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Book review: Leadership paradoxes : rethinking leadership for an uncertain world. Richard Bolden, Morgen Witzel and Nigel Linacre (eds) 9781138807129

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As a human resource (HR) subject group leader, I'm naturally drawn to *Leadership Paradoxes*. The book encourages the reader to critique rational approaches to paradoxes in leadership and to view the world from different angles, as its gravity-defying cover based on Escher's 'Relativity' print indicates. This edited collection is neither a text book nor a prescriptive guide. It is written as supplementary reading for advanced undergraduate, postgraduate, and post-experience students (a) to stimulate new thinking and debate; (b) to encourage wider reading of paradox and ambiguity; and (c) to consider how paradoxes impact leadership. At a time when many of us are confounded by the Brexit referendum vote, terrorist attacks, and Trump's nomination for the US presidency, a key message is that organisational leaders/managers can reframe and embrace paradoxes not as problems to solve but as opportunities. The editors seek 'to introduce some of the paradoxes of leadership and to suggest some ways that leaders and organisations may learn to live with them' (p. 5). The chapters (of around 20 pages each) persuade us to adopt interconnected, interdependent, and globalised viewpoints in turbulent times. Bolden et al. argue that powerful and influential individuals use control as an illusion to maintain their status and position. We are invited to consider the social construction of 'realities' and to adopt synergistic, holistic 'and ... and' rather than 'either ... or' perspectives. The authors admit the chapters provide more questions than answers as 'provocations and catalysts for further enquiry'. This makes it uncomfortable reading for those students seeking normative prescriptions. They will no doubt, however, appreciate the book's insights when they encounter messy, apparently insurmountable problems in their working lives. Indeed, we can all recognise apparent workplace contradictions such as when stress enhances productivity, less is more, and tough love mobilises action.

The nine contributors (three women) comprise scholars and practitioners with diverse industry and international experiences, mostly linked by their association with the University of Exeter Business School's Centre for Leadership Studies in the United Kingdom.

Helpfully, the introduction (p. 1) includes an Oxford English Dictionary definition of paradox as

a seemingly absurd though perhaps well-founded statement; self-contradictory or essentially absurd statement; person or thing conflicting with pre-conceived notions of what is reasonable or possible.

Each chapter consists of an opening summary, plus questions for reflection and discussion, with recommended reading sections and references. The book's complementary website www.leadershipparadoxes.com (no login required) includes a sample of Chapter 1, as well as relevant video, slide, and other web links in each chapter summary, and @lshipparadoxes twitter updates.

The chapters are organised around seven main paradoxes:

Chapter 2	*Leadership*: people need but don't want leaders
Chapter 3	*Perspective*: decontextualising leadership may destroy it; leadership is more than just about studying leaders; invisible leadership may be the most effective
Chapter 4	*Team and time*: leaders must be simultaneously in the present and look to the future while being a part of and apart from the team
Chapter 5	*Heroic leadership:* our heroes are often fictional or dead
Chapter 6	*Distortion*: in attempting to control events, leaders lose control

Chapter 7	*Authenticity* can result in inauthenticity; it is not just about being ourselves as we have multiple identities in different contexts that change over time
Chapter 8	*Right and wrong*: faced by ethical dilemmas, our values conflict and outcomes appear unclear

The first chapter advises us not to reconcile paradoxes but to 'accept them as wholes and learn to live with them and manage them' (p. 4). The three editors explain later that 'manage' originated from putting a horse through its paces in the form of a partnership (p. 152).

In the second chapter, Witzel argues that although we need them, we tend to resist leaders' control. He advises us to discard 'the false authority of transformational leadership and the false humility of personal leadership' (p. 27). Witzel comments that leadership (and followership) is essentially relational, 'something you do *with*'. His argument that 'genuine paradoxes are ultimately futile [and] ... cannot be resolved' (p. 26) is echoed throughout the book.

In the third chapter, Bolden presents three paradoxes: the essence of leadership is lost by attempts to measure it; less attention to leaders enhances our understanding of leadership; and effective leadership results from followers believing they achieved success without leaders. This chapter provides more solid academic journal articles than some of the practitioner-penned essays. For those like me who encourage students to annotate diagrams, the sailing and sinking ships representing academic leadership (pp. 42–43) are insightful illustrations of commercial and professional paradoxes. This chapter mentions critical management scholarship and the African concept of 'Ubuntu' (Zulu: 'I am because we are', p. 36).

In Chapter 4, Linacre emphasises leadership both within and separate from the group. He explains that most leaders understand 'A leader without a team is like a cox without oarsmen and women' (p. 56). The co-editor explores the paradox of simultaneously attending to the present and future. Linacre counsels leaders to keep in touch with reality and to discuss the 'undiscussable' while working towards a common purpose that 'provides the bridge into the future' (p. 68).

In Chapter 5, US co-authors Allison and Cecilione discuss the energizing effects of fictional heroes' journeys. Six paradoxes are highlighted: (1) that the truest heroes are fictional; (2) the greatest heroism is unseen; (3) our leaders choose us and tune into our needs; (4) we love to build up then destroy our heroes; (5) a hero's death increases our affection for them; and (6) rule-breakers, risk-takers and fearless high-functioning psychopaths are appealing. The authors observe that mentors transform others by exploring suffering in leadership journeys and that ironically '[t]he ultimate paradox of leadership may reside in the idea that one must "give it away to keep it"' (p. 87).

For Chapter 6, Lawler and Gold evoke Wittgenstein's metaphor of a river and riverbanks creating each other. These scholars argue that leaders must gain first-hand experience of an organisation's 'noise', its backwaters, turbulence and overflows, to gauge how they go with the flow and change its direction. They critique research on leaders' competences, advocate distributed leadership, and debunk the myth that leaders ever gain full control. Lawler and Gold portray leadership as 'add(ing) to the flow of energy' through story telling about successes while allowing for the 'paradox of distortions' (p. 109). This chapter includes two case studies and a stakeholder mapping exercise (p. 98).

Chapter 7 on the psychological paradoxes of authenticity and inconsistencies suggests that authenticity is not about 'being yourself'. Adarves-Yorno promotes leadership development through mindfulness and introspection, detachment, and 'fluid authenticity'. Within four paradoxes, she asserts that (i) authenticity is context dependant and leaders who candidly admit their lack of confidence can lose legitimacy; (ii) we have multiple expressions of authenticity and identities; (iii) contradictions arise from leaders manifesting different aspects of their authentic selves; and (iv) over time inauthentic behaviours result from a fixed self-image. Adarves-Yorno's

enthusiasm for 'inner training' may resonate well with students who are undergoing transitions from technical specialist to general people management roles.

For the penultimate chapter, Board explores the 'paradox of right and wrong' when our values conflict. Drawing on examples from religion, English literature, science, and corporate engineering failure, she presents ethical dilemmas based on utilitarianism, rules, and care. Board reflects on moral courage and whistleblowing, concluding that our survival depends on the capacity to embrace and learn from life's paradoxes.

In the final chapter, the editors focus on negative capability, i.e. our ability to accept uncertainties without needing to be rational. They consider socially constructed leadership, wicked problems, complexity, and boundary spanners. Bolden et al. reiterate that '[p]aradox demands us to embrace uncertainty and ambiguity and to hold multiple possibilities in our minds at the same time' (p. 153). The authors 'encourage reflection, debate and critical engagement in order to facilitate alternative ways of seeing and understanding the world' (p. 154). They recommend systemic and holistic thinking and reiterate that paradoxes offer stimulating possibilities.

What I like about this book is its focus on leadership and paradoxes as distinct from paradoxical leadership (Lavine, 2014; Smith et al., 2012). The website and end-of-chapter questions are useful for researchers and workshop facilitators. The range of citations is diverse, from physicists, philosophers, TED Talks, political, historical and contemporary events. In using this book with students, I would add definitions of paradox by management scholars. For instance, Schad et al. (2016) define paradox as the 'persistent contradiction between interdependent elements' (p. 10), while Cameron and Quinn (1988) assert that paradoxes 'seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously' (p. 760).

Although the book states seven core paradoxes in the main essay titles, it is confusing that some chapters present even more paradoxes. A summary of all the paradoxes highlighted would be useful in addition to specific organisational illustrations of Quine's three categories of paradox. While key concepts such as followership, distributed, team, heroic, authentic and ethical leadership, traits and styles (p. 8) are mentioned, in future editions of this book I would welcome a theoretical review of paradox literature, for example, Denison et al. (1995), Zhang et al. (2015) and Lewis et al. (2016). Chapters on concepts such as organisational humour, irony, and satire, emotions, embodiment, and sociomateriality could also be added. I would like to hear voices from emerging economies and the southern hemisphere, from younger, older, non-White authors, and influencers who are closely engaged with grand challenges, for instance the United Nations (2015) Sustainability Development Goals. It could be interesting to watch a live debate between the authors, policy makers, and students on the book's website.

In conclusion, these essays are problem-centred and thought-provoking. *Leadership Paradoxes* meets its stated objective of making us consider how paradoxes affect leadership. We are encouraged to question our assumptions about the elusive and dynamic phenomena of effective and ethical leadership in uncertain contexts. I would expect advanced-level business school students to demonstrate critical engagement with top academic journal articles, especially within strategic management literature beyond references provided in the book. Overall, *Leadership Paradoxes* stimulates 'rethinking' of how we frame paradox within well-trodden conceptualisations of leadership as contingent, complex, distributed and relational. Students with an action-bias may be frustrated by the authors' recommendations to be mindful, not in control, and to view paradoxes as futile. As educators, however, we must challenge our students to be reflexive, courageous, curious and contextually sensitive as paradigms and centres of gravity shift.

Of course, we are all familiar with working in 'an uncertain world' as the term VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity) has been in common use since the late 1990s.

Nevertheless, this book is to be commended for reminding us that an understanding of leadership requires us to live with absurdities and question leadership practices and development. The companion website provides an excellent forum for further dialogue. Overall, Bolden et al.'s text is timely in a post-heroic age as we strive to integrate converging physical, digital, and biological conundrums in the fourth industrial revolution (Schwab, 2016).

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