

## The art of paradoxical leadership - a better way to handle opposites

Ivo Brughmans



Many of the contemporary problems businesses face are a direct result of an 'either-or' way of thinking. It doesn't matter how complex the challenge is. The answer must be 'this or that', 'black or white', 'hard or soft', 'right or wrong'.

Ivo Brughmans, philosopher, management consultant and the author of the book 'Paradoxical leadership' (2016), argues that a better fit for our time is an approach that enables leaders to keep opposing forces in balance or, through smart thinking, find a new paradoxical combination, such as playful performance, servant leadership, humble pride, structured chaos.

Our complex and disruptive world demands a new type of leader. These will be people who can break the shackles of a one-sided course of action and who know how to switch fluidly and find balance between opposing forces.

### **What's the problem with either-or?**

Different types of problem arise when organisations and systems are directed on a unilateral course towards one pole:

- *Oscillating between extremes:* In this scenario, the organisation experiences uncontrolled swings in opposite directions. For example, from a tightly centralised approach to a heavily decentralised one, and back again. Or, in a company that's ready to grow out of its initial entrepreneurial culture, from informality to the introduction of rules and procedures, and then (when the bureaucracy becomes overwhelming) back to initiatives to stimulate entrepreneurship and creativity. The organisation follows a one-dimensional strategy until it runs aground and only then reverses its course radically.

- *Malfunctioning chains*: In this scenario, opposing forces that could keep each other in balance are separated into different organisational units. These forces might include innovation and continuity, external focus and internal focus, conception and execution, or entrepreneurship and control. In itself, this can work fine. However, separate departments have a tendency to focus on their own (one-sided) objectives. As a result, this approach leads to suboptimal chains, with units working next to each other or even against each other: marketing vs. finance, projects vs. business as usual, sales vs. compliance, research & development vs. operations etc.
- *Paralysing dilemmas*: The hallmark of this scenario is endless and fruitless discussions on the best way forward. Do we need to change our organisation step by step or try to come up with an ambitious master plan? Do we need to take top-down measures or stimulate bottom-up initiatives? Do we need to change people's behaviours through structure or improve the structure through people's behaviours? There doesn't seem to be just one correct answer.
- *Uninspired solutions*: These occur when the organisations tries to reconcile opposite approaches, but gets no further than a feint and watered-down compromise. Could you provide an example to match points above?

In short: the 'either/or' way of thinking and acting often leads to a waste of resources, time and money, to inefficient solutions and even to a destruction of value.

### **We need to get better at handling opposites**

A better approach to complex challenges lies in a more balanced 'both-and' perspective. 'Both-and' thinking considers opposites as fundamentally equal and recognises that both opposing forces are needed to reach a balanced and sustainable solution. In other words, every problem of any importance requires a solution that involves both sides of the coin.

This shift from 'either-or' to 'both-and' is already evident in society. Borders between areas that were strictly separated in the past are rapidly fading, for example between work and home (working independent of place and time), between the organisation, its clients and its suppliers (co-creation and strategic partnerships), and between waste and resource (cradle to cradle).

### **Meet the 'paradoxical leader'**

The development of this fused culture demands a huge shift in the way businesses are led. As the boundaries between different spheres of activity blur, leaders must adopt a style of 'paradoxical leadership' where they think and act more inclusively, and are more effective at dealing with ambiguity and contradictions. In particular, this means:

- **Looking for connections**: Paradoxical leaders are more focused on looking for a connection than on enlarging a difference. Once they've found a connection, they try to reconcile the interests of different groups and units, such as the aspirations of employees and the aspirations of the organisation.
- **Making change inclusive**: Paradoxical leaders want to know how the strengths of 'the old' can be enriched with 'the new', instead of automatically choosing the opposite approach to that of their predecessors and throwing out all of the old as a key part of the problem.
- **Embracing co-creation**: Paradoxical leaders tend towards newer forms of co-operation and partnerships rather than get hung up with traditional organisational boundaries.
- **Emphasising sustainability**: Paradoxical leaders look for integral and sustainable solution to challenges such as how to reconcile continuous economic growth and hard ecological limitations, how to link short-term profits with long-term corporate health, and how to make sure that business, social and spiritual goals converge.

## **Black, white and many shades of grey**

Paradoxical leadership is a fresh of looking at the reality of modern business and a radically different way of dealing with opposites in general. Handling opposites flexibly and fluently helps leaders avoid getting stuck at either one or the other pole, and lets them maintain an overview at all times. It provides organisations, employees and leaders with the ability to be agile in an increasingly unpredictable, complex and rapidly changing world.

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Ivo Brughmans is a philosopher and management consultant. Living in Antwerp (Belgium), he supports organisations throughout Europe in redesigning and transforming their business. Ivo is fascinated by paradoxes and the challenge to bring together opposite approaches. In his previous book *The art of paradoxical life* (published in Dutch by Lannoo, 2013) he develops a 'both-and'-perspective as a radical alternative to our current way of living. In his most recent book *Paradoxical leadership* (published in Dutch by Boom Publishers Amsterdam, 2016) he applies the principles of 'both-and'-thinking to fundamental organizational and management challenges, like strategy development, business design, corporate governance, performance management, change, agility, innovation, diversity, culture transformation, leadership, talent development and HR policy. Ivo gives lectures, workshops and masterclasses on the principles of paradoxical thinking and how to apply these in everyday life, coaching, mediation, business and government. More information on [www.theartofparadoxicalife.com](http://www.theartofparadoxicalife.com). Contact: [info@dekunstvanhetparadoxaleleven.com](mailto:info@dekunstvanhetparadoxaleleven.com).