

# The *Paradox* *Paradox*

By Bill Mills

A paradox is defined as a self-contradicting statement or a seemingly logical conclusion that defies logic. We don't like paradox. It creates anxiety. A paradox requires "both/and" thinking. It asks us to imagine that Schrodinger's cat is both alive and dead simultaneously until the moment that quantum superposition collapses into reality when we open the box and let the poor cat get on with its day.

We leaders recoil at ambiguity. We've been trained and exhorted by consultants to create clarity; in fact, we exalt it! Good or bad, black or white, right or wrong, these are distinctions we make to avoid the unease (or dis-ease?) of uncertainty.

The point I hope to make is that our aversion to paradox produces poorer decisions because we jump to "either/or" thinking. We want to take multidimensional problems and come up with the single right answer.

Our politicians continue to offer silver bullet solutions for health care, education, immigration and taxation. Business leaders offer policy manual responses because they aren't comfortable navigating the complex and emotional territory of dealing with employees who are real people facing unique challenges.

I experienced a customer service paradox last week when I went to my bank to close an account. A friendly young man I'll call Joe met me at the door, offered me coffee and asked what brought me into the bank. He informed me all the personal bankers were busy and I'd have to wait. After ten minutes, he informed me it would be another 20 minutes before I could be helped since all the personal bankers were

still busy. As I stood to leave a woman walked up and said she'd greet people and that Joe was free to help me close the account. It turns out Joe was a personal banker who was "busy" offering coffee to people. To Joe's credit, he apologized profusely for the corporate policy that turned him into a barista. This example speaks to a very clear rule: "There must always be a greeter because we want our customers to have a great experience." Paradoxically, it produces bad customer experiences. What if the leaders had embraced the inherent complexity of managing the customer's experiences and did what Disney does? Disney teaches employees that every customer is a VIP (Very Individual Person) and each one must be treated in a way that creates safety, happiness and respect. Paradoxically, by giving up control over the employee's decisions and actions, Disney achieves greater influence over the customer experience.

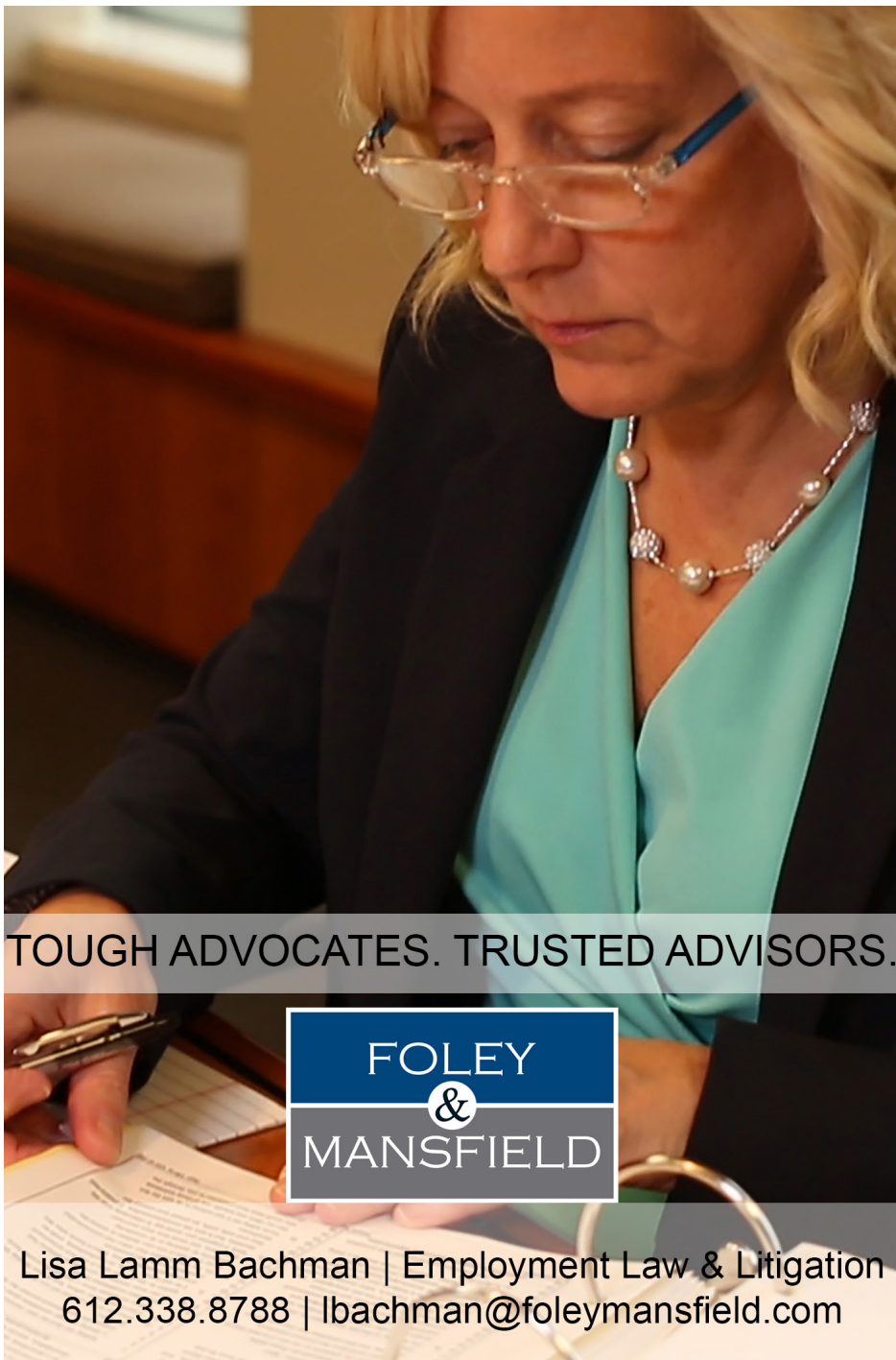
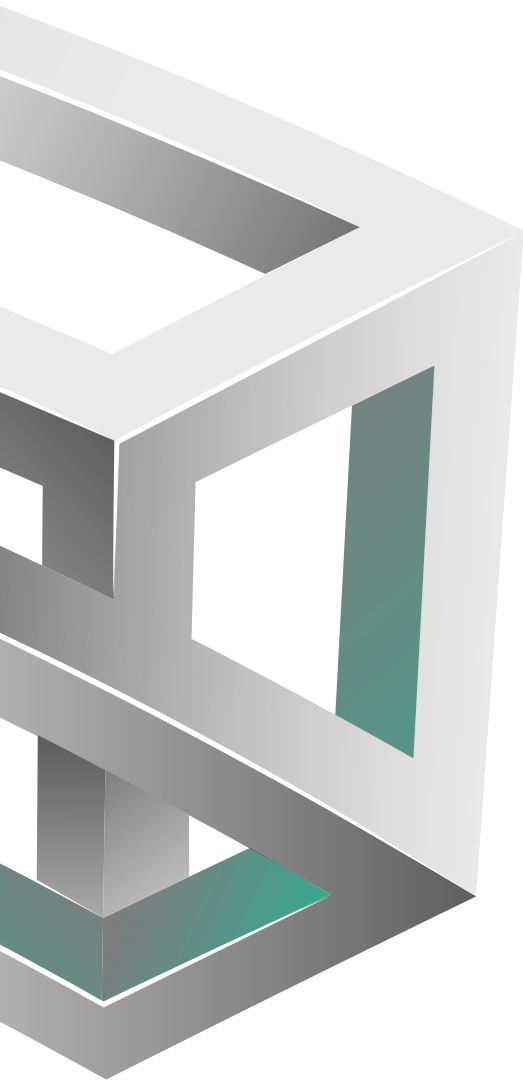
To think paradoxically it's helpful to think of a continuum. Rather than each end of the spectrum being an "either/or" answer, consider the benefits and downfalls of each end and craft a description of a future state that maximizes the benefits and mitigates the risks and downfalls.

The leadership paradox is "How do I



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bring adequate clarity to a situation without being rigid and how do I bring adequate flexibility without becoming ambiguous?” To revisit the cat in the box example: paradox loving leaders won't know what an employee is going to do until they do it, but if they've taken the time to explore together both ends of the continuum they will be pleased to see their employees taking ownership of their role rather than ownership of some rule. They'll see employees sorting through personal issues and building high performing teams. They'll see people beginning to think "both/and" instead of "either/or" and they'll make better and better decisions.



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