

# Paradoxical Leadership for everyone

## *8 practical tips for your daily work*

Ivo Brughmans



### **How can you deal effectively with opposite directions and dilemmas in your daily work?**

*You would really like to make fast progress but also to coordinate your project with other functions. You want to maintain consistency, but you notice that this specific case requires a slightly different approach. Your customer demands a lot of individual attention, but you still have a pile of work waiting for you...*

Every day, you are confronted with the tension between opposite approaches and goals. You frequently feel compelled to make an 'unambiguous choice' because that provides clarity and guidance...But is that necessary... and does it result in effective and sustainable solutions?

In our world of growing complexity where ambiguity is the standard, you are increasingly expected to be able to work with contradictory information and to connect opposing goals and perspectives with each other. Mechanically applying clear and unambiguous 'if-then'-rules no longer works. Moreover, the pace of change is high and ever increasing and requires you to switch swiftly between at times opposite paths to reach your goal. How do you do this without contradicting yourself and how can you clearly justify your choices afterwards?

These challenges require a new way of thinking: more in terms of 'both-and' than of 'either-or'. Paradoxical leadership is precisely about using the tension between opposites as a creative force. Making choices that do justice to both sides of the coin. Paradoxical leadership shows that more is possible than just the extremes or a grey compromise. It challenges us to find creative ways of connecting approaches that at first glance seem to exclude each other.

Being able to deal effectively and inclusively with conflicting goals, perspectives, demands, values and approaches is a skill that requires personal mastery, where you can really make a difference.

How to do this? Here are some tips to put paradoxical leadership into practice:

1. Make the polarities you are dealing with every day explicit and acknowledge that the tensions they generate are fundamentally unsolvable. Make it clear to the people around you that you continuously have to balance between opposing goals and that, depending on the situation, you have to shift a little more to the left or to the right, but that you always stay connected to both sides.
2. Be aware of how the dynamic between movement and countermovement often unconsciously determines our behavior and that of our organization. For example: 'If everyone is into innovation, I unconsciously start to 'lean towards' a more conservative perspective or vice versa.' Determine consciously your own course, instead of being the ignorant victim of this dynamic.
3. Bring the inner tensions that you feel to the surface and make them the topic of discussion. For example, instead of only feeling irritation, uncertainty, doubt, inner struggle, conflicting interests etc. inside yourself, voice them. This will deblock the situation.
4. Appreciate differences instead of smoothing them over or magnifying them. Actively look for people with radically different perspectives and enter into the dialogue so you can enrich your vision/approach.
5. Know and appreciate your own preferred style, but also recognize the power of the opposite style. Perhaps you can adopt some aspects of it without losing your own authenticity.
6. Set seemingly opposing goals as a creative challenge to come up with really innovative solutions. For example, how can I increase both speed and quality in writing my e-mails.
7. Anticipate that every movement you introduce will evoke a countermovement. Create the necessary space for this countermovement. For example, if you want to introduce more rigorous structure, discipline and planning in your work, also build in some moments of creative chaos and dolce far niente.
8. Be open and authentic in your communications, and always present both sides of the coin, even though they are not equally PR-fit. For example, 'With this project we want to improve the customer experience but also save significant costs.' Be transparent about your own inner struggle instead of trying sell one side as the 'ideal solution'. For example: 'We have to continuously balance between giving personal attention and working quickly and efficiently and in this case speed and efficiency prevail.'

---

[Ivo Brughmans](#) is a philosopher and management consultant. In his previous book [The Art of the Paradoxical Life](#) ('De kunst van het paradoxale leven', Lannoo, 2013) he developed the 'both-and' perspective as a radical alternative to our current way of living. In his latest book [Paradoxical Leadership](#) ('Paradoxaal leiderschap', Boom Uitgevers Amsterdam, 2016) he applies this 'both-and' thinking to organizational and management issues. See also [www.paradoxical-leadership.com](http://www.paradoxical-leadership.com).