

Leading Through Paradox

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Key Points

- Paradox in an organizational context is an observation in which two contradictory elements are seen as present or operating at the same time.
- Leaders are faced with cultural paradoxes such as those between cultural forces of individualism and collectivism, achievement and ascription, long- and short-term orientation, and low and high power distance.
- Leaders tend to be embedded in their own perspective and treat paradoxes as cases of right and wrong. In contrast, leaders need to gain a better understanding of multiple, even contradictory, ways of leading.
- Paradoxes are important, as they force leaders to think outside the box and to rethink convenient categories and stereotypes.
- Two critical capacities are needed to lead through paradox: (1) a paradoxical mindset and (2) improvisation.

Related Exercise

- Exercise 9: Taking a New Perspective



Related Cases

- Case 1: Race and Respect
- Case 2: Water Crises
- Case 3: Floating Holidays
- Case 4: Not My Weekend
- Case 5: It's Their Fault
- Case 6: The Scent of Difference
- Case 7: Not Catching On
- Case 8: Glass Ceiling at Big Boy Toys
- Case 9: Super Drugs
- Case 10: The Right to Be Pregnant
- Case 11: Local Bombing
- Case 12: Benefits Battle
- Case 13: Francois' Dilemma

We do leaders a disservice then when we train them to rely too heavily—too exclusively—on management formulas and models. Leaders have no choice but to grapple with the paradoxes and complexities of human nature.

Joan Gallos, *Learning from the Toxic Trenches* (2008)

Our mind is capable of passing beyond the dividing line we have drawn for it. Beyond the pairs of opposites of which the world consists, other, new insights begin.

Herman Hesse, *Stories of Five Decades* (1972)

The word paradox originates from the Greek words para (beyond) and doxa (belief). Cameron and Quinn (1988) aptly define a paradox in the organizational context as an observation in which two contradictory elements are seen as present or operating at the same time. Examples of paradoxes faced by leaders include the paradoxes between continuity and change, planning and action, and learning and performance.

In leading across differences, leaders are also faced with cultural paradoxes, such as those identified by cross-cultural researchers (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000; Hofstede, 2001; House Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta,



2004; Schwartz, 1992) between cultural forces of individualism and collectivism, achievement and ascription, long- and short-term orientation, and low- and high-power distance. Such paradoxes can be daunting for leaders who are used to unambiguous solutions and models.

The aim of this chapter is to create awareness of paradoxes faced by leaders in working across differences. In particular, I discuss how paradox presents itself across cultures and how leaders might respond. Drawing on insights from social psychology, philosophy, and the creative arts, I discuss the role of a paradoxical mindset and improvisational practice as capacities that leaders could develop in leading effectively through paradox.

WHY PARADOX?

The ability to navigate paradoxes has been cited by organizational scholars as the mark of exemplary leadership. Mitroff described the management of paradox as “one of the most crucial of all human activities” (1995, p. 749). Pascale (1990) found that leading companies such as IBM, Honda, Ford, and General Electric orchestrate tension and harness contending opposites to stay ahead of their competition. Consider the following findings of a six-year study on leadership at Toyota:

“Toyota deliberately fosters contradictory viewpoints within the organization and challenges employees to find solutions by transcending differences rather than resorting to compromises. This culture of tensions generates innovative ideas that Toyota implements to pull ahead of competitors, both incrementally and radically Toyota doesn’t merely have some odd characteristics —it is steeped in contradictions and paradoxes.” (Takeuchi, Osono, & Shimizu, 2008, pp. 98–99)

As described by Takeuchi, Osono, and Shimizu (2008), paradoxical forces in organizations can be a powerful, generative source for innovation. This is also true of national cultures. Consider the following example of American and Japanese managers:

“According to Hofstede’s cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance, Americans are characterized by high tolerance for uncertainty, while Japanese have a low tolerance. Why, then, in business contracts

do Americans painstakingly spell out every possible situation, while Japanese intentionally incorporate ambiguous clauses? Also, in the United States, autocratic behavior is frequently tolerated from CEOs, even though the United States is identified as an egalitarian culture.” (Fatehi, 2007, p. 138)

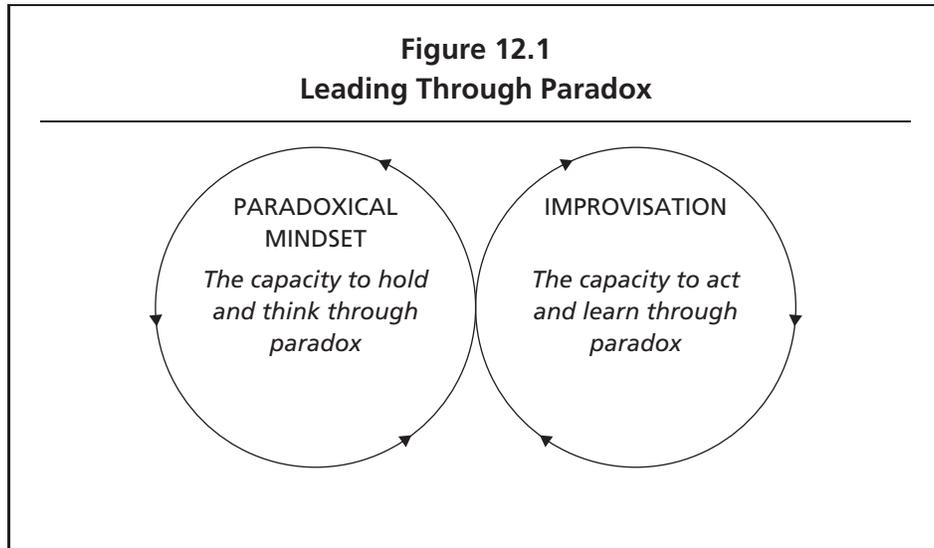
Cultural realities are too complex to be explained from a single viewpoint. While the cultural dimensions model by scholars such as Hofstede (2001) provide a useful language in investigating cultural differences, such dimensions should not be taken as absolutes. Instead of treating culture as static, leaders need to situate it in a larger dynamic context and to view paradox as a positive and innovative force.

LEADING THROUGH PARADOX

Dietrich Dorner (1996), in his book *The Logic of Failure: Why Things Go Wrong and What We Can Do to Make Them Right*, observed that leaders who fail at responding to complex situations are those who rely on predictable solutions and fail to adjust their thinking and actions based on the scenarios presented to them. On the contrary, effective leaders are those who are open to opposing perspectives and are willing to revise their thinking and alter their courses.

For leaders to work effectively through paradox, they need to be able to see paradoxes from both ends and to hold them in balance. However, in most cases, leaders tend to be embedded in their own perspectives and to treat paradoxes as cases of right and wrong. In contrast, leaders need to gain a better understanding of multiple, even contradictory, ways of leading. Paradoxes are important, as they force leaders to think outside the box and to rethink convenient categories and stereotypes.

How does one lead effectively in this environment? Leaders should not only persist in uncertainty but seek it out and leverage it for organizational change and transformation. Leadership through paradox requires leaders to hold mutually divergent views among organization members from different cultures and representing diverse facets within the organization. When faced with paradoxes, leaders need to analyze situations closely and to be versatile in their response. This represents two critical capacities needed in leading through paradox: (1) a paradoxical mindset and (2) improvisation. This process is illustrated in Figure 12.1 and elaborated in the sections to follow.



PARADOXICAL MINDSET

Unlike distinct and solvable problems for which an either/or decision may be chosen, paradoxical situations require leaders to see situations from multiple perspectives. A paradoxical mindset is one that accepts opposing interpretations as both plausible at the same time and does not view paradox as an uncertainty needing be removed or reduced. While a typical problem-solving mindset seeks final resolution, a paradoxical mindset views paradox as a lens for greater understanding and a catalyst for change. The difference between these two approaches is described in Table 12.1.

Table 12.1
Problem Solving vs. Paradoxical Mindset

	Problem-Solving Mindset	Paradoxical Mindset
Human behavior as. . .	Predictable	Contradictory
Paradox as. . .	Obstacle for action	Opportunity for learning
Leadership as. . .	Resolute and directive	Emergent and responsive

A paradoxical mindset is one that is able to hold and frame paradoxes in a productive manner. It can accept both ends of a paradox; even though they seem

contradictory or contrasting, they are seen as meaningfully related. In complex situations such as leading across differences, black-and-white thinking can lead to problems. In contrast, a paradoxical mindset views differences as a step toward learning and can facilitate new ways of thinking about opposing and contradictory perspectives. There are two critical components to this mindset: (1) the capacity to hold paradox and (2) the capacity to think through paradox.

The Capacity to Hold Paradox

Leaders often rush too quickly into action or, without adequate consideration, they break problems down into apparently manageable “bits” in an effort to make them seem manageable. To hold a paradox, managers must appreciate that contradictions can be productive and that they can be integrated. Fitzgerald describes this as “the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function” (1956, p. 69). Holding paradox is neither a compromise nor a split between competing tensions but is, rather, an awareness of both. This is not easy, as Palmer observed:

“If we want to teach and learn in the power of paradox, we must reeducate our hearts [I] understand that the tension that comes when I try to hold a paradox together is not hell-bent on tearing me apart. Instead, it is a power that wants to pull my heart open to something larger than myself.” (Palmer, 1998, pp. 83–84)

As Palmer describes, the act of holding paradoxes can be developmental, leading to an expanding of one’s emotional capability. The concept of “negative capability” is best described in the words of the English poet, John Keats: “of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (1970, p. 43). The ability to hold paradox, or negative capability, is a refusal to rush to resolution. This is often difficult for managers socialized in a problem-solving mindset that emphasizes positive capability and cognitive closure (Webster & Kruglanski, 1997), often at the expense of negative capability and the capacity to hold paradox.

The Capacity to Think Through Paradox

To facilitate the integration of conflicting agendas and contradictory demands, Smith and Tushman suggest that managers within organizations can develop *paradoxical cognition*, which they define as “managerial frames and processes that



recognize and embrace contradiction” (2005, p. 523). Paradoxical frames allow leaders to think through paradox, first by differentiating between contradicting aspects of the decision problem and then integrating them by identifying potential linkages and synergies (Smith & Tushman, 2005).

Barry Johnson (1996), in his book *Polarity Management*, suggests a practical model that leaders can use in framing paradox. As opposing ends to a paradox, Johnson describes polarities as interdependent opposites that function best when both are present to balance with each other. Due to their interdependence, neither side of a polarity can be chosen as a solution when the other side is ignored. Drawing on Johnson’s approach, the following are some questions that can be used when confronted with paradox:

1. What are the opposing polarities that seem to be in conflict with each other?
2. What are the upsides to each of the poles?
3. What are the downsides to each of the poles?
4. What can be done to build on the upsides and prevent the downsides?

Polarity mapping is one example of a process in thinking through paradoxical situations. It incorporate elements of systems thinking—a dynamic process of seeing how parts are interrelated within a larger whole. Further resources on this method are included in the Resources list at the end of this casebook. The important thought processes are exploring the multifaceted sides of a paradox and a willingness to think with both poles. It requires the ability to see differences and similarities at the same time.

IMPROVISATION

Improvisation is a unique practice that derives its energy in working through uncertain situations. While improvisation has typically been associated with jazz music and theater, it is a creative practice that builds and thrives on paradox. As Cunha, Kamoche, & Cunha describe, improvisation in leadership is the “dynamic syntheses of apparently contradictory behaviors in the process of leading a group” (2003, p. 51). It is the capacity to act and learn through paradox.

The opposite of improvisation is the use of habitual or defensive routines to guide behavior. A habitual routine exists when a person repeatedly exhibits a similar pattern of behavior in a given situation without considering alternative ways of behaving (Gersick & Hackman, 1990). In scenarios in which paradox is



perceived as threatening, managers can also resort to defensive routines (Vince & Broussiere, 1996), such as the following:

1. Rationalization: Explaining away the paradox
2. Regression: Resorting to actions that provide security
3. Denial: Refusing to accept the paradox

It is important for leaders to be aware of and recognize such defensive routines within themselves and in their organizations in order to work through paradox. Improvising through paradox requires one to step outside habitual and defensive patterns and experiment with new behaviors. To counter defensive routines, I propose three improvisational routines that leaders can consider when confronted with paradox:

1. *Anticipation*: In leadership, as in artistry, it is important for the leader to anticipate how different audiences might act or respond to their actions. To anticipate is to expect a range of plausible possibilities. The act of anticipation is an act of learning, where a leader becomes more responsive to the external environment and adapts his or her actions to that environment.
2. *Harmonization*: To harmonize is to blend apparent contradictions—a bridge between seemingly discordant parts. To use a music metaphor, harmonization involves the fusing of dominant and non-dominant tones to create a new sound. For leaders, this would involve orchestrating between seemingly contrary belief systems or ways of acting. For example, in India, Sinha (1984) found that exemplary managers harmonized a task-oriented approach with a nurturing style of management—not necessarily viewing one as opposite to the other.
3. *Experimentation*: Improvisation involves taking a risk, especially when working across contradictory belief systems. As Weick describes, improvisation involves “bringing to the surface, testing, and restructuring one’s intuitive understanding of phenomena on the spot” (1995, p. 5). The experimental nature of improvisation is about challenging conventional routines, taking risks, and learning from the process. At times, the experiment may even involve silence or non-action. Experimenting with non-action can be paradoxically effective, particularly in action-oriented cultures.

The good news is that improvisation is a developable skill. In jazz music, for example, improvisation capacity is developed through preparation and experience. Similarly, many organizations have found that improvisational training through theater and music has transferable returns for leadership in the workplace. Through engaging in improvisational practice, leaders can unlearn habitual and defensive routines and begin to be more versatile and responsive to paradox, with routines such as anticipation, harmonization, and experimentation.

CONCLUSION

Leading through paradox is not easy. One can almost feel crushed by the weight of paradox and the anxiety it creates. However, the process of leading through paradox can be developmental both for the leader and the organization, with its generative force for change. When leaders grapple with opposing insights, they are pressed to embrace complexity and contradiction. By embracing paradoxical thinking and improvisation, leaders can develop the relevant capacities for leadership in a globally diverse world.