PARADOXES OF LEADERSHIP

Recognizing the tensions and contradictions within leadership theory and practice is an important starting point for developing more creative and constructive ways of working. The ambiguity, uncertainty and complexity that now permeate all areas of business and society drive an expectation for leaders to provide a clear and compelling sense of purpose and direction for staff and stakeholders. Like many aspects of leadership, however, this requires balancing competing demands and expectations that are not easily resolved. This entry outlines principles of a paradoxical approach to leadership, some of the key paradoxes faced by leaders and organizations, and highlights implications for theory, practice and development.

Understanding the link between paradox and leadership

A paradox is defined as something that incorporates contradictory elements that cannot be resolved or explained through logical reasoning alone. Understanding and exploring paradox has been a primary concern of authors and philosophers throughout the ages, with the logician Willard Quine outlining the following three types of paradox:

1. *Veridical paradoxes* are statements that, whilst appearing nonsensical, are logically true. A common example is the Schrödinger's Cat thought experiment (devised by the physicist Erwin Schrödinger in discussion with Albert Einstein), which says that in the absence of an opportunity to verify whether a cat enclosed in a sealed box is dead or alive we must consider both to be simultaneously true.

2. *Falsidical paradoxes* are statements that, whilst appearing logically true, turn out to be false. An example here being Zeno's paradoxes of motion (named after the Greek

philosopher Zeno, who came up with them in 4th Century BC) which suggest, amongst other things, that an arrow will never reach its target and that motion is an illusion.

3. *Antinomy paradoxes* comprise two plausible yet contradictory statements that cannot be resolved by any amount of logical reasoning – an idea used by Emmanuel Kant to demonstrate the limits of philosophical and scientific enquiry.

Such examples are not purely intellectual curiosities but have practical implications for how we engage with the world and make sense of the information we are provided with. Veridical paradoxes, for example, highlight our ability to 'think outside the box' and have an important role to play in fostering creativity and innovation. Falsidical paradoxes highlight our ability to distinguish sense from non-sense, something particularly pertinent in a world of populism and 'fake news'. And antinomy paradoxes highlight our capacity to make plans, actions and decisions in the face of complex, ambiguous and incomplete information.

Paradoxes are characterized by a tension between two or more 'polarities' that, at face-value, appear as discrete and in opposition to one another (e.g. the cat IS *either* dead *or* alive) yet, on closer inspection, turn out to be inter-dependent (e.g. the cat must be CONSIDERED *both* dead *and* alive until observed). In an extensive review of theory and research on paradox in management studies, Jonathan Schad and colleagues define paradox as "persistent contradiction between interdependent elements" (2016: 10). The persistent nature of paradox, they suggest, distinguishes it from similar notions, such as *dialectics,* which suggests the possibility of synthesis of polarities, and *dualities*, which focuses on the interdependent elements themselves rather than the tensions between them. They conclude by proposing that paradox is a promising meta-theoretical perspective and theorizing tool for exploring the complexities, tensions and challenges of organizational life.

The challenge and opportunity of paradoxes is that they require us to think and act

differently. Whilst some leadership theory and practice might encourage leaders to be bold and decisive, a paradoxical perspective encourages us to consider the (unintended) consequences of such an approach and to (re)conceive an alternative approach. As Albert Einstein famously said, "we cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them".

The implications of a problem-centered approach to leadership are illustrated by Keith Grint, who highlights the need to differentiate between different kinds of problems and the strategies that can be used to address them. *Tame problems*, he argues, are the kinds of issue that we have faced before and, although potentially quite complicated, can be addressed through a rational process of 'management'. *Wicked problems*, on the other hand, are novel challenges comprising a series of complexities and interdependencies that no amount of analysis will resolve. Addressing such problems is fundamentally ideological, requiring a collaborative 'leadership' response that helps makes sense of the issues and potential ways forward. The third category discussed by Grint is *critical problems*. Whilst crises, of course, may be the manifestation of underlying tame or wicked problems the time-critical nature of the issue requires a decisive 'command' intervention.

Any one of these kinds of problem may contain paradoxical elements; however, they are most evident within wicked issues. Faced with complex, contested and intractable challenges, leaders are often expected to deliver apparently contradictory outcomes, such as improving services whilst cutting costs. Responding to such demands requires inclusive and collaborative ways of working that may challenge established norms and assumptions about leadership. When faced with a wicked problem, the work of leadership is not to provide the 'solution' but to convene a sufficiently diverse group of contributors to help frame the 'problem' and to work collaboratively towards addressing it.

Recognizing the paradoxical nature of leadership, and organizational life in general, is a

central theme of complexity approaches to management and organizations, where contradictions emerge through the interface of individual and systemic factors. For complexity scholars paradoxes are a ubiquitous characteristic of organizational life that can never be 'resolved', and which demand a shift in mindset – from *either/or* to *both/and* - in order to address them.

Common paradoxes of leadership

There are multiple paradoxes that face leaders, as well as organizations and those researching leadership. In a book on *Leadership Paradoxes*, edited by Richard Bolden, Morgen Witzel and Nigel Linacre, contributors highlighted issues including:

- The ambivalent relationship between leaders and followers in respect to the perceived need and want for 'leadership'.

- The elusive nature of 'leadership' and the challenges this poses for leadership research and development.

- Tensions around leaders being a part of and apart from the 'team' and addressing current versus future needs/challenges.

- Paradoxes around the nature of, and assumptions about, 'heroic' leadership.

- The conundrum whereby, in attempting to control events leaders may experience a loss of control.

- The paradoxical nature of 'authentic' leadership, particularly in relation to conceptual framing, context, identity and depth.

- Moral dilemmas of leadership and the complexities of 'right' and 'wrong'.

Each of these points highlight fundamental contradictions and ambiguities in how leadership is understood and enacted. These are issues that extend beyond leaders themselves, with

implications for organizations and societies more widely.

Like power, leadership has been described as an 'essentially contested' concept in that what is seen, understood and/or encouraged is dependent on the perspective of the observer. This incorporates a wide range of factors, including demographics, profession, personality and political orientation. Such issues help explain the difficulties in agreeing on a universal definition of leadership and of putting in place appropriate reward and recognition systems.

Some underlying polarities within leadership include individual – collective; leading – following; competition – collaboration; stability – change; autonomy – control; means – ends; planned – emergent; and short-term – long-term. Whilst a simple *either/or* solution is often proposed, it is argued that a *both/and* approach is more effective and less likely to produce unintended consequences.

Implications of paradox for leadership theory, practice and development

Despite the ubiquity of paradox in organizations much management and leadership theory, practice and development still promotes the idea that leaders and managers can exert direct control over organizational outcomes. Such concepts continue to influence leadership and management practice and development around the world and, whilst many non-Western countries have a tradition of recognizing and valuing paradox, it is not well documented how they achieve this in the face of pressure to conform to concepts of professionalism promoted through much global management education.

In volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environments, leaders and organizations face a range of paradoxes, dilemmas and tensions that are not easy to resolve. Leadership, management and organization development, as well as performance review and appraisal processes need to recognize this and support the development of individual and

collective capacity to deal with paradox. Such processes may feel counter-cultural in contexts where rationality, planning and control are emphasized and rewarded.

Working with paradox requires us to think differently about how we try to resolve problems. As Charles Handy argued in *The Age of Paradox*, rather than seeking control we need to generate a compelling narrative that creates a sense continuity, connection and direction around which people can mobilize.

In order to embrace the opportunities offered by paradox it is suggested that leaders and organizations need to enhance their capacity for identifying polarities, clarifying purpose and priorities, reframing issues from *either/or* to *both/and*, connecting and working across boundaries, providing support and reassurance for people struggling with the anxiety caused by uncertainty, and building a learning culture that is able to adapt and respond to emerging scenarios. Ultimately, an ability to recognize and embrace paradox opens new opportunities for leaders and organizations to promote creativity and remove entrenched assumptions and ways of working.

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See also Complexity Leadership Theory, Creativity, Systems Theory, Wicked Problems

FURTHER READINGS

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