

Gain Strategic Agility through Paradoxical Leadership

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How do you lead with bold optimism while realistically recognizing and analyzing pitfalls... those you see and those you can't lying around the next corner? How do you balance the authoritative and collaborative components of group decision making, or drive your team with warmth and empathy while enforcing deadlines and objectives?

F. Scott Fitzgerald once said, *"The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposite ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function,"* which is a pretty good definition of paradox. All business leaders want to have first rate intelligence, but that's not easy when managing any business requires a balance of contradictions.

"Living with paradox is not comfortable or easy. It can be like walking in a dark wood on a moonless night. It is an eerie and at times, a frightening experience. All sense of direction is lost; trees and bushes crowd in on you; wherever you step, you bump into another obstacle; every noise and rustle is magnified; there is a whiff of danger; it seems safer to stand still than to move. Come the dawn, however, and your path is clear; the noises are now the songs of birds and the rustle in the undergrowth is only scuttling rabbits; trees define the path instead of blocking it. The woods are a different place. So will our world look different and less frightening if we can bring light to the paradoxes." Charles Handy, [The Age of Paradox](#)

We humans are actually paradoxical beings — we can, and hopefully do communicate both frankly and diplomatically at the same time. Too much frankness without sufficient diplomacy is blunt. Too much diplomacy without the complementary and seeming opposite frankness is evasive. Most of us struggle to achieve that paradoxical balance where someone receiving our communication is grateful for our comments even when they bring a gap in acceptable behavior to light. In fact, 12 paradoxical pairs of traits are measured by the [Harrison Assessment](#).

Realizing paradoxical imbalances and blind spots can help teams work more effectively and enhance the development of emerging leaders, among other benefits. According to Dr. Harrison, *"We generally recognize the benefits of our strong characteristics but we often fail to notice the unintended consequences that can occur from imbalances that hinder decisions, teamwork, collaboration, innovation and communication."*

Paradox is NOT trade-off, weighing the pros and cons then choosing one.

It is NOT compromise, finding common ground and blending both options.

It is holding the tension of both / AND.

At the senior executive level, consistently successful organizations are embracing "Paradoxical Leadership," taking this awareness of the power of paradoxes to heart and building *strategic agility*. Lego and Unilever are two examples of this, as presented in the research conducted by Marianne W. Lewis, Constantine Andriopoulos, Wendy K. Smith and presented in **"Paradoxical Leadership to Enable Strategic Agility."** According to the leaders of Unilever and Lego, being aware of and managing paradoxes in their leadership approach and communications with their team members, gave them strategic agility, and helped to bring clarity and focus onto those paradoxes they consciously and subconsciously dealt with every day, which were so influential in their communications and thought processes.

Unilever sought consistent flexibility and quick strategic responses to enable agility and leadership across

its extensive and varied product lines, and geographic regions. They were also looking to balance social responsibility against profitability, and focusing both on global and local markets. These paradox conflicts stretch resources and can cause conflict, so allocating resources appropriately and strategically managing the tension between the paradoxes is important.

Unilever's CEO Paul Polman said, *"The difference between average and outstanding firms is an 'AND' mentality'. We must find and create tensions – force people into different space for thinking... This is not just a performance issue but a survival issue, because managing paradox helps foster creativity and high performance."*



Lego, faced with a dramatically changing global toy market, restructured to become increasingly lean and agile – able to quickly adjust to market trends, while innovating and executing strategic changes rapidly. The paradoxes they identified were:

- Empowering and Controlling
- Teamwork and Individual Productivity
- Cohesiveness balanced with Individuality

Eleven paradoxes of leadership now hang on the wall of every manager at Lego, such as:

- To be able to build a close relationship with one's staff, **and** to keep a suitable distance.
- To be able to lead, **and** to hold oneself in the background

Simon Sinek says, *"One of the best paradoxes of leadership is a leader's need to be both stubborn and open-minded. A leader must insist on sticking to a vision and stay on course to the destination. And he must be open-minded during the process."*

In the end, to earn strategic agility that will not only create success but sustain it, thinking strategically requires thinking paradoxically. If succeeding and then sustaining that success were easy, everyone would be doing it.

"The right thing to do and the hard thing to do are usually the same."
Dr. Steve Maraboli



Pamela Stambaugh, President and Founder of [Accountability Pays](#), has delivered transformative results as an Executive Coach, Trainer and Facilitator for 30 years. She has provided [Harrison Assessment feedback](#) to over 2,500 executives as a coach and facilitator, including five years as a Vistage advisor to CEOs and their key executives. Pamela offers **Paradoxical Leadership** training in various packages to organizations desiring strategic agility. She also offers customized **Team Leader Effectiveness** courses utilizing Harrison Assessment's 12 paradoxes plus other assessments, through team and individual coaching. For more information, call 619-231-0195.

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