

Learning to Lead with Paradox:

Studies on how to effectively cultivate paradoxical leadership

ABSTRACT

Leaders face the challenge of simultaneously pursuing contradictory elements or paradoxical tensions (Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Paradoxical leadership, which refers to a leadership style that addresses paradoxical situations where seemingly contradictory yet interrelated elements coexist over time, is a promising approach (Smith, 2014; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Despite its potential, research remains limited regarding whether and how leaders can learn to navigate paradox, resulting in the underdevelopment of the capacity of leaders to navigate it (Lewis & Smith, 2023). This study addresses this research gap in the following three perspectives.

A paradox mindset, defined as the extent to which one is accepting of and energized by tensions (Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith, & Lewis, 2018), is crucial for leaders to thrive amidst these tensions (Keller & Sadler-Smith, 2019). Despite its importance, the underlying mechanisms through which managers develop this mindset remain underexplored (Batoool, Raziq, & Sarwar, 2023; Griffin, King, & Reedy, 2022). This research gap is noteworthy because failing to address it leads to a lack of effective methods for managers to improve a paradox mindset, resulting in its underdevelopment (Lewis & Smith, 2023). Therefore, the first research question of this study is set as how managers can improve and sustain paradox mindsets through training interventions. This study suggests that the simultaneous pursuit of simplification and complexification is an essential factor that facilitates the fundamental transformation of how managers see paradoxes to achieve the long-term learning effect.

Once leaders improve their paradox mindset, they are likely to demonstrate paradoxical leader behavior (PLB), which refers to seemingly competing, yet interrelated, behaviors to meet structural and follower demands simultaneously and over time (Zhang, Waldman, Han, & Li, 2015), to effectively navigating paradoxical situations in people management. PLB is considered a promising approach to navigate such paradoxical challenges in people and organizational management (Batool et al., 2023), where leaders are confronted with the paradoxical challenge of simultaneously enhancing work engagement and preventing burnout while under pressure to achieve business results. Prior research showed that PLB acts as a double-edged sword (Boemelburg, Zimmermann, & Palmié, 2023; Shao, Nijstad, & Täuber, 2019), posing the risk of paralyzing members in double-bind situations or unrealistic goals (Berti & Simpson, 2021; Julmi, 2021; Pina e Cunha, Giustiniano, Rego, & Clegg, 2017; Sleesman, 2019). Therefore, it is critical to identify mechanisms that leverage the positive effects of PLB while mitigating its negative effects, signifying the second research question: how and when PLB influences organizational outcomes such as work engagement and burnout. This study proposes that leader's authenticity serves as a boundary condition, ensuring that PLB is seen as genuine and well-intentioned rather than malicious or chaotic.

Given that leader's authenticity is a boundary condition when PLB act as a well-intentioned leadership style and contribute to the favorable organizational outcomes, leaders need to nurture their authenticity while enhancing their PLB. However, how can leaders enhance their authenticity in their leadership development includes paradoxical challenges: to be an effective leader, a person must play the image of a leader that fits the implicit image of followers, while simultaneously demonstrating authenticity in his or her own way. These two contradictory demands form a paradoxical relationship called the authenticity paradox (Ibarra, 2015), which refers to the paradoxical situation in which leaders are required to be

authentic (true to themselves) within the expectations of others (Nyberg & Sveningsson, 2014). The existing literature on leadership development has rarely addressed how to navigate the authenticity paradox effectively. Moreover, current models of leadership development on authenticity (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005) are largely grounded in Western perspectives and tend to assume a clear distinction between the “self” from “others,” thereby intensifying the paradoxical demands between meeting the expectations of others and staying true to oneself. Therefore, there remains a significant gap in understanding how leaders navigate the authenticity paradox in the leadership development, which is the third research question of this study. This study develops a model using the traditional Japanese concept of Shu-Ha-Ri, rooted in Eastern perspective and developed over 500 years, which offers a valuable framework for navigating and ultimately overcoming the authenticity paradox in leadership development.

This study offers theoretical insights into how leaders learn to navigate paradox and contribute to the management and learning literature. First, this study demonstrates that leaders’ paradox mindset can be developed and sustained through training interventions and the simultaneous pursuit of seemingly contradictory and paradoxical processes of simplification and complexification is essential to achieve the long-term learning effect, implying that learning paradox is paradoxical. Second, this study offers a novel lens of the authenticity paradox grounded in Eastern perspectives. The core of the Shu-Ha-Ri model is grounded in the two principles: double eyes and mind-body congruence. Together, these perspectives overcome the limitations of conventional approaches to the authenticity paradox in leadership development that are largely grounded in Western perspectives. Third, this study offers a novel insight regarding the relationship between authenticity and paradox in leadership development. Leaders need to foster authenticity to ensure that PLB is seen as genuine and well-intentioned rather than malicious or chaotic in the eyes of followers, while cultivating

authenticity in leadership development requires navigating the authenticity paradox. Therefore, cultivating authenticity and navigating paradox form a complementary relationship where one needs the other in leadership development. This study also provides practical implications by proposing a three-stage developmental and intervention model that integrates these complementary elements—cultivating authenticity and navigating paradox—to address the authenticity paradox and mitigate potential negative effects of paradoxical leadership.

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