for formal and informal discussions. We have collected more than 40 relevant internal documents: job descriptions, organization charts, work programmers, job descriptions, meeting reports, etc.

4.3 Study sample

In order to select our sample of respondents, we relied on the work of de Huy (2002), who defines the middle or proximity manager as "*any manager who is two levels below the Director and one level above the workers and operational staff in the field*". On the basis of this definition, we decided to select people who met the following two criteria: (1) be located below the site manager and above the operational team workers and (2) have at least one team under their responsibility. In addition, it should be noted that from among the proximity managers who met these two criteria, we made a selection so that all three directorates and the various departments (infrastructure, passengers, freight) were represented. In this way, the tensions identified are not limited to a particular function or site but can be generalized to the organization.

4.4 Data processing and analysis

The average length of an interview is estimated at 1 hour. The minimum duration is 45 minutes and the maximum duration is 1.5 hours. The final collection represents a total duration of 21 hours. During the exploratory phase, "open" coding is done manually and categories are established based on successive round trips between the field and the literature. In fact, the volume of interviews did not require the use of a data processing programme (NVivo).

The interviews began with a detailed description of a typical working day in the outreach setting, illustrating both positive and negative events. We then extracted from the data all of the verbatim reports that referred to tensions that proximity managers deal with on a daily basis and conducted an in-depth analysis of these different types of paradoxical tensions.

5. Paradoxical practices developed by local executives

The strategies identified by the literature to deal with paradoxes and their concrete translation into behavioral patterns are observed in the empirical study. We have

identified responses to paradoxes in the form of paradoxical practices through a coding process. We then checked their concordance with existing responses in the literature. This resulted in synthesizing our responses into seven types of responses that we grouped into two categories: defensive responses and active responses.

5.1 Defensive responses

We recorded paradoxical practices to deal with paradoxical tensions in a changing context, which we then grouped into four defensive strategies: sequential practice or temporal separation, compartmentalization or spatial separation, selection and repression. In our case analysis, it should be noted that these strategies were observed for the majority of Smith and Lewis' (2011) categories of paradoxes.

5.1.1 The practice of separation

Firstly, proximity managers explained that they manage paradoxical situations by separating the different poles within their teams. Compartmentalization consists in reserving spaces for expression distinct from the contradictory logics within the organization (Perret and Josserand, 2003). Since this strategy divides the paradoxical elements into different zones, it must be connected to the existing strategy of spatial division. In this case study, examples of responses to spatial division included division of labor, delegation of work to employees or the use of external contractors. In particular, the workload and complexity of the work of the proximity manager, resulting in an increase in activities to be carried out with downsizing and restructuring, reinforced the performance paradox, as it became difficult for managers to manage both the usual activities and the unforeseen. To cope with this tension, the proximity manager may entrust certain day-to-day tasks to an employee in order to devote himself or herself fully.

> "*I conduct awareness sessions for my officers on the safety of people so that each officer is responsible for his or her own safety at the time of work. I designate the team leader as responsible for the total safety of the work site and one agent is responsible for monitoring the quality and performance of the work carried out.*" [Respondent 9]

In our case study, spatial separation is observed in the case of agent conflict. Some proximity managers reassign conflicting agents to different teams in order to manage the tension that arises from the identity paradox.

> "*I try to resolve the conflict between the two conflicting officers amicably and if I can't then I separate the two officers. One of the two will be seconded to another team.*" [Respondent 19]

Second, the temporal or sequential separation that consists in arranging the paradox by allowing the expression of each of the opposite dimensions at successive periods (Perret and Josserand, 2003). In the temporal separation, one pole of the paradox

is supposed to hold during one period and the other during a different period. The result of our empirical study showed that this practice is identified in the work programming. In fact, proximity managers schedule major maintenance operations during periods when there are fewer passenger trains (generally the night of Saturday to Sunday) in order to guarantee high productivity. Outside these periods, it is difficult to convince the transport management to arrange time intervals for maintenance work. Priority is given to passenger train traffic, which pushes the local authority to ensure the monitoring and safety of the installations.

> "*Scheduling work during periods when there are fewer trains running and I only supervise during periods when there are high passenger volumes.*" [Respondent 4]

The pace of work of the local executive is very high. He or she must divide his or her time between handling administrative matters, monitoring the performance of technical services, managing disrupted situations and carrying out directives from the hierarchy. This requires a major effort on the part of the proximity manager in order to carry out these various tasks.

> "*My job is too busy: I have to do a lot of business in a limited time. I spend the evening dealing with administrative matters. The morning is reserved for site rounds and daily problem solving.*" [Respondent 8]

By separating the two poles of the paradoxes, temporally or spatially, lean managers sought to identify synergies and create a sense that could reconcile the two contradictory but interdependent objectives.

5.1.2 The practice of selection

Selection is the practice of choosing one of the poles of the paradox. Selection tactics are often imposed by external pressures related to scarcity, change and plurality (Smith and Lewis, 2011), leading actors to conceive of paradoxes as dilemmas.

In this tactic, organizational actors may neglect opposites more or less intentionally, for example when they feel obliged to give priority to one key actor and not to another who represents a conflicting position. Our case study shows that this tactic is practiced in the resolution of the organizational paradox. Some proximity managers have chosen organizational improvisation in order to better adapt to problems or new situations that require them to propose solutions or select a priority. Proximity managers have expressed the difficulty of planning the work to be carried out because of the lack of resources (human or logistical) which are always requested from the hierarchy. They always try to find solutions that allow them to work despite this lack of means.

> "*The work becomes very difficult without spare materials. I troubleshoot with salvaged materials after checking and maintaining them. I realize solutions for adapting the old non-*

compliant one after having seized the hierarchy and getting their agreement. Sometimes I ask my colleagues for materials on loan." [Respondent 8]

"*With the lack of means, I always change my program and I deal with emergencies and especially with work related to security. I reduce the programmes to be carried out with a minimum of means.*" [Respondent 10]

5.1.3 The practice of repression

Repression is one of the avoidance tactics of denying the existence of paradoxical tension. In our case study, this tactic is observed in the treatment of the paradox of identity. Proximity managers find it difficult to satisfy hierarchy and carry out directives that seem to them to be inconsistent with reality. They insisted that hierarchy, instead of making their job easier, only complicates things, which increases tension, accentuates conflict and stimulates job stress.

"*I always say yes to my bosses. Even if their directives sometimes have nothing to do with the reality on the ground. I don't want to conflict with them. I carry out the directives that seem feasible to me. For the others, I try to simplify them, and I go back to my leaders to try to convince them to take up these directives.*" [Respondent 8]

"*Problem of conflict with the hierarchy. I find it difficult to agree with her. Too many messages and sometimes useless, which wastes a lot of time answering them and increases the tension in my work. Sometimes I ignore certain directives that seem useless to me.*" [Respondent 9]

5.2 Active responses

In cases where proximity managers have accepted the paradoxical situation, they show a more favorable reaction to paradoxical tensions. They consider a new way of thinking. The results involved four active coping strategies to overcome the paradox.

The strategies identified by the literature to deal with paradoxes and their concrete translation in terms of behaviors observed in the empirical study are respectively: acceptance, confrontation and transcendence.

5.2.1 Acceptance

Acceptance, by avoiding debates that may give rise to and sustain conflict, is a strategy for managing paradoxes. This response does not mean that the paradox is ignored. Proximity managers are aware that team agents with contractual status are an integral part of the ONCF and that it is essential to ensure cohesion within the teams. They are called upon to reconcile public-sector staff and contract staff. They ensure that all staff members share the same frame of reference and speak the same language. To this end, they build a common framework that is understood and integrated by all.

"Transfer the rules and values of the ONCF (commitment-rigor and safety) to the employees of private companies - define and explain common objectives - establish a group spirit and collaboration between them - have frequent sharing and communication meetings - settle disagreements and promote understanding." [Respondent 7]

Second, proximity managers explained that they manage paradoxical situations by adjusting the organizational structure of resources (structural adjustment). Examples of structural adjustment include the reorganization of existing resources or the addition of new resources. This type of adjustment is necessary when existing resources are not adequate or are not optimally used to meet the increasing number of demands, as is the case in a changing context.

"Downsizing is a common problem I'm having. I have become accustomed to troubleshooting and doing the work with the available manpower. Every time I ask for support from other institutions and private companies in the form of "management" even these agents are not well trained for the railway professions. I try to integrate them with competent agents to help them with handling work and loading of equipment for example." [Respondent 3]

5.2.2 Confrontation
While acceptance is a constructive strategy in that it allows conflicting expectations to be taken into account without compromise, it also leaves proximity managers to deal with their difficulties on their own. Confrontation, on the other hand, should make it possible to engage in debates aimed at taking better account of contradictions.

5.2.2.1 Communicate openly
In our case study, the confrontational reaction is practiced by proximity managers through open communication with their team members and with their hierarchy, which allows for the social construction of a more accommodating understanding (Lewis, 2000; Lüscher and Lewis, 2008). This allows proximity managers to confront technical and managerial problems in order to find appropriate solutions that guarantee better productivity.

"From a technical point of view, problems are solved through meetings with subordinates or the hierarchy and the implementation of action plans that can be implemented over time in order to increase productivity and reduce the backlog of work." [Respondent 1]

"To make the collaborators adhere to the company project in order to increase their effectiveness and efficiency at work through communication and exchange of information about our company, its project and its strategy." [Respondent 1]

5.2.2.2 Breaking the rules

Some proximity managers have understood that in paradoxical situations, it is materially impossible to carry out the tasks entrusted to them. One of the proximity managers interviewed stated that "*this is in spite of ourselves, we have no other solution*".

In order to get out of the confinement in which the paradox places them, some proximity managers do not hesitate to break safety rules in order to be able to use more time in production-related work. They are always looking for solutions that allow them to bypass regulations while controlling safety.

> *"Sometimes I allow myself to make arrangements with the staff in return, they agree to work more, especially during periods when there is less traffic.*" [Respondent 4]

Other managers transgress the rules of the administration in order to incite their staff to be productive, especially in periods when important work is scheduled.

> "*Work with purpose. I'm looking for profitability and productivity and I leave it to my agents and I'm only interested in the actual scope of work and I can make arrangements with them in an informal way.*" [Respondent 9]

> "*In order to allow my teams to use more work intervals for the maintenance of the installations, I reduce certain safety rules, but my presence at the site is mandatory to control the situation.*" [Respondent 16]

Transgression is another form of reaction to the paradoxes very frequently used by proximity managers, especially in organizations where work is formalized by regulation, as in the case of organizations in the railway sector.

According to Babeau and Chanlat (2008), the rule is indeed at the center of a paradoxical mechanism. Initially, its role is to reduce uncertainty. Paradoxically, however, not only does it fail to completely reduce this uncertainty, but it also creates uncertainty that is used by the actors, the very actors who are supposed to be constrained by the rule (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977).

5.2.3 Transcendence

Finally, transcend includes the original reframing response and has been renamed in accordance with the use of the word by other authors (Lewis, 2000; Poole and Van de Ven, 1989). Transcend served as an active coping strategy in which officials reframed the situation so that all the paradoxical elements were interpreted as interdependent rather than competing with each other. A proximity framework illustrated this coping response by viewing its relationship with clients as a binary relationship rather than a one-way relationship. Although this coping strategy relieves tension in the long run, some community-based managers have been able to manage the paradox from a creative problem-solving perspective.

"*As a stationmaster, it is not enough to serve the client, but we must establish a relationship of trust with him based on listening, respect and participation in the process of servuction.*" [Respondent 17]

Transcendence also implies another way of understanding the paradox that helps to recognize the respective importance of contradictory tendencies. Our case study has shown that other proximity frameworks practice reframing by introducing a new element into a situation that allows the two opposites to be reconciled in order to emerge from the contradiction (Perret and Josserant, 2003). This practice is used in the management of the autonomy/control paradox. In fact, proximity managers establish weekly work programmes addressed to team leaders that offer them more autonomy in the use of resources, but at the same time it is a means of control. The team leader is called upon to justify delays in the progress of work and the use of resources.

"*I entrust the work to the team leaders and their assistants according to a weekly program that mentions the objectives to be achieved and the means at their disposal, while leaving them a certain amount of autonomy.*" [Respondent 9]

"*The team leader has a certain freedom in the use of these means and in making certain decisions at the local level. He has to report back to me at the end of the program and he has to justify the work not done at the meeting with me at the end of the week.*" [Respondent 8]

6. Discussion

The aim of this chapter was to define the active and defensive strategies used by them to deal with paradoxical tensions. We now bring together our findings to illustrate the paradoxical nature of the work of proximity managers in a changing context.

According to Smith and Lewis (2011), responses induce cycles of reinforcement that can be negative or positive. The data show that when proximity settings are placed in the face of contradictions, they may respond by choosing defense mechanisms such as spatial separation, temporal separation, selection or repression. In this respect, our work makes four contributions. First, it revisited the notion of temporal separations, showing that this strategy is rooted in the daily work of the proximity framework and distinguished during the programming of the work to be carried out. Secondly, spatial separation was recorded in the distribution of tasks by the proximity framework in order to cope with the workload. Thirdly, it was observed that the proximity managers can opt for the selection strategy by giving priority to one pole and not the choice to consider the two poles as complementary. In the end, repression was distinguished as a denial of the paradox. In this strategy, the executive ignores the paradox and refuses to engage simultaneously in opposite processes. Such defensive mechanisms (temporal separation, spatial separation, selection and repression) provoke vicious cycles because they result

from factors such as cognitive and behavioral forces for coherence and also scarcity which implies resource limitations, whether temporal, financial or human (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Indeed, in our empirical study, several proximity managers expressed the difficulty of achieving their objectives due to lack of means. On the other hand, when middle managers see tension as an invitation to creativity and opportunities (Beech et al., 2004), it leads to a virtuous cycle. Smith and Berg (1987: 215), note in this regard that "*by immersing oneself in the opposing forces, it becomes possible to discover the link that unites them, the framework that gives meaning to the apparent contradictions in the experience*". Findings from our case study indicate that the process of acceptance of community-based settings can take two forms. First, proximity frameworks practice reconciliation with the polarities of the paradox by creating the possibility of simultaneously activating the two opposites. To do so, they try to place themselves on the opposite poles of the paradox. Secondly, they use a structural adjustment strategy that consists of reorganizing available resources or adding additional resources.

The confrontation strategy, on the other hand, seeks to discuss openly how to combine the contradictory elements. In particular, our research found two forms of the confrontation strategy. First, proximity managers confront paradoxes through open communication with their team agents. The second practice takes the form of transgression, which consists in circumventing the rule in order to carry out certain tasks. With regard to the response to transcendence, only a few cases have been reported. This is not surprising inasmuch as this response requires the ability to think paradoxically in order to construct a more accommodating perception of opposites. This is how Lewis (2000: 764) points out that "*such a reframing marks a radical change in the meaning attributed to a situation where paradoxical tensions become seen as complementary and intertwined*". In order to escape paralyzing cycles, proximity frames must immerse themselves in the tensions (Smith and Berg 1987; Lewis 2000) in order to open up a framework that gives meaning to apparent contradictions (Vince and Broussine, 1996).

6.1 Recommendations to better manage paradoxes
Empirical research shows that proximity managers do not always distinguish between appropriate behavior in the face of contradictions. However, their willingness to adopt these behaviors can be widely encouraged.

6.2 Pay particular attention to those exposed to paradoxes
During the interviews we conducted, several proximity managers told us that the contradictory nature of certain expectations was an important source of motivation, as it represented a challenge to be taken up.

This ability to live positively the paradox manifests itself in their ability to adapt permanently to the constraints of intoxication. They are able to engage in creative problem solving and always find solutions that are appropriate to the situation and they are aware of the acceptance of contradiction afterwards. The empirical study shows that

it is in the interest of the hierarchy to rely on these proximity managers by assigning them to the positions most exposed to contradictions, for example the management positions of the heterogeneous technical teams composed of new recruits, former employees, public employees and contract workers. However, vigilance on the part of the line of authority is essential, as these functions require considerable energy and counterparts that are commensurate with the commitment of the individuals.

Lack of recognition is a source of demotivation and stress. It is therefore necessary for the hierarchy to be clear about what it expects from the local executive and for the shared expectations to be made explicit. Indeed, like any employee, the proximity manager needs positive feedback from his or her superiors. They must also accept the right to make mistakes and make efforts to obtain resources.

6.2.1 Encouraging exchanges at all levels

The empirical study also shows the favorable effects of an orderly dialogue between actors with conflicting objectives. The possibility given to each party to discuss its constraints makes it possible, through an awareness of the difficulties of the other, to reduce tensions and to invite collective reflection on cooperation procedures for overcoming conflicts.

In the regional infrastructure departments belonging to the organization, which is the subject of our empirical study, meetings bringing together proximity managers and members of the proximity management have made it possible to highlight their differing objectives.

The dissatisfaction expressed by those present at these meetings, as to the effectiveness of the coherence of the objectives, made it possible to re-examine the modes of communication between the different levels of the organization.

The hierarchy must be attentive to its communication, which will enable it to play the role of translator and to cooperate more effectively with proximity managers. Indeed, the latter need to grasp the management's vision and strategic objectives, so that they in turn can translate them to team members.

6.2.2 Improving the working conditions of proximity managers

Improving working conditions is an important lever to make the organization more efficient in order to reduce occupational risks. The results of our study revealed a deterioration in the working conditions of proximity managers, especially with a lack of the necessary means to carry out their work in accordance with the rules of the trade.

This approach is based on a global approach and can be broken down into several types of actions:
- Improve work organization by better distributing the workload or work rhythm of proximity managers;
- Develop the skills of proximity managers through better information, enhanced training and optimization of career management;

- Supporting technical solutions through the refurbishment of premises, replacement of equipment or collective and individual protection tools;

The involvement of senior management is essential: performance evaluation must include the human factor, and therefore the health of employees. In our empirical study, we found that the organization has a well-established Safety Management System (SMS) and has deployed it at the lowest level. This system integrates the notion of human reliability, which consists of putting in place systems to ensure that team members have the ability to perform their tasks safely, on time and according to expected requirements.

6.2.3 Training as a tool for the development of managerial and behavioral skills

Training is a strategic lever contributing to the progress of human resources management. It is an intangible investment that helps public and private organizations to have the skills they need to achieve the objectives they have set themselves.

Currently, training is an intellectual investment such as strategic thinking, work organization, communication rules, management practices and political and social innovation. Our empirical study shows that proximity managers need complex managerial skills in order to be able to actively manage organizational paradoxes. To this end, the general management must accompany proximity managers during their professional career in order to develop their managerial and behavioral skills by integrating management modules into the training plan.

In our case study, the organization programs a training module called "From Manager to Leader" for the benefit of all operational and functional first level managers, with at least 1 year of managerial experience, with a desire to improve their leadership skills.

This training is carried out in the railway training institute whose objectives for a manager are:

- Clarify and assert one's position as a manager within one's environment, which is multiple in nature and complex;
- Develop your room for manoeuvre with your team and partners;
- Mastering the fundamentals of change management and its accompaniment;
- Appropriate one's own leadership style, in relation to the context;
- Developing interpersonal effectiveness;
- Develop the ability to contain and deal with conflict;

The result of our study shows that the challenge for proximity managers in their day-to-day management is to support each employee and the teams, satisfy the hierarchy and manage situations of disruption and multiple and complex tasks.

7. Conclusion

Our results confirmed two key points: 1) the presence of organizational paradoxes that affect the daily work of proximity managers; and 2) proximity managers can respond to paradoxical tensions with four defensive and three active responses. In this regard, our

work also highlighted that the dualities encountered are not always managed in the same way by all organizational actors. In particular, it has been shown that proximity managers can apply different management strategies when faced with the same duality. This example illustrates the plurality of adaptation strategies that can be deployed within a public organization. With this in mind, future research could focus on identifying factors conducive to the use of active responses that are beneficial to the organization in the long term.

If we refer to the literature, the focus on the short term and the regulation of daily activities are therefore the main specificities of the position of the proximity framework. Some authors also acknowledge a key role in change management. Evaluated on its ability to guarantee a high level of productivity, the proximity manager is however confronted with the difficulty of setting priorities between change and daily activity. Their "pivotal" position within the organization means that they must take into account the requirements of operational staff, satisfy customer expectations and negotiate the necessary resources with management in order to achieve the objectives set for them.

While the study does show a deterioration in the working conditions of proximity managers, this deterioration is more rapid for those who show "defensive" reactions in the face of paradoxical tensions. Others manage to break out of the confinement of the paradox. Close to clients, their teams and their hierarchy, proximity managers are aware of the divergent interests of these stakeholders. They must then find the necessary adjustments to reconcile these different interests. The main contribution of proximity managers therefore lies in their ability to reduce the gap between the work prescribed and the work that can be done at the operational level. This is a major contribution.

Conflict of Interest Statement

I certify that I have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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