

Two sides to everything

Your effectiveness and satisfaction will be enhanced if you recognise there are two sides to everything. Two sides to everything creates paradoxes in our personal and professional lives and if you learn to manage the tensions posed by these paradoxes they become game changers for yourself, your team and your organisation.

Paradox is pervasive

Today's organisations are uncertain and complex environments that continuously create conflicting demands for executives. A [paper](#) from the Center for Creative Leadership explains how these demands manifest as tensions: control versus empowerment as a leader; task versus relationship in teamwork; competition versus collaboration in strategy; centralised versus localized authority in the structure; and work versus home tensions in your life.

Use of the word 'versus' five times in the previous paragraph illustrates how the tensions are typically – and unhelpfully – viewed. For as long as you frame these tensions as *either/or* problems, you will be conflicted and waste precious emotional and physical energy. Far better to see them as paradoxes to be understood and coped with by reframing them as two-sided dilemmas, where neither is right or wrong, good or bad. Put another way, these are *both/and* problems and must be managed as such.

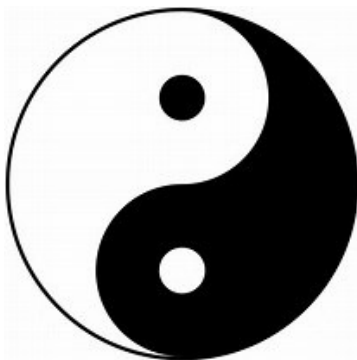
Paradox in life dates back to ancient philosophies, e.g. the male and female of Hinduism and the yin and the yang of Taoism. They are far from new. Only recently have organisational scholars brought them to our attention.

Importance of understanding paradox

'Paradox' is used to describe the tensions that arise when situations have two sides that pull in opposite directions, creating conflicting demands. It's important of the each side has a positive and negative aspect. The sides co-exist and are complementary.

For example, rigorous analysis of the numerical facts of a situation at the expense of what peers feel about its consequences can obscure the probability of encountering resistance to change. What the executives in this situation failed to grasp was that too much focus on numbers, however compelling, created a blind spot.

A one-sided, or polar, view deprives you of awareness of and input from the other side. In addition, becoming overly attached to one pole prevents you from recognising its downside. In this case a strength becomes a weakness. Barry Johnson has written an excellent [book](#) on this subject, *Polarity management: Identifying and managing unsolvable problems*.



Seen this way, executive paradoxes have common characteristics: they are not problems to be solved – they are not solvable; without being attuned to their existence, they are difficult to discern – and therefore remain unmanaged; dealing with paradoxes produces better results. Ultimately managing paradox requires developing an executive mindset beyond simplistic *either/or* or *right/wrong* logic.

The yin-yang symbol of eastern philosophy is a beautiful way of portraying paradox. As you look at the symbol you see two opposite elements that contain the 'seed' of the other. This is a reminder that there are always two-sides of a situation and one side is never a pure perspective; it always has the seed of the other – and can be balanced by the other.

Recognising and accepting a paradox is the first step to coping and benefiting, as I now show in examining the management–leadership paradox.

Management and leadership defined

John Kotter of Harvard has made us all aware of the differences between management and leadership. To recap. Management is about dealing with complexity by bringing order and consistency to organisational processes that contribute to quality and the management of risk. For example, management involves plans, budgets, analysis, structure, control and problem solving. Using a sailing metaphor, management is the keel on the boat – it keeps things stable. Whereas leadership is about dealing with change in volatile, technologically driven environments. Leadership sets direction, communicates vision, is creative and flexible, and aligns and inspires people. Using a sailing metaphor again, leadership is the spinnaker that powers the boat.

Standing back, it's not too difficult to see that an effective organisation requires both management and leadership in equal and complementary degrees. But where does this leave the individual executive: Are you a leader or are you a manager? Or are you both? This is a classic paradox. You are either a leader with the seed of a manager or a manager with the seed of a leader in the yin-yang model.

Case study

Peter found himself as a senior executive in charge of a troubled business unit. He understood the challenges involved coping with substantial complexity and making major changes. And time was not on his side. Being consultative by nature, he sought input from peers and superiors.

On the one hand he heard proponents of *management* urge more detailed plans for his line managers to report against, new control measures, and a review of structure. Instinctively Peter knew that too much management would be stifling and he might lose some of his top talent. Yet there was no doubt that the 'loose cannons' were causing difficulties and key external stakeholders were concerned about continuity of supply and quality of services. On the other hand the proponents of *leadership* argued there was little intrinsically wrong with the organisation. Its problems lay in being allowed to drift for too long with its people bunkered in silos and lacking real purpose in their jobs. With too much empowerment Peter sensed would come chaos and dilution of effort in pursuit of the main game.

On which should Peter focus? The answer is *both*. Too much management at the expense of leadership would be paralyzing. And the opposite would be disarray. In the short- and long-term he needed to balance management and leadership in himself and in his immediate team. Handling the paradox was essential. Thinking the management end of the spectrum was the problem and leadership was the solution, i.e. *either/or* thinking, would doom him to failure. He had to operate on both ends simultaneously, i.e. adopt *both/and* thinking. Peter did this by enunciating and driving actions to maximise the positives at both ends of the management–leadership spectrum, and using early warning signs to detect and minimise the negatives of too much of one end.

Conclusion

Too many hold the view that leaders make more of a difference than managers do. This is not only misguided; it deprives those with this mindset from developing as fully effectiveness executives.

The real insight is not to turn management–leadership polarities into either/or thinking, but to accept and work with the differences to tap the power of both. There are two sides to everything; use both.

Learn more about executive paradoxes

- + [Managing Paradox](#) from the Center for Creative Leadership
- + [What do leaders really do](#) by John Kotter