

LEADERS AS PARADOX NAVIGATORS

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The search for the holy grail of leadership, a single underlying factor that will ensure leadership effectiveness, continues. In recent years, leaders have been encouraged to have emotional intelligence, then learning agility (or grit, resilience, growth mind-set, perseverance). In our research, *navigating paradox* has become the next wave in the evolution of leadership effectiveness.

Paradoxes exist when seemingly contradictory activities operate together. We experience paradoxes in daily life, as captured by the popular phrases *tough love*, *do more with less*, *oil and vinegar*, *sweet and sour*, *work/life balance*, *Catch 22*, *go slow to go fast*, *good and evil*, and so forth. When these inherent contradictions work together, success follows. Instead of focusing on either/or; paradoxes emphasize and/also thinking.

Why Paradoxes Matter Today: Emerging Organization and Leadership Requirements

The logic for the increased importance of paradox comes from the evolution of the concept of organization.

Traditional views of organization, grounded in work by German sociologist Max Weber, drew insights from bureaucracies like the Catholic Church and German military. In these legacy views, organizations succeeded and survived by responding to external complexity with a clear line of authority, chain of command, decision rights, spans of control, specialization, and division of labor, where each employee knows his role and responsibilities. The assumptions of bureaucracy have pervaded management practice through scientific management, process reengineering, and organization alignment (e.g., STAR, McKinsey 7-S, or organization health models). The hierarchical organization assumptions coordinate work through strategic and role clarity, process efficiency, and disciplined routines. And for decades, these organizational assumptions enabled organizations to respond to complex work settings.

But, today, the greater challenge for organizations is that the world is changing so quickly that what was right yesterday is not right today and will not be right tomorrow. In a world of rapid change, the assumptions of hierarchy (control by roles, rules, and routines) often impair organizational success because of inflexibility. Organization thought

Increasing organizational adaptability comes from navigating paradox.

leaders have sought to replace bureaucratic organizations with new organizational forms: ambidextrous, lattice, holistic, holacracy, boundary-less, market-based networks, etc. An organization's success comes from its ability to adjust to change, which is often referred to as agility, flexibility, learning, transformation, revitalization, and so forth. Increasing organizational adaptability comes from navigating paradox. Navigating paradox accepts and heightens disagreements that enable organizations to change and evolve. Without the tensions that come from paradoxical thinking and debates, organizations perpetuate the status quo and do not respond to change. Leaders of these organizations need to become paradox navigators to help their organizations respond to the pace of change.

Why Paradox? Historical Roots

The concept of paradox, which shows up in today's management thinking, is rooted in ancient philosophy. In Chinese philosophy, the yin-yang concept views the world as holistic, in which all phenomena are "shaped by the integration of two opposite cosmic energies, namely yin and yang," as shown in "Yin yang: A new perspective on culture," a 2012 article by T. Fang in *Management and Organization Review*. Yin represents female energy and yang represents male energy; both forces operate both independently and together, shaping all universal phenomena and generating constant change. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary reveals a Western history of the concept of paradox:

Ancient Greeks were well aware that a paradox can take people outside their usual way of thinking. They

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combined the prefix para ("beyond" or "outside of") with the verb dokein ("to think"), forming "paradoxes," an adjective meaning "contrary to expectation." Latin speakers picked up the word and used it to create their noun "paradoxum," which English speakers borrowed during the 1500s to create the term paradox.

In management thinking, concepts of paradox have shown up in many terms: behavioral complexity, polarity, flexible leadership, duality, dialectic, competing values, dichotomies, competing demands, ambidexterity, and so forth. These concepts have applied to accounting, marketing, technology, strategy, and human resource literatures and practices. There is an increasing body of evidence that navigating paradox has positive implications within organizations. We highlight only a few of these studies within organizations that enable us to define what it means to for a leader to be a paradox navigator:

- Barry Johnson, consultant and author, offers tools to deal with what he calls polarity management. In his work he wants to help managers shift from solving problems with simple answers through either/or thinking to managing polarities for unsolvable problems. In managing polarities, managers recognize that there are multiple "right" answers, and by mapping the polarities, managers can find innovative options.
- Kim Cameron and Bob Quinn, business professors at the Ross School of Business, University of Michigan, discuss the challenges associated with managing the tensions between competing values within an organization to drive organizational effectiveness. In their extensive research, they find that organizations have four

competing values (collaborate, create, compete, control). As organizations manage these values as culture, and leaders turn them into behaviors, the tensions inherent in these four competing values build effectiveness. Organizations avoid slow death by the deep change that comes from working across multiple value sets. Leaders with cognitive complexity and the ability to manage across the four values are more effective.

- Marianne Lewis, former professor at the University of Cincinnati and now business school dean at the Cass Business School, City University of London, offers a comprehensive review of paradox in management research and provides a guide for how managers and researchers may more effectively deal with inherent tensions. The scholars and practitioners she reviews have recognized the importance of paradox and have developed a number of practical and useful guides to dealing with paradox in general.
- Professor Wendy Smith, from the University of Delaware, provides frameworks for leaders to manage paradox and demonstrates how managing paradox helps senior leaders be more effective. She found that successful firms deploy a dynamic decision model in which paradoxes are surfaced, then managed by differentiating actions (focus on each paradox pole) and integrating actions (finding synergy across the paradoxes). Through dynamic decision making, paradoxical differences are less accepted or accommodated and more highlighted to find innovative solutions.
- The Center for Creative Leadership has summarized the paradox work and concluded: "Knowing how to manage paradox is a game changer. The research is clear: Organizations, leaders, teams, and individuals that manage paradox are better performers than those who do not." They then offer tools for mapping paradoxes (and dualities) so that differences and synergies can be recognized.

This selected set of studies confirms that paradox has become relevant for organization and business leader success.

What Is a Paradox Navigator? State of the Art and Science

As introduced above, a paradox is a situation or concept comprised of two opposites whose coexistence seems impossible (e.g., yin and yang; past and future; top/down and bottom/up). If leaders are to help deliver on these paradoxical requirements, they must carefully maneuver their way forward through potentially hazardous waters. At any given moment, emphasis may need to lean in one direction, but then a moment later, emphasis may need to lean in the other direction. Rather than charting a straight-line course, paradox navigators have to maintain high-level vision for where their organization is headed, then make the necessary real-time adjustments to short-term directions to avoid downfalls and optimize how to get to this final destination. Navigating paradox is like an airline flight from point A to point B. If there was a straight line between these two points, the airplane would be on this exact line less than 5 percent of the total flight time, constantly navigating based on conditions. In our research, we are clearly not inventing the concepts around paradox, nor offering new theoretical perspectives. We have studied paradox navigators within the human resources (HR) profession, but our results have implications for leaders in general.

We measured the paradox navigator competency by developing a set of competency items on our survey that reflected common and important tensions that HR professionals tend to face in their work (again, note that these paradoxes would also be relevant for leaders in other roles).

- Effectively manages the tensions between global and local business demands
- Effectively manages the tensions between the need for change (flexibility, adaptability) and stability (standardization)
- Effectively manages the tension between taking time to gather information and making timely decisions
- Effectively manages the tensions between internal and external hiring

- Effectively manages the tensions between individual employee needs and collective organizational goals
- Effectively manages the tensions between internal focus on employees and external focus on customers and investors
- Effectively manages the tensions between top-down organizational control and bottom-up employee empowerment

What Our Research Tells Us about Paradox Navigators

In our study of about four thousand HR participants (those doing self-assessment) and twenty-eight thousand associate raters, we received ratings about the extent to which the HR participant either does or is capable of navigating the above paradoxes. While the personal ability to navigate paradox has moderate statistical impact on perceived personal effectiveness, the paradox navigator competence is by far and away the most important predictor of business performance (for more information, see our book *Victory Through Organization*).

How to Become a Better Paradox Navigator

Leaders navigate paradox by creating the right organizational approach to paradox and developing the personal skills of a paradox navigator.

Organizational Approaches to Paradox

Based on our experiences and research, we have identified six stages of paradox management that organizations and leaders often use, as illustrated in Table 1. As paradox navigators, leaders should be able to assess where their organization is relative to these stages, then play the appropriate role in moving to the next level.

How Does One Transcend Paradox in an Organization?

From a practical perspective, there are some simple steps any leader can take to become more comfortable confronting this reality. We base these steps on our experience and on the academic and consulting research and practices cited above.

Stage	Action	Implication	Leader Role
1 Ignorance	Ignore the paradoxes and hope they go away	❖ "You can't hide the truth" ❖ "Ignorance is not bliss"	Gently point out alternatives
2 Denial	Recognize paradox, but pick a pole and stick with it	Fixed mind-set ... you better have picked right	Suggest options; do site visits
3 Spatial splitting	Create satellite organizations or internal competition; Leaders lead differently in different settings	❖ Suboptimize by making parts more than the whole ❖ Leadership ambiguity leads to cynicism	Look for common ground and creating learning processes across units
4 Temporal splitting	Sequence the poles; try one then try the other	❖ Hard to let go from one time to the other ❖ Easy to get locked in and stereotype	Ensure learning from each sequence (after action review)
5 Small adjustments	Focus on learning from one setting or episode; run experiments	Still separate, but encourages learning	Move quickly to identify small wins and weave into next steps
6 Transcending paradox	Use information to clarify poles, explore new ideas, and exploit actions at same time	❖ Manage convergence, divergence ❖ Seek common and higher purpose	Become a true paradox navigator

TABLE 1. STAGES OF PARADOX MANAGEMENT

- *Clarify the poles of the paradox.* When paradoxes exist, organizations can sometimes get trapped into arguments about which side (pole) of the paradox to choose and emphasize. Many times this occurs because decision makers have not been able to explicitly identify the paradoxes at play and articulate why both outcomes are important and how they are in tension with each other. Taking the time to clarify the seemingly opposing poles of a paradox and how they relate and interrelate to each other can provide an important first step towards navigating that paradox.
- *Define best outcomes.* Once we clarify the paradox, we can attend to the overarching criteria for success in our organization, and we can begin to explore how the opposing sides of the paradox relate to our success criteria. Doing so can help to clarify when to emphasize one or the other side of the paradox.
- *See others' points of view.* Listen to others and try to understand how they experience the paradox in question. How does the paradox influence them and their work? What will happen to their work and outcomes if we emphasize one side more than the other? This may be done by a duality or polarity map where the alternatives are laid out with pros and cons of each. It may also be done by reverse role playing where advocates of one pole argue for the other and vice versa so that each side more fully appreciates the other's point of view.
- *Find common ground.* Where do we agree and where do we disagree? Where do we agree to disagree? Can we agree on the conditions under which we lean towards one side of the paradox and the conditions under which we lean to the other side? In restructuring an HR group, there was a lot of quite animated debate about what work should go where (centralized vs. decentralized). We asked each of the senior HR team members to draw on a flip chart their idealized organization. When they presented to each other, they realized that they had 80 percent agreement. We acknowledged this. We then looked at the 20 percent disagreement (which was taking 80 percent of the discussion) and laid out options. We experimented with an option for three months to

Where do we agree to disagree?

see what would work. We then adapted and learned. Within nine months, an acceptable governance structure was in place and being acted on.

- *Take first steps.* Once there is some common ground, begin to take small steps forward and learn as we go. This might include questions such as: What is the plan for adjustments to the plan? How will we know when we have moved too far in any given direction? Have we established enough common ground that we can embrace this paradox together as we move forward?

What Individual Skills Make a Good Paradox Navigator?

Paradox navigation is not an innate trait, but a learned set of behaviors that translate into skills. Leaders who are paradox navigators possess the knowledge, skills, and abilities proposed in Table 2.

These paradox navigation skills can be acquired or improved through training and experience. But the first step is to recognize the importance of paradox in being an effective leader, then to assess both the stage of organization and skills of individual leaders in navigating paradox.

Paradox navigation is not an innate trait.

Skills	Definition/Behavior	Rate (1 to 10)
To what extent am I able to ...	What are specific behaviors associated with skill ...	
1 Deal with cognitive complexity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ See different sides of an issue ❖ Respect someone else's point of view ❖ Learn new ideas (20 to 25% every two years) ❖ See patterns in events 	
2 Be socially endearing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Disagree without being disagreeable ❖ Allow for tension without having contention ❖ Listen to understand ❖ Help others feel better about themselves after meeting with me 	
3 Be socially connected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Spend time with people who are not like me (e.g., visit shop floor or other departments) ❖ Observe and learn from those not in your zone of influence (competitors, customers, leading players) 	
4 Be personally aware	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Know my predispositions (e.g., introvert vs. extrovert; judging vs. perceiving) or style ❖ Not be bound by my predispositions and see beyond my biases ❖ Judge myself less by intent and more by my behavior 	
5 Be grounded in a strong set of values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Know my core values and act consistently with them, even if behaviors may vary ❖ Avoid pandering to different groups, while respecting their requirements 	
6 Surround myself with people better than and different from me	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Seek colleagues and friends who differ from me ❖ Ask opinions of people who may differ from me ❖ Access experts who know more than me, listen to their advice, and adapt my insights 	
7 Encourage divergence and convergence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Encourage diversity of thinking if your team or organization tends to groupthink; generate options ❖ Encourage focus if your team or organization has too much diversity and no closure; ensure actions 	
8 Use a decision protocol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Clarify the decision to be made and who is ultimately accountable for making it ❖ Set a timeline for making decision ❖ Gather information to make the best decision ❖ Make decision and build in learning processes to improve 	
9 Have a growth mind-set	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Take risks to experiment and try new things ❖ Constantly learn from what worked and what did not ❖ Be resilient when things do not work 	
10 Zoom out and zoom in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Establish a vision and overall purpose ❖ Envision systems and how parts fit together ❖ Focus on the details when necessary 	
	TOTAL:	

TABLE 2. PERSONAL SKILLS OF PARADOX NAVIGATOR

Conclusion

While rooted in old ideas and while part of everyday experience, paradox navigation may be the next agenda for effective leadership. In our research we found that, with HR professionals, competence in navigating paradox had the biggest impact on business performance. We believe that the organization and leadership skills of paradox management apply to leaders in general.



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