

## Contradictions Beget Conflicts

BY ADITYA BHALLA

### Contradictions or Conflicting Demands

Consider the scenario faced by many working professionals and more so by women.

If they focus exclusively on developing their professional careers then family life is placed under considerable strain. However, if they focus on family life then professional careers take a setback (especially in fast paced jobs where breaks such as maternity breaks tend to significantly impact the growth prospects).

Contradictions or conflicting demands such as the one above evoke intense emotional response from all of us.

Many people when faced with conflicting demands, whether in personal or professional life, tend to react in one of the two ways

- a) Push through a solution that suits the personal interests (*My way or the Highway*)
- b) Settle for compromises or tradeoffs

For those who are unskilled in the principles of resolving contradictions, conflicting demands are one of the unfair aspects of life and tradeoffs are the harsh reality to avoid conflicts.

For innovators, however, searching out the inherent contradictions is a fun-filled activity as it paves the way for elegant solutions (sometimes with super benefits) that are considered win-win by each affected stakeholder.

The essence of generating innovative solutions is the ability to *identify* and *resolve* the inherent contradictions in any situation.

TRIZ (Theory of Inventive Problem Solving) provides the formal structure to develop the skill to identify and resolve contradictions.

## Case study: Limited Staff to Inspect Claim Vouchers

### A) Initial Situation

Admin department of one large MNC is managing the intra-city transportation of staff across different cities. Given the high frequency of movement of staff and the low reliability of public transportation systems, movement of staff is managed through cabs hired from contracted vendors.

A recent study has revealed that the expense on cabs has increased significantly in the recent past. It is suspected that vendors may be submitting inflated claims and some employees may be using the cabs for personal usage.

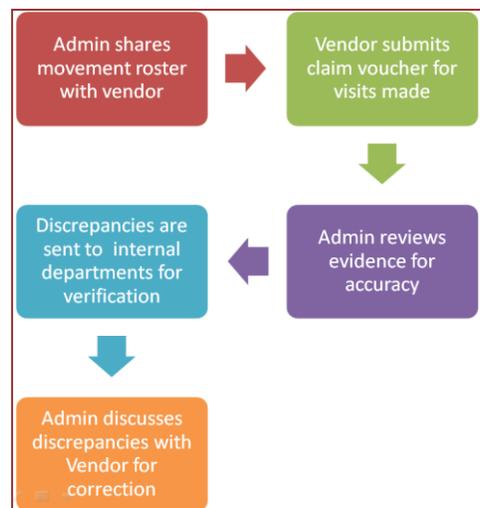
Additional constraints of the situation are that the entire system is managed manually. Due to recession, investment in automation solutions is not considered a viable option.

### B) Proposed solution and Secondary Problems

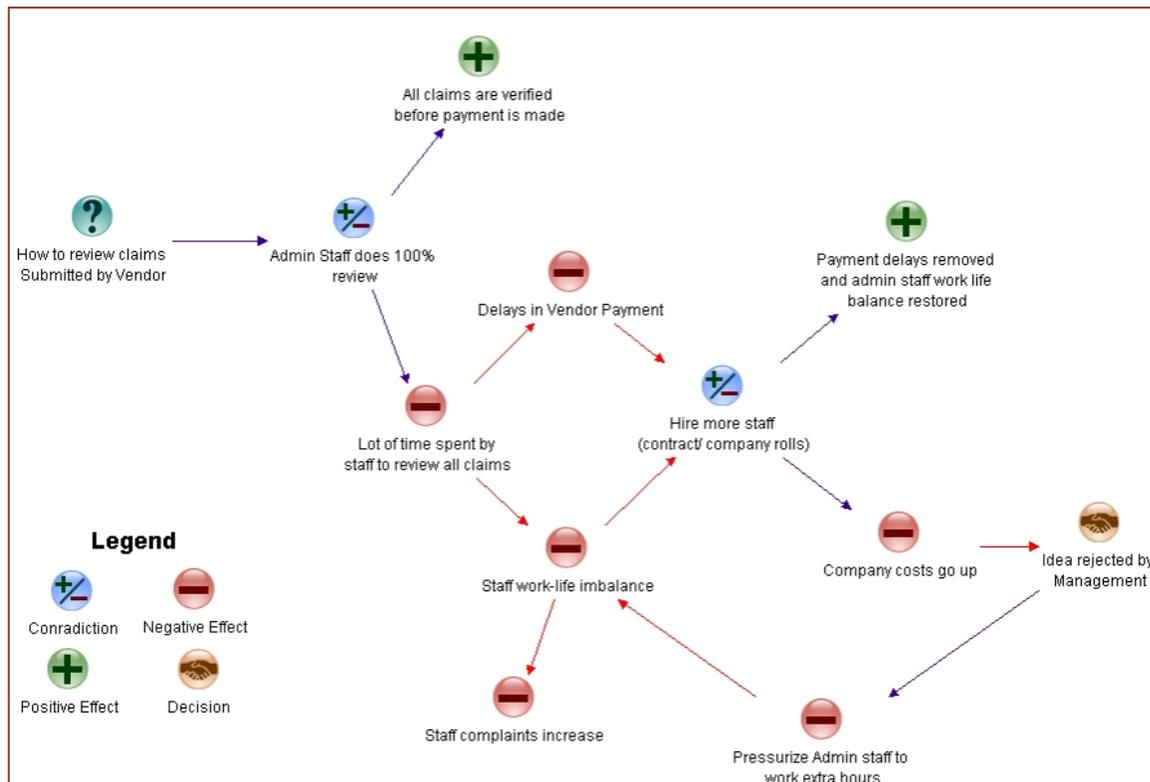
Given the above context, Admin department decided to come out with the process as shown in the picture.

The proposed process ran into trouble from the moment of creation itself.

Given the high volume of movements, Admin department found itself to be understaffed to review the claim vouchers for accuracy.



The immediate response was to ask for increased headcount either by hiring new staff or by outsourcing to external agency. Both suggestions were rejected by management (refer image).



The next response was to apply pressure on existing Admin in

staff to finish the work even if they had to put in long hours. However this yielded only limited additional results and staff started complaining of work-life imbalance.

The above is a simplified demonstration of how individuals as well as organizations fail to recognize a contradiction and end up recommending solutions that exacerbates the problem even further.

**C) Resolving the Contradiction**

Let us try to generate solutions that make use of one of the well-known principles of resolving contradiction: *Separation between the Parts and the Whole.*

An example of the application of this principle is the bicycle chain which demonstrates how an object can be rigid and flexible at the same time. Each link of the bicycle chain is rigid but the entire chain is flexible.

Before we apply the principle we need to first decide which contradiction to focus our efforts on.

If we review the image depicting the summary of the situation we notice that there are two contradictions. One of them is however a consequence of the solutions proposed by the team. Complex problems will have many hidden contradictions with some of them caused by the actions taken by people when they encountered an earlier barrier or contradiction.

The trick to being a strong innovator lies in not only revealing the hidden contradictions but to be able to decide which one to focus to resolve the problem.

Another important point to note is that contradictions are very specific to the context of the given problem. The same situation could be depicted differently if budgetary constraints were to be taken away. Strong innovators need to generate ideas within the existing constraints of the problem – *thinking within the box*.

How can we apply the principle of *Separation between the Parts and the Whole* to the contradiction of *100% review of claim vouchers* within the existing constraints of the problem situation?

To answer this well, we need to first define what *Parts* and *Whole* mean in the context of the problem.

Taking parts as an abstract concept and applying to the core elements (such as voucher, vendor, visit, location) in the stated problem we can generate a list as illustrated below.

1. Parts of the claims voucher (such as amount, mileage counter at start and end of journey)
2. Parts of the visits (such as long distance versus short distance, high frequency versus exception based)
3. Parts of the vendors (consistent performers versus inconsistent performers, new vendors versus tenured vendors)

Now applying the principle in the manner: “In parts we review, as a whole we don’t review” we get the following list of possible ideas

- 1) Review a sample of claims that exceed a defined threshold
- 2) More reviews for vendors with low reliability ratings
- 3) More reviews for those routes where the likelihood of variation in recorded mileage is significantly high.
  - Such scenarios exist especially in large cities with traffic congestions where the cab driver may use different (sometimes longer) routes at different times of the day to avoid the known traffic congestion points.
- 4) Review claims for visits that were made on exception basis (for example on weekends, special movement like sending staff on training programs from office on senior management approval)

Each of the above ideas needs to be further strengthened to ensure that it does not compromise the risk associated with not doing a 100% review.

For example two ideas that can be explored towards standardization of claims submitted by vendors are

1. Establish a mileage database for the locations frequented by staff. It will take care of the need to review the mileage counters of cabs.
2. Review the contractual terms to move away from mileage based payment systems.

## Conclusion

The inability to recognize contradictions will many times lead to solutions that create more conflicts. Innovators need to develop the ability to identify the core contradictions and resolve them elegantly that takes care of the concerns of all affected stakeholders. Every solution will also lead to secondary problems. However, the approach for identifying and resolving contradictions hidden within these secondary problems will remain the same.

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## Author Details



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