

Paradoxical Leadership and its Impact on Leaders

By

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Abstract

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Summary: Paradoxical leadership refers to a leadership that embraces and effectively manages tensions, complexities, and contradictions within the workplace. Organisations are operating in VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) world; hence, practising paradoxical leadership is necessary for leaders, especially future leaders. It may unlock benefits for followers. However, the impact on leaders who engage in paradoxical leadership has been overlooked in the leadership literature. To analyse paradoxical leadership, I drew on paradox theory and conducted 35 in-depth semi-structured interviews with leaders and followers in four multinational clothing companies in Bangladesh. I report only findings from the leaders' interviews in this development paper. This study unveils the impact of paradoxical leadership on leaders. In this paper, I discovered that paradoxical leadership helps leaders in job crafting, benefiting leaders in managing paradoxes within their organisation, which I am focusing on. Additionally, I uncovered the potential drawbacks associated with leaders who practice paradoxical leadership.

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Introduction

Organisations are operating in environments that are continuously becoming complex and unstable (Bunders and De Moor, 2023). Several factors, such as globalisation, technological advancements, incremental and radical innovation, rapid organisational changes, and increased conflicting demands, contribute to the complexity of the organisational environment. To cope with the complex and unstable environment, organisations require the capability to be innovative and effective simultaneously (Papachroni and Heracleous, 2020), resulting in tensions. These tensions seem individually purposeful or logical, but when they occur simultaneously, they can give rise to inconsistency and contradiction (Lewis, 2000). These tensions, inconsistencies and contradictions are known as paradoxes (Schad et al., 2019). Paradoxes can go beyond the simple idea of having only two opposite sides. They can be nested or embedded within each other, creating layers of complexity (Berti et al., 2021). This means that a single paradox can contain multiple paradoxes within it, each with its own set of contradictory yet interdependent elements. Paradoxical leadership is pertinent to manage paradoxes in organisations in constructive ways (Smith et al., 2017). It allows organisations to thrive in the face of ambiguity and encourages a more holistic and adaptive approach to leadership. Scholars advocate paradox theory as a provocative lens for responding to questions regarding the nature of paradox and how to manage it (Andriopolous et al., 2014; Smith and Lewis, 2012). Paradox theory represents tensions as contradictory demands, which are also persistent and interrelated, and actors should acknowledge, engage, and manage tensions rather than resolve them (Cunha and Putnam, 2019). Paradox theory is an approach of dealing with oppositions that proposes ‘a dynamic equilibrium model of organising that portrays how cyclical reactions to paradoxical tensions enable sustainability and provides peak performance in the present that supports future success’ (Smith and Lewis, 2011, p. 381). Paradox theory posits that tensions are inherent in complex systems, and that long-term sustainability requires simultaneous attention to contradictory yet intertwined needs (Cunha and Putnam, 2019). As a result, paradox theory is uniquely well placed to help understand and manage these tensions generated from such misbalance (Lewis, 2000; Cameron, 1986; Smith and Tracey, 2016).

Paradoxical leadership is needed because paradoxical leaders can manage ambiguity and unravel paradoxes and they encourage followers to actively search for and manage paradoxes (Fairhurst et al., 2016; Cunha and Putnam, 2019; Stewart et al., 2019). Additionally, paradoxical leaders provide guidance and assistance to followers in dealing with paradoxes, leading to greater adaptability and efficiency (Chen et al., 2021). So, practising paradoxical leadership helps leaders in navigating organisational tensions and paradoxes. Contemporary leadership studies have identified paradoxical leadership as a way to deal with organisation’s complexity, contradiction, tensions and uncertainty (Zhang et al., 2015; Papachroni and Heracleous, 2020). Adopting paradox theory as a theoretical lens is beneficial for understanding multidimensional paradoxes and paradoxical leadership (Lewis and Smith, 2014; Cunha and Putnam, 2019). Paradoxical leadership has gained considerable attention among scholars (Pearce et al., 2019; Putnam et al., 2016; Schad et al., 2016). Existing literature on paradoxical leadership has predominantly concentrated on followers (Chen et al., 2021). Still, very little is known in relation to its influence on leaders and how leaders are affected by engaging in paradoxical behaviour. Prior research has shown that paradoxical leadership influences followers (Zhang et al., 2015; Smith, Binns, and Tushman, 2010), while the impact on leaders who engage in paradoxical leadership has been overlooked (Chen et al., 2021; Ishaq et al., 2021). This is why my research focuses on paradoxical leadership's impact

on leaders by analysing the positive effects and potential drawbacks of practising paradoxical leadership.

Paradoxical Leadership

The construct of paradoxical leadership refers to leaders who simultaneously use two mutually opposing, interdependent, and complementary behaviours to satisfy structural and individual needs (individual needs of the leader and the follower) (Chen et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2015). Paradoxical leadership, which emphasises the coexistence of mutually interdependent aspects, is a process based on cognition and personal characteristics that manage organisational paradoxes by applying a "both-and" strategy instead of an "either-or" strategy (Zhang et al., 2015; Schad et al., 2016). According to Lavine (2014), paradoxical leadership is an effective leadership style as leaders demonstrate the ability to operate in diverse ways, encompassing both soft and hard approaches, quick and methodical, as well as creative and controlled. Lewis, Andriopoulos, and Smith (2014) highlight that leaders with paradoxical behaviour address multiple demands simultaneously. For example, paradoxical leaders possess the capacity to promote innovations while leveraging existing business operations. They operate within well-defined formal structures that aim for control while working devotedly to encourage collaboration (Li et al., 2018; Stewart et al., 2019).

Paradoxical leadership encompasses multifaceted impacts (Li et al., 2020). Positive impacts are felt by both the organisation and the leaders themselves. Organisationally, paradoxical leaders exhibit enhanced performance through *job crafting*. Job crafting means having the acumen to tailor job roles to align with their motivations and organisational objectives (Berg, Dutton and Wrzesniewski, 2008). Job crafting helps paradoxical leaders simplify their jobs to manage setbacks and challenges by taking on fewer or more tasks, changing the extent of their relationship at work. Job crafting also helps them to cognitively change their job by altering how they perceive tasks. Thus, paradoxical leaders embrace contradictions to find opportunities within adversity and maintain a sense of purpose and direction during difficult times (Yang et al., 2019). Furthermore, they are adept at motivating subordinates to actively confront and engage with challenges, thereby bolstering organisational performance. On the leader front, paradoxical leadership involves leaders' cognitive abilities and personal characteristics (Zhang et al., 2015). It positively influences leaders' self-confidence and self-efficacy (Li et al., 2020). They develop the ability to weigh conflicting factors and perspectives, leading to more comprehensive and effective solutions. Additionally, paradoxical leadership equips leaders with the requisite skills to manage stress and regulate emotions, even amid demanding circumstances. Thus, it is associated with positive behavioural outcomes. While paradoxical leadership has positive impacts on both organisations and leaders, this research specifically focuses on how paradoxical leadership impacts leaders through job crafting.

Research Method

This research follows inductive reasoning employing qualitative semi-structured interviews, allowing me to interpret the individual's perspective by understanding the individual's reaction and behaviour in different contexts (Bryman and Bell, 2015, p. 495). I have chosen multinational clothing companies in Bangladesh because Bangladesh is the second largest garment exporters in the global apparel market (World trade organization, 2023, p.80) and these multinational clothing companies significantly to Bangladesh's economy. As reported by McKinsey & Company, the ready-made garment (RMG) industry, which includes many

multinational companies, accounts for 84% of Bangladesh's exports (Berg et al., 2021). In these companies, there is a need to understand how different leadership styles impact productivity, employee satisfaction, and organisational culture. Therefore, I want to explore how leaders working in multinational companies effectively tailor their global leadership strategies to enhance management practices within the unique Bangladeshi context. I have conducted 35 semi-structured interviews (18 managers and 17 team members). My participants are managers who lead their followers and teams of any specific department and the team members in the organisation. It is essential to comprehend the perspective of managers and team members to understand the impact of paradoxical leadership on leaders. That is why I have considered managers and team members as my participants. Each interview takes approximately 1 to 1.5 hours, depending on the rapport with the interviewee, the richness of the discussion and the contextual complexity they talked about. The interview guideline is prepared by structuring the main topics that need to be covered to address the research questions. Two sets of interview questions are prepared to address managers and the team members in the organisation.

To ensure that all participants were aware of their rights, privacy, and to prevent any harm resulting from my research, I followed ethical guidance (Bryman and Bell, 2015, pp 128-132) and obtained ethical approval for the study through my institution.

To analyse the data, I have utilised thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and NVivo (version 14) due to my familiarity with the software. It allows me to organise my themes by dragging codes from one group to another. It is a unified workspace where I can efficiently arrange and analyse the entire dataset. It helps me ensure my analysis's conceptual clarity and thoroughness (Jackson and Bazeley, 2019, p.105).

Discussion of findings

The key contributions of this study underscore that paradoxical leadership manifests both positive and negative impacts on leaders. As a positive impact, I found that paradoxical leadership facilitates job crafting (which has been defined and discussed extensively in the literature, e.g., Kooij et al., 2017), and I aim to enrich the understanding of how paradoxical leadership helps leaders in job crafting. On a more negative note, I identified that behaving paradoxically may tax leaders' cognitive resources, which can cause leaders to experience psychological stress (which has also been discussed extensively by, for example, She et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2020).

The findings around job crafting refer to paradoxical leaders actively customising their jobs to better align with their skills, needs, and goals. For example, they are doing additional tasks for efficiency, such as creating a process to save time from repetitive work. They are good at job crafting because they are conscious of structural and individual needs. One participant says,

"Merchandisers leave the fabric samples scattered throughout the office. I hate disorganised things. Therefore, I create a tidy process for organising samples, even though it is not my job. Establishing this process in the office was not easy. I had to fight for it in several managers' meetings, even though I prefer to remain calm and quiet. Locating the necessary samples in storage is much easier, and the office appears more organised."

This quote demonstrates managing paradoxes for two reasons. Firstly, the participant operates in a complex, messy environment but employs a simple, tidy process through job crafting, thus dealing complexity with simplicity. Secondly, the participant works against their personality traits to achieve this.

Paradoxical leaders demonstrate the capacity for strategic job crafting, promptly leveraging their cognitive ability to interact and maintain stakeholder relationships. This way paradoxical leaders can manage the uncertainty and ambiguity at work. One participant reflects,

"I maintain good relationships with government officials at the airport. As a result, I receive their assistance whenever I require special support for our business. This approach saves me a significant amount of time and hassle."

This quote represents managing paradoxes by maintaining relationships with external stakeholders (airport officials). The participant goes beyond the scope of their job requirements to foster these relationships, aiming to deal with uncertainty effectively.

Paradoxical leaders can use two mutually opposing, interdependent, and complementary behaviours. One participant says,

"I strictly adhere to project deadlines and communicate this expectation clearly to my team at the beginning of any project. I consistently empower my team members. Establishing clear alignment minimises the time, energy, and back-and-forth involved in decision-making."

This quote represents paradoxical behaviour as the participant empowers their followers and controls them with strict deadlines and work outcomes. They communicate expectations at the beginning of a project to alter job boundaries, which minimises iterative decision-making processes.

However, paradoxical leadership can also have a negative impact on leaders. Paradoxical leaders continuously face tensions, challenges, complexities and higher expectations that require them to use their psychological, cognitive, and emotional resources, inevitably increasing their stress (which has been discussed extensively by, for example, She et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2020). Leaders employing paradoxical leadership embrace "both-and" behaviours that simultaneously acknowledge and integrate opposing demands to derive benefits from the underlying paradox. Engaging in paradoxical behaviour imposes a cognitive load on paradoxical leaders because paradoxical leadership puts pressure on leaders as a challenge stressor that promotes leadership progress. Challenge stressor is one kind of work stressor, encompassing factors like time pressure, workload, and job complexity (as seen in the literature, e.g., Cavanaugh et al., 2000; Zheng et al., 2020). This sort of challenge stressor encourages leaders to achieve better task performance. One participant expresses,

"Facing tensions and complex situations stress me but contribute to my professional maturity."

Challenge stressors can influence individuals' intrinsic motivation and thinking, subsequently impacting their work attitudes and behaviours. One participant says,

"I often observe that the top management loses their temper due to job complexities and tensions, leading them to shout and scream at employees. I feel frustrated, and thus, I try to remain calm with my subordinates, even amidst complexities and tensions."

While dealing with challenge stressors, paradoxical leadership demands cognitive and emotional resources, which induce pressure on leaders, potentially leading to psychological stress (also found by Cavanaugh et al., 2000). One participant shares,

"In my first organisation, I struggled to manage the tensions. I was feeling trapped with no apparent alternatives. As a result, I resigned without thinking that I had no job lined up."

Paradoxical leadership might adversely affect a leader's self-confidence and self-efficacy if a paradoxical leader cannot manage the psychological stress in the long run. Therefore, paradoxical leadership can cause adverse effects on leaders' intrapersonal skills (i.e., self-confidence and self-efficacy).

Conclusion

This research explores paradoxical leadership and analyses its impacts on leaders from the theoretical lens of paradox theory. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by emphasising the influence and practical implications of paradoxical leadership on leaders. In particular, I highlight both the potential benefits and drawbacks experienced by leaders engaged in paradoxical leadership. Paradoxical leadership enables leaders in job crafting. Job crafting encourages paradoxical leaders to customise their jobs to align more closely with their motivations and strengths. It assists paradoxical leaders in managing organisational tensions and paradoxes, fostering career resilience. However, this engagement in paradoxical behaviour also imposes a cognitive burden on leaders, leading to psychological stress. This stress may have adverse effects on the leaders' self-confidence and self-efficacy. Overall, the benefits of paradoxical leadership outweigh the drawbacks, yet paradoxical leaders need to be mindful of its potential drawbacks. This study opens the door for further research into job crafting as a mechanism of paradoxical leadership, broadly complementing existing research on paradoxical leadership. Additionally, it provides an opportunity to analyse paradoxical leaders' psychological mechanisms and subsequent behaviours.

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