

# THE LEADERSHIP PARADOX

50 000? That's the number of leadership books listed on Amazon!

Clearly there is no definitive answer regarding what constitutes effective leadership. Maybe its time we reframe the question to embrace the inherent paradoxes all leaders need to navigate, and avoid our typical binary thinking on this topic? As F Scott Fitzgerald profoundly observed: *"The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function."*



## Fluid leadership

Fluid is probably one of the words that best describes our current COVID-19 state. Leadership is always about context, and hence our leaders need to embrace this fluidity and the inherent paradoxes that come with it.

Leadership paradoxes are those ongoing challenges between two interdependent sides, neither of which on their own can stand as the correct and permanent answer. There are positives and negatives to each side, and if you lead only from one side, you will inevitably experience their downside. For example: leaders need to be both task AND people orientated. If nothing is delivered a leader will be deemed ineffective and lack credibility. Conversely, if all that is focused on is execution, the leader ignores the reality that people are central to delivering on strategy and tasks. Therefore both task and relationships are essential for truly effective leadership

In order to manage these paradoxes, leaders need to be "fluid". This is not being wishy-washy, but rather being realistic when dealing with the complexity of a VUCA world.

## How do you rate as a Fluid Leader?

Here are some crucial leadership paradoxes that illustrate the fluidity needed and their outcomes if managed well. Rate yourself on scale of 1=very poor to 10=exceptional. To overcome self-rater bias get some of your peers/staff to give you an honest appraisal...

5 KEY LEADERSHIP PARADOXES	
<p><b>People (relationship orientated):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Builds a diverse network of mutually beneficial relationships.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Task (results driven):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deliverables are completed on time and to an exceptional level.</li> </ul>
<b>Leads to followership</b>	
<p><b>Consideration (empathy):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Genuinely listens to understand the underlying concerns/needs of the individual/team.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Candour (courage):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourages rigorous debate and candor.</li> </ul>
<b>Leads to authenticity</b>	
<p><b>Creative thinking:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Brings new and/or different insights, practices and approaches.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Analytical thinking:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Accurately identifies the root causes/leverage points.</li> </ul>
<b>Leads to wise decisions</b>	
<p><b>Strategic:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sets a clear long-term direction.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Ops-Tactical:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Builds efficient, high performing systems.</li> </ul>
<b>Leads to execution</b>	
<p><b>Change:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Anticipates trends within/outside the organisation and acts upon them.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Stability:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Articulates and sticks to key priorities.</li> </ul>
<b>Leads to sustainability</b>	

Do you tend to be on the one side of the table more than the other, ignore specific paradoxes altogether, or are you quite fluid and move easily between the two sides as and when the context demands it?

At this point it is important to note that leadership is a team sport. It would be unrealistic to expect a leader to embody all of these paradoxes, but they must appreciate them and build a team of leaders that will contribute into these domains. Too often I see an executive that hires and promotes those that see the world they do, when what they really need is cognitive diversity.

## What are the benefits of Fluid leadership?

It allows leaders to be more realistic, relevant and ready for change. Let's explore the 3 R's further..

### *Realistic:*

- reframing your leadership paradoxes to become complementary solutions not entrenched, binary differences (a broader perspective);
- exploring opportunities and advantages in paradoxes rather than suppressing or denying them (a deeper perspective).

### *Relevant:*

- exposing and interpreting recurring chronic issues, especially in multi-national/multi-cultural contexts;
- looking for clues in mixed messages for a source of hidden paradoxes.

### *Readiness for change:*

- working through resistance to change by providing an approach and tools to make sense of the "AND";
- perpetuating continuous improvement that creates upwards virtuous cycles.

In closing let us capture the power of fluid leadership through Rebecca Solnit's words: "If gold has been prized because it is the most inert element, changeless and incorruptible, water is prized for the opposite reason; its fluidity, mobility, changeability that make it a necessity and a metaphor for life itself. To value gold over water is to value economy over ecology, that which can be locked up over that which connects all things."

PS: If the Fluid Leadership approach appeals to you, please contact me on [mark@synenergy.world](mailto:mark@synenergy.world) and we can see how it could be used from a 360-degree leadership assessment and training/coaching intervention perspective.

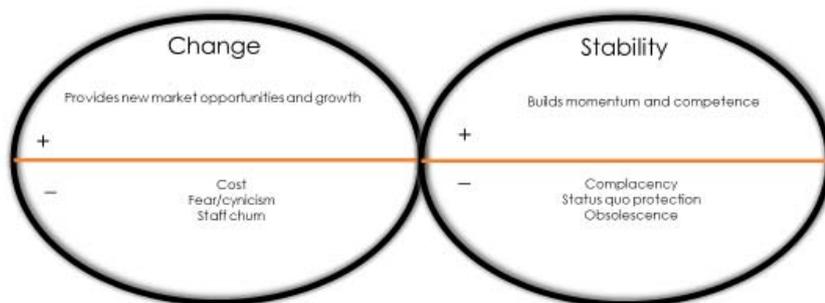
PART 2:

### **How to navigate paradoxes fluidly?**

Firstly, we need to recognize leadership paradoxes when we see them. We then need to adopt an infinity loop mindset, where we fluidly move between the positives of both sides, whilst avoiding the downsides as much as possible.

A practical way of doing this is creating a circle and dividing it into 4 quadrants, on the left you have one side of the paradoxes with its positives in the top left quadrant and its negatives in the bottom left quadrant. Then you do the same for on the right-hand side for the other alternative e.g. change/stability paradoxes explained below.

## Change and stability infinity loop



You then orientate your leadership team by asking the following questions:

1. What can we do to ensure the benefits of both the upper quadrants?
2. When do you know you are in the "comfort zone" or are over-playing your strength?
3. How will you know when it's time to shift focus from one side of the paradoxes to the other side?
4. What team behaviours help/hinder us from moving smoothly through the infinity loop?
5. What structures/processes might help us better balance the 2 sides of the paradoxes so its ritualized into our way of operating?
6. How can we educate ourselves and others (leaders and followers) to see the full picture of this paradoxes (both positives and negatives)?

It would be unrealistic to expect a leader to be exceptional in all of these dimensions, and this is where the power of their team becomes crucial so that the leaders gaps are complemented by others. Leadership is ironically therefore a team sport, and real attention must not focus solely on the leader and his/her skillset, but that of their leadership team as well. The ability to supplement and cover each gap creates the synergies and excellence that is missing when its all about the ONE leader.

There has been a big focus on strengths in the last 20 years, as many thought leaders have moved away from the deficit model of development. Whilst there are some merits in this approach, we must be careful of an over-simplistic application of this approach. I see many examples where peoples strengths, become over-developed and ironically become their Achilles Heel. The antidote? Fluidly moving between the inherent paradoxes.

In conclusion:

Lets move away from cookie-cutters, they are only good for the kitchen. Be realistic and embrace the inherent leadership paradoxes, and together with our leadership teams and play to their strengths, whilst being mindful that we will need to work both sides that paradoxes present.

If you are interested in exploring, measuring and developing leadership from a perspective that truly embraces this approach, contact Mark on [mark@synenergy.world](mailto:mark@synenergy.world)