

The paradox of paradoxes

Why the perceived paradoxes facing organizational leaders are material illusions that simultaneously attract and repel

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Abstract

Interest in the apparent paradoxes facing organizational leaders has grown substantially. But are paradoxes real or artificial constructs? The paradox of paradoxes is that they are *material illusions*: phantastic objects forged by individual and group desires for conformity and cohesion that are nonetheless invaluable to address.

Keywords

Paradox, social defenses, primary task, phantastic objects, conformity, reconfiguration.

Word count: 12,867

Introduction

Paradox. A word that evokes, dare I say, paradoxical feelings. Clarity and confusion. Possibility and constraints. Historically, philosophers and physicists pondered the essence of paradox. The famous Socratic paradox: I know that I know nothing. The Liar's paradox: This statement is false. Schrödinger's cat, which is simultaneously alive and dead.

Over the past few decades, paradox, which this paper defines as “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time,” has become a field of interest for organizational scholars (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382). That's no surprise. The very idea of an organization has a seeming paradox at its heart, because “on the one hand it contains free, creative, independent human subjects; on the other hand, the relation between these subjects aspires to be one of organization, order and control” (Clegg, Cunha, & Cunha, 2002, p. 483). Today's world is increasingly characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. The leadership challenges of this so-called VUCA world are increasingly “adaptive,” meaning they can't be solved by technical application of known methodologies (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linksy, 2009). Data suggests that leaders feel like they do indeed have to do it all. A report by AlixPartners, a consulting company, found that 85 percent of CEOs said that disruptive change, defined as something that displaces “existing businesses, markets, and value networks in favor of newer ecosystems and relationships,” was their primary strategic challenge (AlixPartners, 2021). Dealing with disruption requires

that leaders simultaneously think and act in multiple frames that at best appear to be in conflict, and at worst appear to indeed be paradoxical. Running today is about working from the present forward, carefully planning, thoughtfully analyzing, and executing with discipline; creating tomorrow involves intuitively working from the future back, experimenting, and taking intelligent risks. The leadership imperative is clear: almost two-thirds of companies are currently experiencing disruption, but research shows that only three percent of companies have made meaningful progress in strategic transformation (Abbosh, 2018; Anthony, Trotter, Bell, & Schwartz, 2019). CEOs believe that innovative thinking is the most important skill for up-and-coming leaders (The Conference Board, 2021). However, innovation inside an established organization seems to teem with paradox. For example, leaders are told they have to be ambidextrous by simultaneously exploiting current opportunities and exploring new ones (Smith & Tushman, 2005). Innovation requires confronting fundamental tensions such as “destroying past understanding to construct new and more complicated frames of reference” (Lewis, 2000, p. 765) or in layperson language, “forgetting to learn.” Mastering these specific paradoxes requires adopting broader paradoxical behaviors such as being “comfortable with discomfort” and “consistently inconsistent.”

Despite the apparent challenges, the struggle to grapple with these kinds of paradoxical demands is somewhat perplexing. As described in the literature review section, a scholarly community has formed around paradox, providing a robust definition of types of organizational paradoxes (Smith & Lewis, 2011), describing conditions that influence paradox (Berti & Simpson, 2021; Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith, & Lewis, 2018), detailing options leaders have in the face of paradox (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009), exploring tactics that increase the odds of “transcending” paradox (Knight & Paroutis, 2017; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Smith, 2014), explaining capabilities that maximize the resonance of high-impact strategies (Hannah, Balthazard, Waldman, Jennings, & Thatcher, 2013; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018), and defining the challenges and opportunities paradox presents (Berti & Simpson, 2021; Miron-Spektor, Gino, & Argote, 2011; Smith & Besharov, 2019). Why is it, then, that so many organizations seem stuck in paradox?

That was my original research question. I aspired to construct a “paradox toolkit” that synthesized and simplified relevant academic literature and then conduct action research to tease out individual and group barriers inhibiting the toolkit’s application. Along the way, however, a more foundational question emerged. Are the paradoxes researchers have

identified in organizations real or perceptual? And if they are perceptual, why do they persist? While the academic literature has presented various viewpoints that touch on this topic, it has not looked at it from the viewpoint of how individuals experience paradox. I conducted Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) on 11 research subjects to assess their general experience with paradox and their specific experience considering a set of paradoxical leader behaviors that help to transcend paradox. While individual experience with paradox varied widely, three key themes emerged from analyzing the interviews (summarized in **Figure 1**).

Figure 1: Analysis of IPA interviews

Paradox is perceived to be powerful	True paradox is timeless	Religion
		Nature and math
	Confronting paradox leads to growth	Resolution of problems
		Personal development
	Examining paradox leads to reflection	Surfaces subconscious issues
		Raises questions
Provides a way to evaluate leaders		
Paradox generates a range of emotions	Positive feelings	Curious
		Excited
		Empowered and engaged
	Negative feelings	Fear
		Pain
		Powerless
	Paradoxical feelings	“Unsettled but good”
“A pleasant struggle”		
Context heavily influences the experience of paradox	Structural influencers	Individual role
		Type of organization
	Individual perceptions & capabilities	Time horizon
		Experiences and social context
		Mental capacity / capabilities
		Frame of analysis

First, paradox is perceived to be powerful. There is a timelessness to it, with many individuals speaking about it in language that bordered on awe. Individuals noted how

wrestling with paradox was a vehicle to both drive personal growth and to create breakthrough solutions to seemingly intractable problems. And the very process of examining paradox led to deep reflection. Second, paradox generates a range of emotion. Some of those emotions, like curiosity, and excitement, are positive. Some of those emotions, like pain and powerlessness, are negative. And, of course, sometimes paradox produces paradoxical emotions. Interview subjects reported feeling “unsettled but good,” and noted how thinking about paradox was a “pleasant struggle.” Finally, context heavily influences the experience of paradoxes. The perception of paradox is heavily influenced by both the structure in which an individual operates as well as their own background, perceptions, capabilities, and experiences.

The research suggests a paradox of paradoxes: organizational paradoxes are *material illusions*. They are *illusions* in that they generally are mental or system constructs that can be resolved via reframing or focused interventions. They are *material* because the process of wrestling with them, and developing the capabilities to wrestle with them, enable personal growth and development. Spiking beneath the surface using systems psychodynamics suggests three fundamental barriers inhibiting piercing through the illusionary shroud of organizational paradox:

1. Transcending a perceived paradox threatens a group’s social identity.
2. Individuals using the capabilities that enable transcending a perceived paradox can isolate themselves from the group.
3. Developing the capabilities to grapple with paradox requires challenging introspection and self-realization.

All of this leaves leaders with a choice. There’s no doubt that tackling perceived paradoxes presents challenges and requires work. It is easier for leaders to collectively wave their hands, sigh, shrug their shoulders, and say, “What can I do? It is a paradox.” In organizations, however, it isn’t. Perceived paradoxes can be dissected and transcended, turning helplessness into empowerment.

The pages that follow will detail the path that led to this conclusion.

Research aims and objectives

I have spent the last two decades as a researcher and a strategic advisor connected to Clayton Christensen's groundbreaking research on the dilemmas posed by disruptive change. Specifically, since 2003, as a partner at Innosight, a growth strategy consultancy co-founded by Christensen, I and my colleagues have advised organizations around the globe on how to navigate disruptive change. As I began exploring the paradox literature, I saw themes that connected to issues that Innosight's clients face on a regular basis. Further exploration led to the creation of a research study with two primary objectives.

My first objective was to synthesize the academic literature into a practical, practitioner-friendly toolkit that would have three components:

1. A clear definition of paradox, including relevant categories and a simple "litmus test" to evaluate potential issues.
2. A set of practical tools and approaches to help leaders grapple with paradox, including step-by-step instructions to use the most powerful tools.
3. Techniques to build or strengthen capabilities that enable effective use of tools and approaches.

The key components of the toolkit appear in **Appendix 1**.

The second objective was to answer two key questions. I started with the question of what is blocking the use of tools and approaches that help to confront paradox? It is a real mystery. Leaders have to deal with unprecedented levels of uncertainty and change in the form of exponentially advancing technologies, blurring competitive boundaries, shifting demands from customers and stakeholders, and geopolitical shifts and shocks. Many of the specific challenges seem to fit the definition of a paradox: opposed forces that appear together and seem impossible to reconcile. The literature details the power of a proactive approach to address those challenges and describes accessible tools and approaches. Why then is it that there is so little awareness of this literature and these tools and approaches?

As I built the paradox toolkit, a serendipitous moment surfaced a more foundational question. I was wrestling with two papers that presented different instruments to assess the degree to which a leader is following "paradoxical leader behaviors" that materially boost organizational performance (Zhang & Han, 2019; Zhang, Waldman, Han, & Li, 2015). I couldn't decide which instrument was more pertinent, so I decided to create a short survey

asking people to rank order nine categories from the two articles, with the idea of creating a “mash-up” of the two instruments. After completing the survey, one person e-mailed me saying, “Done! That was surprisingly hard. Very keen to learn more about the research.”

That moment surfaced an issue that had been lurking at the edge of my consciousness. Paradoxes in philosophy, literature, and science are clear, intellectually rich, and definitionally impossible to truly solve. Organizational paradoxes, on the other hand, seem different. What did it mean that the first four people who answered my survey gave completely different responses? Could this straightforward survey, I wondered, serve as a way to create a common phenomenon across a disparate group of people that each would also have their own lived experience with organizational paradoxes?

Therefore, I finalized two research objectives:

1. Synthesize and simplify the paradox literature into a practitioner-friendly paradox toolkit.
2. Answer two critical questions: Is paradox real, or is it perceptual? Does the answer to this question help explain what is blocking the use of tools and approaches that help to confront paradox?

Literature review

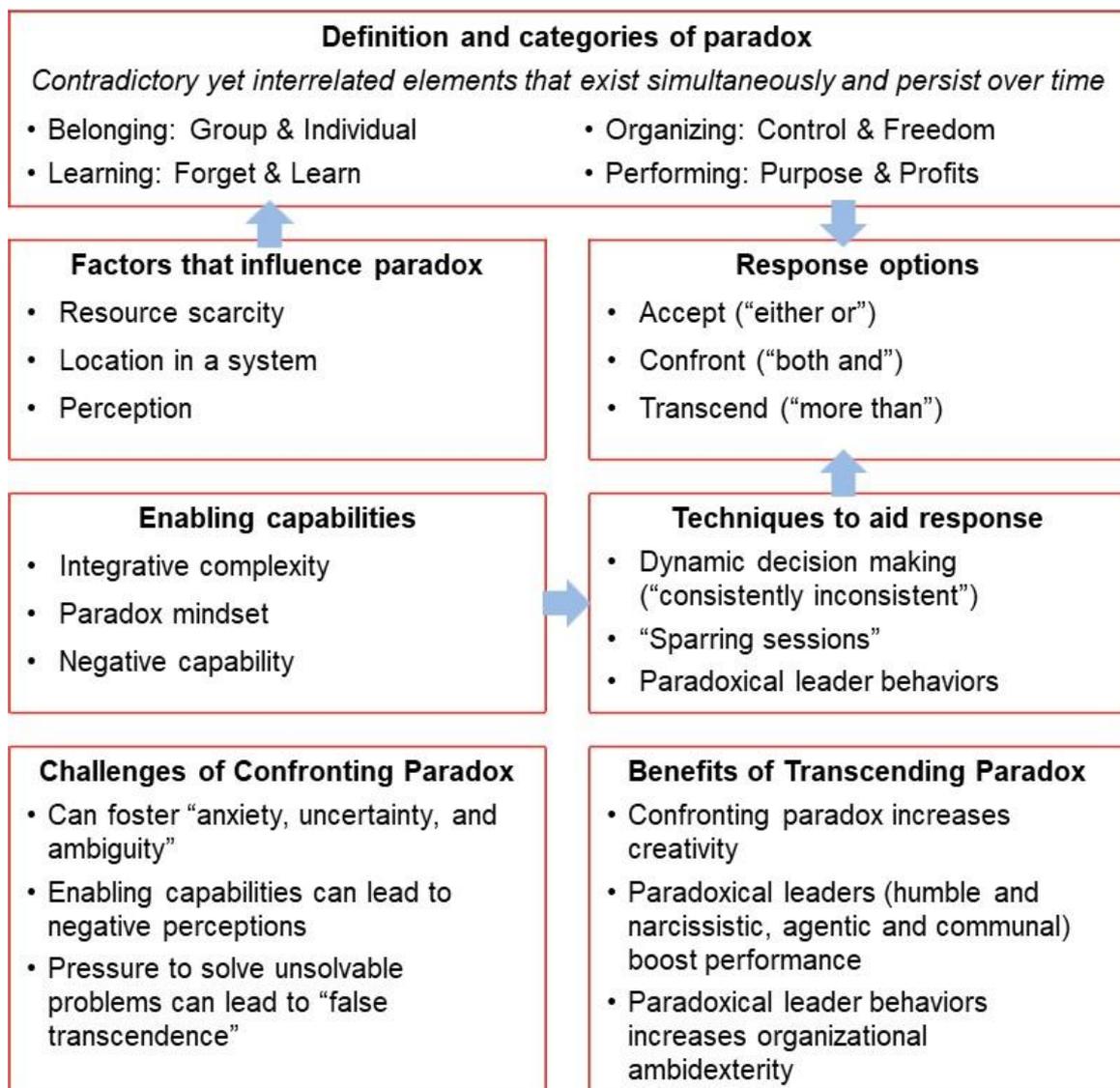
The concept of paradoxes has existed in philosophy for millennia. For example, consider Chapter 36 of the *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu (Mitchell, 1999):

*If you want to shrink something,
you must first allow it to expand.
If you want to get rid of something,
you must first allow it to flourish.
If you want to take something,
you must first allow it to be given.*

Paradox made occasional appearances in the leadership and organizational literature during the 20th century. For example, a 1979 book showed how artistic achievement often came from transcending paradoxes, such as how composers like Beethoven and Mozart combined harmony and discord, using silence as a form of sound (Rothenberg, 1979). In the 1980s and

1990s the concept often appeared together with the seeds of what became the scholarly field of ambidexterity, which holds that organizations have to confront the tension between exploiting today and exploring tomorrow (Denison, Hooijberg, & Quinn, 1995; March, 1991; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Then, in October 2000, Marianne Lewis published a powerful article in *Academy of Management Review* describing the opportunities and challenges of confronting paradox in organizations (Lewis, 2000). That paper kickstarted two decades of academic research that built an overall framing for organizational paradox that can be broken into seven primary categories. **Figure 2** presents a summary overview of the academic literature around paradox.

Figure 2: Overview of the paradox literature



First, researchers have explored **definitions and categories** of paradox in organizations. Lewis's first paper argued that there were three fundamental categories of paradoxes: learning (e.g., simultaneously destroying and creating knowledge), organization (e.g., "autocratic autonomy"), and belonging (e.g., "collective individualism") (Lewis, 2000). Further research added a fourth primary category: performing (e.g., "purpose-driven profit maximization") (Smith & Lewis, 2009). Researchers also highlighted classic philosophical examples of paradox, such as the Socratic paradox ("I know that I know nothing") and the Liar's paradox ("This statement is false"). While scholars use different definitions of paradox, the vast majority of definitions reference having contradictory, related elements that persist over time. Thus, for purposes of this paper, I will use the definition offered by Smith and Lewis: "Contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time" (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382).

Second, researchers have described **circumstances that influence paradox**. Three areas appear in the literature most frequently: resource scarcity, location in a system, and perception. Research shows that *resource scarcity* materially increases the perception of tensions that accompany paradox (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). Time can function as a scarce resource, and a longer time horizon can sometimes provide the space to resolve apparent paradoxes. Paradox appears differently depending on an individual's *location in a system*. What appears impossible to reconcile to a mid-level manager can be a strategic choice by a top leader, perhaps even a borderline sadistic choice to put an employee in an impossible-to-resolve "double bind" where "obeying the order implies disobeying it, and protesting its absurdity is taken for insubordination" (Berti & Simpson, 2021). Consider a leader barking at a subordinate to "be creative." Dutifully following the order isn't creative. More broadly, scholars have questioned the degree to which paradoxes are inherent in organizational constructs or socially constructed (Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016), or are "ontological" (part of the underlying reality) versus "epistemological" (perceptually grounded) (Schad & Bansal, 2018). Using quantum mechanics as an analogy suggests that perhaps paradoxes are *both* latent and socially constructed (Hahn & Knight, 2021). Hence, *perception* impacts paradox.

Third, researchers have detailed paradox **response options**. The first basic option is to accept that the paradox exists and is unsolvable, what is often called an "either-or" approach. While an either-or approach helps to cope in the face of paradox, it can "exacerbate stress, result in the loss of organizational synergy, and fuel vicious cycles" (Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart,

2016, p. 123). The second approach is to confront the paradox by temporally or spatially separating the poles of the paradox (e.g., have one team focus on exploration and another focus on exploitation). This category is known as a “both-and” approach (Putnam et al., 2016). Finally, the third approach is to transcend the paradox by finding a solution that resolves it, what is called a “more-than” approach (Putnam et al., 2016). Academics that look at paradox from an Eastern perspective note that Eastern philosophy is indeed grounded in the idea that “the opposites in a paradox are not merely intertwined in a state of tension, but in fact constitute a state of wholeness” (Chen, 2002, p. 188).

Fourth, researchers have further explored **techniques to aid response to paradox**. For example, dynamically shifting between the poles of the paradox can mitigate extreme tensions of either pole, leading to a solution that simultaneously gets the best and avoids the worst of each end of the paradox (Gebert, Boerner, & Kearney, 2010). A detailed study of a news organization showed how top management teams that followed this kind of approach made paradoxes more visible and helped to ensure that teams consciously sought opportunities to transcend apparent paradox (Knight & Paroutis, 2017). Another approach involves forming “guardrails” and consciously iterating between poles, which helped a not-for-profit organization transcend the tension of meeting business objectives and social aims (Smith & Bersharov, 2019). A detailed action research study at Lego highlighted the importance of “sparring” sessions to help provide space for managers to discuss paradoxes, with “interventive” questions helping to move from a “mess” to a defined problem to an identified paradox to a workable solution (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). In 2015 and 2019, researchers developed separate “double-barreled” batteries to identify the degree to which a leader follows paradoxical leader behaviors related to long-term development and people management (Zhang & Han, 2019; Zhang et al., 2015). For example, specific behaviors in the category of *maintaining control while allowing autonomy* include “makes decisions about big issues, but delegates lesser issues to subordinates” and “maintains overall control but gives subordinates appropriate autonomy” (Zhang et al., 2015). Other approaches that help to transcend paradox include creating space for reflection and engaging in serious playfulness to “open up rather than close off meanings and use tensions to enhance a discursive consciousness of paradoxical situations” (Putnam et al., 2016).

Fifth, researchers have discussed **enabling capabilities** that help to maximize the impact of these approaches. Three particularly capabilities are worth noting. First is the importance of “integrative complexity,” which allows the evaluation of both sides of the paradox

(“evaluative differentiation”) and the independent and interdependent development of an integrated solution (“conceptual integration”) (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Hannah et al., 2013). The application of integrative complexity is a form of “dynamic decision making” where a leader is “consistently inconsistent,” where leaders “make choices in response to specific dilemmas in the short term, while embracing competing demand inherent in paradoxes in the long term” (Smith, 2014, p. 1615). Second is what is called a “paradox mindset,” such as when an individual is energized by tension or feels “uplifted” when they realize that “two opposites can be true” (Miron-Spektor et al., 2019). Third is “emotional equanimity” or the ability to have what John Keats called the “negative capability” to not get overwhelmed by paradox but rather “balance confidence with doubt, ready to act as if they know and yet as if they do not know” (Ashforth, Rogers, Pratt, & Pradies, 2014, p. 1465). This kind of negative capability helped managers in the aforementioned Lego case to accept paradox. While acceptance sometimes connotes “submission, surrender, or avoidance,” for Lego it meant “a new understanding of inconsistencies, conflict, and ambiguity as natural working conditions” (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008, p. 234). One technique enabled by a negative capability is what physicist Douglas Hofstadter calls JOOTSing, or “jumping out of the system” to gain a new perspective on an apparent paradox (Farnam Street, 2021).

Sixth, researchers have demonstrated the **benefits of transcending paradox**. Grappling with paradox has been shown to enhance creativity by improving the ability to manage contradictions (Miron-Spektor et al., 2011). Leaders that act in a narcissistic way but are perceived to be humble improve organizational ambidexterity, which has been proven to increase performance (Owens, Wallace, & Waldman, 2015). Combining visionary and empowering leadership boosts follower performance through increasing goal clarity (Kearney, Shemla, Knippenberg, & Scholz, 2019). Following the paradoxical leader behaviors described above boosts organizational ambidexterity generally and performance specifically (Zhang & Han, 2019; Zhang et al., 2015).

Seventh, researchers have identified what **makes it challenging** for organizations to confront paradoxes. Paradox challenges an organization’s desire for consistency and simplicity and can lead to defense mechanisms such as splitting, regression, and ambivalence (Jarrett & Vince, 2017; Lewis, 2000). At more extreme levels, paradoxes can “foster anxiety, uncertainty, and ambiguity, leaving individuals feeling threatened and defensive” (Schad, et al., 2016, p. 31). Building the capacity to confront paradox requires “confronting our own defenses – the desire to overrationalize and oversimplify the complications of organizational

life – and learning to explore the natural ebb and flow of tensions” (Lewis, 2000, p. 774). People with the capabilities that feed into the ability to handle paradox, such as high degrees of integrative complexity, can be viewed as disagreeable and hard to work with (Tetlock, Peterson, & Berry, 1993). Finally, pressure from leadership to transcend a paradox of great strategic importance can lead to frustration or even unethical behavior, such as the Volkswagen emissions scandal, where “paradoxes, experienced in a fearful and intimidation-filled decision-making context, led to a charade of achievement” (Gaim, Clegg, & Cunha, 2021, p. 962).

The literature leaves several unanswered questions. Why is a practical, proven set of tools and approaches that provides clearly defined benefits still largely undiscovered by broader populations? Much of the research focuses on what makes it hard for an organization to confront a paradox, but what are the specific barriers that stop individuals from developing the capability to deal with paradoxes? What interplay is there between individual barriers and organizational systems? How do people experience paradox? Finally, is paradox real, or is it an artificial construct? While there is vigorous academic debate as to whether paradox is a construct or latent within a system, there does not appear to be more existential exploration of its very existence. Philosophical paradoxes reduce to pithy phrases that are ontologically impossible to resolve. I know that I know nothing. This statement is false. The cat is alive and dead. The definition used for this research has the phrase “persist over time” and Lewis’s 2000 definition notes that “no synthesis or choice is possible nor necessarily desirable” to a paradox (Lewis & Dehler, 2000, p. 708). If something persists, how can it be transcended? Several academic papers use conditional language around a paradox. For example, the research into the Volkswagen emissions scandal described how the pursuit of transcending the paradox of simultaneously pursuing environmental sustainability and profits “in a fearful and intimidation-filled decision-making context, led to a charade of achievement ... achieving the impossible remains, at least for now, as impossible as ever” (Gaim et al., 2021, p. 962). At least for now. Are paradoxes real, or are they perceptual? How does answering that question inform what’s blocking the use of tools and approaches to understand and address paradox? Those are the questions I sought to answer in my research.

Methodology

After conducting the literature review and developing the integrated paradox toolkit, I conducted an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore my research questions. IPA is typically used to identify how individuals make sense of their experiences, and therefore is a valuable mechanism to explore my research questions (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). I specifically followed three steps.

First, I conducted in-depth interviews with 11 research subjects. One challenge was that my research subjects had differing experiences with paradox. So, in addition to exploring experiences with paradox broadly, each subject also completed and then discussed reactions and associations related to a short survey related to paradoxical leader behaviors. The intent of the research was to develop a synthesized version of the essence of the experience of paradox that covered both what the subjects experienced and the feelings those experiences generated (Moustakas, 1994).

Second, I transcribed the 11 interviews and analyzed them to identify critical themes. I color coded the interviews into six categories, and through multiple iterations ultimately identified three primary themes, eight sub themes, and 21 specific areas. This grouping was largely qualitative, but I also conducted a word count to identify the frequency of words that indicated positive (“excited,” “resolved,” “curious,”), negative (“frustrated,” “unsettled,” “unresolved”), and ambivalent (“maybe,” “could be,” “seems”) sentiments. I tried to hold from formulating hypotheses during this phase of the work so as not to draw premature conclusions and miss an important finding. Of course, my own lived experience and perspectives, including my relationship with the research subjects surely influenced my interview sensemaking.

Third, I evaluated the resulting themes through a selection of systems psychodynamic lenses. My intent was to identify potential root causes of expressed feelings. I brought my own perspectives into the analysis at this point, consistent with the perspective that IPA should involve “double hermeneutics” that combines general analysis based on personal accounts and the interpretation and experience of the researcher (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

This analysis also involved a cross-check against key articles in the paradox literature to assess the degree to which resulting root causes fit or contradicted previously expressed perspectives.

Description of the research setting

While there are various guidelines for the right number of subjects for a robust IPA, general guidance is five to ten subjects. I decided to focus on people that I thought would have had experience with paradox through their connection to innovation and strategic transformation. My experience suggests that these areas are replete with the kinds of paradoxes described in the academic literature. Indeed, one reason why I found the paradox literature so enticing is because it meshed with much of what I had experienced in my years as an advisor on these topics. An article exploring ambidextrous leadership corroborated the selection of this research setting:

What makes innovation processes complex is that creativity and implementation do not neatly proceed in a linear fashion and, therefore, cannot be easily split into separate phases or stages. Instead, the requirements to generate and implement ideas alternate throughout the innovation process in an ever-changing manner. This factor makes innovation full of paradoxes and tensions (Rosing, Frese, & Bausch, 2011, p. 957).

I sought three types of interview subjects:

1. Advisors that helped companies confront issues related to innovation and strategic transformation. Here I solicited members of the Innosight leadership team that I thought would have particularly interesting views on the topic (three interview subjects) and advisors from other companies with whom I had collaborated in the past (two interview subjects).
2. Executives with first-hand experience leading innovation and strategic transformation, which I drew from my personal network (three interview subjects).
3. “Intrapreneurs” that had first-hand experience driving innovation and strategic transformation inside established organizations. I sourced intrapreneurs from my personal network (one interview subject) and participants from “master classes” I ran with organizations as I tested and refined the paradox toolkit (two interview subjects).

The text below provides more detail about my 11 interview subjects, and **Figure 3** provides a summary overview.

Figure 3: Overview of research participants

Role	Five advisors, three executives, three “intrapreneurs” inside established organizations
Gender	Six males, five females
Ages	35-44 (4), 45-54 (3), 55-64 (4)
Country	United States (5), Singapore (2), Australia (2), the Philippines, Switzerland
Post-secondary education	MBA (4), PhD (2), master’s degree
Undergraduate major	Engineering (4), international relations (2), communications (2) computer science, economics, law, psychology

Advisors (5)

- A1 (Male, USA, 55-64): I have known A1 since 2000. He used to work in the strategy department of a large technology company, and now is an independent advisor. He and I have written several articles together.
- A2 (Male, USA, 55-64): A2 has been a colleague of mine since 2014. Prior to joining Innosight he had substantial experience at a leading strategy consulting company. We worked together on two significant client projects in 2020.
- A3 (Female, Australia, 35-44). I have known A3 since 2017. She is the founder of a boutique consulting company with which Innosight has a strategic relationship.
- A4 (Male, Switzerland, 55-64). A4 has been a colleague of mine since 2012. Prior to joining Innosight he had substantial experience at a leading strategy consulting company. We worked on numerous projects together between 2012 and 2019 but have not collaborated closely recently.
- A5 (Female, USA, 35-44). A5 has been a colleague of mine since 2011. We worked closely together on two significant client projects in 2020.

Executives

- E1 (Male, USA, 45-54). I have known E1 since 2003. He has been a professor, the CEO of a media company, a university president, and the head of a new business unit within the university.
- E2 (Male, USA, 55-64). I have known E2 since 2004. He was a top leader at a large, diversified consumer packaged goods company, and played a leading role in helping it to launch and grow several \$1 billion+ businesses. Innosight served as an advisor to his company between 2004 and 2009.
- E3 (Female, Singapore, 35-44). I have known E3 since 2017. She is a senior executive at a company going through a significant transformation effort. I sat on this company's Board of Directors from 2013-2019 and Innosight served as an advisor to E3 in 2020.

Intrapreneurs

- I1 (Female, the Philippines, 55-64). I have known I1 since 2011. At the time she was just about to set up the venture capital investing arm of a large company in the Philippines. We advised the company (though not specifically related to I1's effort) from 2011-2015. I1 attended a paradox master class and agreed to participate in the research.
- I2 (Male, Singapore, 45-54). I have known I2 since 2009 and served as a consultant to three different organizations at which he worked. His last role was leading the innovation arm of a large insurance company. His previous experience was in telecommunications and consumer electronics.
- I3 (Female, Australia, 35-44). I met I3 as part of a paradox master class given for the law firm at which she works. She is part of that law firm's innovation team, which is chartered with helping the law firm experiment with and adopt new technologies to transform the practice of law.

It is clear from this overview that there is substantial history between me and many of my research subjects. Many of these people are indeed people I would call friends. I believe these close relationships allowed deeper, more meaningful conversations, balanced by the potential risk of corrupting the conversation.

In addition to the 11 research subjects, two intrapreneurs that I approached about participating in the research did not respond to my request. Twenty-three other people took the survey on paradoxical leader behaviors. Two of those people were other Innosight colleagues, and 21 were people that were part of paradox master classes.

Data gathering and reporting

Data gathering and reporting involved three stages: preparing for the interviews, conducting the interviews, and interpreting the interviews.

Preparing for the interviews

To prepare for the interviews, I designed an interview guide (detailed in **Appendix 2**). I did not share the interview guide with attendees. All interviewees completed a short online survey before their interview. The survey presented asked respondents to rank order nine categories of paradoxical leader behaviors from 1 (most pertinent) to leaders seeking to drive strategic transformation to 9 (least pertinent). Prior to each interview, I reviewed the interviewee's survey result to identify:

- The behaviors the interviewee ranked first and second.
- The behavior the interviewee ranked relatively more important than the average survey respondent (**Appendix 3** presents the summary results of the survey).
- The behavior the interviewee ranked relatively less important than the average survey respondent.

The intent of capturing and sharing these relative rankings was to give different ways to explore the survey specifically and paradox more generally. For each interview I created a customized one-page PowerPoint slide that showed the individual's results (an example PowerPoint slide appears in **Appendix 4**).

Conducting the interviews

The interviews were all conducted over Zoom. All subjects agreed to have their interviews recorded for transcription purposes. Ten of the 11 interviews were done as video interviews, with one outlier done via audio as the participant was walking outside. I began each interview by telling people about the basic idea of IPA research before going into the questions. I asked follow-up questions to seek more specific examples or to probe the use of specific words.

Consistent with guidance around best practices in conducting IPA interviews, I sought to be comfortable with silence, giving interviewees space to explore their thoughts. I took notes both on what interview subjects said as well as their affect and other cues such as sighs and laughter.

One of the biggest challenges I faced is my natural tendency to seek to synthesize as quickly as I can. While that tendency can be very helpful in the field of strategy consulting, it can inhibit a researcher's search for deeper truth. To combat this tendency, I announced my intent to stay in "researcher mode" early on in the discussion. I then consciously said "I am going to break from researcher mode" when I inevitably had a comment or thought to add (this happened typically one or two times per discussion). During the interviews I was also seeking to practice "self as instrument" so was conscious of how I felt in the discussion. I could definitely sense that at least some of the interviews involved a form of performance on the part of the participant, perhaps in an effort to impress me. That could be transference from the research subjects, picking up a feeling from me, or even picking up something from the topic of paradox.

Each of the 11 discussions followed its own unique rhythm. The text below shares excerpts from one representative from each of the three categories of my sample (advisor, intrapreneur, and executive) to showcase the range of interviews.

Vignette 1: The curious advisor

The five advisors all entered into the discussion in different ways. A1 looked at paradox from a developmental lens, arguing that you can assess a leader's capacity by looking at how they how addressed paradox. A2 primarily reflected on client experiences. A3 spent time exploring what he perceived to be paradoxes posed by reactions to uncertain events like the COVID-19 pandemic. A4 explored experiences within their organization. And A5, the focus of this vignette, ranged widely during the discussion.

A5 admitted that she entered the discussion unfocused. That said, she offered a succinct definition of paradox as something that combines a tension, an opposite, and a "little bit of an element of counterintuitive" to it. Rather than focusing on clients or the organization at which she worked, she primarily explored paradoxes from a human perspective. One discussion stream focused on health and wellness. "The quote, 'You're the CEO of your body' I think, is an interesting parallel ... Navigating some of the tension inherent in trying to make progress against goals perhaps has some of that. Like, I feel. lazy and tired, but at the same time I want

to be active and energetic, and what the relationship between rest and recovery and all that is another thing that comes to mind.”

A significant portion of the discussion focused on personality traits. “Can you be collaborative but authoritative at the same time? Can you be serious and playful? Can you be inclusive but build deep individual relationships?” She talked about how her own approach involved consciously pushing herself if she felt that she veered too far towards an extreme.

If I know I have a tendency towards one side of a tension versus another, I put something in place to help motivate or enable the pulling in the opposite direction. It’s kind of like when you hit a mid-afternoon slump you have a cup of coffee or something like that, or I have a full calendar so I’m going to go for a walk right now, or I know that I’ve had a bunch of one on ones with somebody on this topic so I’m going to make sure I set up a larger group format conversation to demonstrate inclusivity. There are ways to program into routines and create habits out of being able to do that, I think. Space for reading, reflection, thought always helps.

When asked whether the ability to be conscious of these challenges and choices, she said her perspective is a lot of it is innate.

I think you can learn compensating behaviors and you can train and build skills that aren’t maybe as natural as they are for other people and that’s harder for some people and easier for others, depending on what the skills are. And then I think cultures, families, organizations, countries have different emphasis that are placed on certain skills or traits that are then reinforced in different ways for people. And that is what then becomes dominant.

At the end of the discussion, what I dubbed the curious advisor reflected on how the conversation prompted thoughts and questions.

I feel like I’ve lost track of time a little bit. I have not been looking at the time. I’ve just been walking around enjoying the conversation. I feel like I was a bit fragmented and my brain was in other places coming into the conversation ... I wonder if I had read something or read three different things like would the train of thought or conversation gone in a totally different direction, and how does that influence your research. Did other people do different types of their own pre thinking or put space

before this and how does that change outcomes? I just have a bunch of thoughts or questions in my head about you and your research. To be honest.

Vignette 2: The lost-in-paradox intrapreneur

The intrapreneurs reflected on the challenges they faced working inside systems that were along some dimensions imposing constraints that resulted in them facing what seemed like difficult-to-reconcile paradoxes. Subject I3 provided an acute example of this. She works in the innovation department of a law firm. The interview began slowly, and she struggled to provide examples of paradox. She paused, corrected herself midsentence, and was clearly frustrated. Then, about a third of the way through the discussion there was a click moment where she reflected on her own circumstances. She is part of a group in a law firm that is chartered with helping the organization experiment with new technologies and new ways of working. But pursuing innovation inside a law firm presents a fundamental challenge. As she described that challenge, she came to the realization that she was being asked to do something that felt paradoxical.

The whole basis of the Australian, British, and American legal system is precedent. When you're providing legal advice or advising a client, you're not making it up. It's not here's my idea, or you know, probably here's a strategy that I think will work. It's this is what I think and here's the authority, whether it's legislation, whether it's the case that's come before whether it's an experience that you've had on a similar case. So you're never just giving your opinion, you always have to back your opinion up with some sort of authority that you cite and that's through the whole legal system ... None of that is a criticism. It actually works really well.

The challenge, of course, is that innovation is difficult to prove based on past precedent.

I think the work that I do is paradoxical in nature because we're meant to be doing innovation, which by definition is new, but if it's too new, nobody actually wants to do it because they want to see some proof, or they want some reassurance that it's going to work. So we're being asked to innovate and we're called the innovation team, but at the same time, if it's a totally new approach, it's hard to even explain it to someone, let alone give them the reassurance they need to try it.

She said being lost in paradox felt demotivating, like she is "stuck in the middle" because she is "not in a position to say okay let's go change these structures ... so it feels disempowering

in a way.” As she further explored the paradox, she said that it appears “close to impossible” to address in the short term, but achievable over a longer period of time. “I think it’s perspective, right?” she said. “What for one person might seem not possible for another person is achievable.”

At the end of discussion, the lost-in-paradox intrapreneur reflected on how the framing of paradox helped her to understand some of the frustrations and challenges of her job.

I mean it didn’t quite feel like a therapy session, but it was good to talk about this as a concept, because it’s something that I’ve never articulated but now, having talked about it with you, I can see why that would absolutely impact your, not wellbeing, but motivation, performance, etc. at work if you’re having to work within what you perceive at least to be a paradox.

Vignette 3: The off-the-line seeking executive

The three executives generally focused on how they encountered paradox in their roles trying to help their organizations innovate and grow. The executive on which I focus here described how much of his job involved searching for the “point off the line.” In other words, when gathering data, an *on-the-line* point fits a previous pattern. An *off-the-line* point represents an anomaly. The “off-the-line-seeking executive” viewed these anomalies as “gifts,” because they present the possibility to reframe a problem perceived to be an unsolvable paradox.

If I ran an experiment and the point falls on the line, that’s good in some way, but it’s almost like [sigh] I didn’t need to run that experiment. And when the point falls off the line the energy of everybody is to explain the error and look at the process and determine why that point is really on the line. My joy is, uh it didn’t fall on the line and so maybe it means I have the wrong axis. That point has all the information. The line has all of the information but it’s not new information it’s old information. ... I just think paradoxes are a gift. They’re a gift.

Specifically, the point off the line gives an accidental view into “another plane,” which allows you to “shift the axes” and see a new way to reframe a problem. The off-the-line-seeking executive argued that the apparent paradoxes that he experienced during his business career could often be addressed by reframing points off the line. He cited Douglas Hofstadter, noting how you can’t sense a problem “inside a system.” Making sense of the point off the line requires creating a new metaphor. “I think the paradox is grounded in a contextual

metaphor so if I could only see the context, I might be able to deal with the paradox differently,” he said. “So I’m searching for new context. And that new context to me is metaphorical because in that new context, if we could make more progress, then it’s a useful metaphor.” He cited several examples where a metaphorical reframe helped to super-charge the growth of early-stage ideas by helping to pinpoint the specific way to create value. “I am in the search for utility. If it’s not useful I don’t care. Mathematically, if the world is really an infinite number of dimensions, a dimension that’s not valuable is just another dimension.”

More broadly, the off-the-line-seeking executive talked about how confronting apparent paradoxes requires changing the rules. “I am never going to be good at tennis,” he said. “But if we could stop talking about tennis, I have a chance. Let’s pick some new rules and we’ll find out.” He talked about how leaders need to remove constraints to enable others to find their own points off the line. “We used to use the design principle that if you add an ingredient, it has to do two functions not one,” he said. “Because it’s about degrees of freedom. A problem is more solvable when you add two and take away one. You should always add more degrees of freedom than you take away.”

Interpreting the interviews

Each interview had a transcription automatically generated by Zoom using Otter AI. I re-watched each interview to clean up the transcripts and to further immerse myself in both the words spoken and the sentiments expressed. I then combined all of the transcripts into a single file (with a total word count of more than 95,000 words) and read through it twice. The first read was to absorb the data. The second time I color coded six thematic areas: definitions, examples, positive feelings / power of paradox, negative feelings / challenge of paradox, intellectualization, and impact of context or perception. I then created a new file that combined all highlighted areas under those headings. I then reread the resulting file and settled on the architecture detailed on **Figure 1** in the Introduction that included three primary themes, eight secondary themes, and 21 tertiary themes.

The next section explores and analyzes these themes.

Findings and discussion

This section is broken into two parts. The first part explores the themes from the interviews in greater depth, the second discusses findings and interpretations that resulted from analyzing these themes.

Exploring interview themes

Three key themes emerged from the interviews: paradox is perceived to be powerful, paradox generates a range of emotions, and context heavily influences the experience of paradox. The text below explores each of these in depth, with illustrative quotations from the interviews. Quotations have generally been kept as anonymous as possible, sharing only context critical to sensemaking.

Primary theme 1: Paradox is perceived to be powerful

Interviewees generally attributed significant power to the idea of paradox. While each interviewee provided different definitions of paradox, they all generally mirrored the definition used in this paper, describing two opposed forces that need to be addressed simultaneously. The power of paradox was expressed in three subthemes: paradox is timeless, confronting paradox leads to growth, and examining paradox leads to reflection. **Appendix 5** summarizes supporting quotes for this theme.

True paradox is timeless. Interviewees gave a wide range of examples of paradox. Religion featured in three different discussions, such as the intrapreneur that noted:

That then which nothing greater can be imagined or that then which nothing greater can exist ... I love the God paradox, because when you really think about it, the paradox is it's unsolved ... the paradox is that we can both conceive of something in principle that is God, which is infinite—that then which nothing greater can be imagined—and yet we can't imagine it. That to me is a lovely paradox from 700 years ago.

Examples from nature and math featured prominently as well. “People who believe things are in a state such as rain or sun I kind of ask very simply, just a question, have you ever seen a rainbow?” one executive noted. “And the answer is of course. Well then, it's not either rainy or sunny sometimes it's rainy and sunny and the result is a rainbow ... A paradox is kind of a

search for a rainbow.” These and other examples demonstrate how classic paradoxes indeed persist over, in some cases infinite amounts of, time.

Confronting paradox leads to growth. Another way in which interviewees ascribed power to paradox was the impact of wrestling with paradox. One interviewee started by saying “continual creativity comes from paradox ... it’s the doorway into creativity,” before going a step further and asserting that “all great meaning comes from grappling with paradox.” One of the executives talked about how the resolution of paradox creates “brilliant innovation and breakthroughs.” That executive further described how paradox sparked personal growth as well. “It’s really hard to do but when you do it, you realize I’ve become something more and at an organizational level I’m more effective and at a personal level I’m either a better person or I’m at least a more self-aware person.”

Examining paradox leads to reflection. The lost-in-paradox intrapreneur and curious advisor both noted how the discussion spurred personal reflection. Another advisor provided a good summary of the power of paradox by saying, “Who would have thought that there was so much to explore with a single word?” Specifically, this advisor said the conversation helped her think about “things that I don’t consciously think about much.”

Primary theme 2: Paradox generates a range of emotions

I did a word count analysis to look for the number of times people expressed feelings about paradox with words that show positive emotions (such as excited or curious) or negative emotions (such as frustrated or unsettled). **Figure 4** shows the results of the word count analysis:

Figure 4: Interview word count analysis

Word category	Examples	Average	Min	Max
Positive feelings	Excited, curious	4.4	0	18
Negative feelings	Frustrated, unsettled	3	0	12
Total		7.4	1	19

While the numbers are modest, all 11 interviews had at least one connection of paradox to an emotionally connected word. Seven out of 11 interviewees expressed both positive and negative sentiments. Four interviewees biased towards positive sentiments (bias demonstrated by having more than 90 percent of emotionally connected words in one direction), four interviewees biased towards negative sentiments, and three interviewees had no bias. This

demonstrates that paradox generates positive, negative, and paradoxical emotions. **Appendix 6** summarizes supporting quotes for this theme.

Beyond feeling curious or excited, another *positive* sentiment cited by subjects was how apparently resolving a paradox led to them feeling engaged. As the off-the-line-seeking executive described paradox as a gift, it is no surprise he also said he found them “really intriguing because there’s something new there.” One interviewee described how the discussion itself provided a small dose of serotonin. “I feel a little bit, like, simulated, like in the middle of a great chess game,” he noted.

The lost-in-paradox intrapreneur’s discussion about the *negative* feelings of being frustrated, unsettled, demotivated, and stuck parallels the academic literature about the challenges that accompany paradox. One of the executives described how the perceived paradox of producing short-term results and investing in the long-term created the fear of titling too far toward the near term, “chasing rabbits” and finding out that “in six months in a year you’re not actually further towards your goal. You’ve hit your milestones every month, but you’re never growing who you need to become as a person or as an organization.” Another interview subject described the potential pain that came from confronting paradox, because it raises fundamental questions about your identity. “Inherent in a paradox is the logic that becomes part of your identity, part of your being, part of your self-worth even. And so to let go of that logic to embrace the other one you have to invalidate something you’re good at, you have to invalidate part of your own identity.”

Several of the interviewees also expressed *paradoxical* feelings, or the simultaneous expression of two opposed ideas. One executive said the discussion left him feeling “unsettled but good.” He reflected that paradoxes create conflict. As an executive, he could resolve paradoxes in his organization structurally, but “it’s a lot harder to portfolio manage yourself. You can’t compartmentalize your life quite as easily as you can compartmentalize an organization with separate divisions. I can’t be Mr. Kind and Warm in my home and be Mr. Combative at the office. They’re going to affect each other, you know, for good and bad.” The “but good” part of his sentiment came from remembering the personal growth that came from addressing these kinds of issues. Another interviewee described grappling with paradox as a “pleasant struggle” that is simultaneously complex, difficult, and worthwhile. A third described how paradox simultaneously triggered anxiousness, optimism, and decisiveness.

Primary theme 3: Context heavily influences the experience of paradox

A primary reason to use IPA is to understand how context impacts the experience of a phenomenon. I asked interviewees to provide specific examples and to reflect on circumstances that made their experience of paradox more or less acute. When reflecting on the survey ranking the paradoxical leader behaviors, I asked them whether when they answered the questions they did so abstractly or formed a mental image of specific circumstances. About half said they answered abstractly while half formed a mental image, typically involving a past role. I also asked the degree to which their answers would be persistent versus changing based on context. Almost all said their answers would change at least to some degree. Relatedly, when looking for words indicating emotions in interview response, I also counted words that showed some degree of uncertainty, fluidity, or circumstantiality in responses, such as “maybe,” “could be,” and “seems.” The average respondent used such words 42 times, six times the number of emotionally connected words. In summary, the interviews provided substantial data supporting the viewpoint that paradox is circumstance contingent, with structural drivers and individual perceptions and capabilities both as key influencers. **Appendix 7** summarizes supporting quotes for this theme.

Structural influencers. The lost-in-paradox intrapreneur shows how one’s position in a system can impact their experience of paradox. “Without the context of the law firm,” she noted, “the paradox would arguably not exist.” Other interviewees commented on the difference between being in a more production-oriented environment versus more knowledge work. Several commented on how that impacted the degree to which they assessed the paradoxical leader behavior of “enforcing work requirements while allowing flexibility” as important. As the curious advisor noted, “If you are in a factory of auto workers or a warehouse full of people moving boxes around, maybe that’s more important, but it is less circumstance relevant to somebody working or leading, in this country at least, more knowledge-oriented work.”

Individual perceptions and capabilities. Numerous interviewees described how an individual’s perception or capabilities impacted the perception of paradox. Recall the lost-in-paradox intrapreneur commenting how taking a longer time horizon could allow the paradox in which she felt caught to be resolved. Several interviewees commented how their own experience or social context made a specific paradox more or less salient. One interviewee, who has extensively studied adult development theory by Robert Kegan, commented how

people with different levels of development will perceive paradox differently. “The level of depth of how someone resolves a paradox will give you a measure of how richly that person can organize their internal psychology and cognition, but also how they can cognize the world around them,” he commented. Finally, as the off-the-line-seeking executive noted, paradox can be a matter of perspective. One interview subject talked about how new frames can help to resolve a seeming irreconcilable paradox:

Sometimes the problem that is looks intractable we call a paradox, because what we are doing is putting up sort of an either-or trade off lens on it, and it would seem as though there is no solution. And the seeming is, and again I go back to the face of it, through a specific lens of analysis, the paradox has no solution. But if you alter the frame in some way, shape, or form, use a different type of map use a different lens or change the rules of the game, the paradox can actually be so-called solved.

A number of interviewees also described how what historically had been perceived as organizational paradoxes had been addressed by new leadership approaches. The off-the-line seeking executive said that the perceived paradox of exploring and exploiting was false. “Leaders say they have to report their quarterly reports,” he said. “Well, you know Warren Buffett kind of said forget that and turned out fine.” Another interviewee commented on how “West Coast” management principles generally resolved the perceived paradox between decision control and autonomy. “Before the rise of tech and the rise of Silicon Valley no one would have ever thought it was possible.”

Analysis of interview themes

My analysis of the interview themes led to three conclusions. First, paradoxes inside organizations are, paradoxically, material illusions. They are *illusions* in that they are a function of context, perspective, and the construct of a system. They can be, and often are, resolved, which definitionally makes them *not* paradoxes. They are *material* because the work wrestling with them, seeking the “point off the line,” and intervening to overcome system-imposed constraints provides significant positive benefits. Second, the systems psychodynamic lenses provide vital insight into what is blocking the adoption of practical tools to help leaders receive the proven benefits from transcending these illusionary paradoxes. Specifically, individual and group desires for coherence and congruence lead to systematic underinvestment in developing and using capabilities that aid with transcending paradox. Third, the illusion of paradox persists because the power of paradox creates a

phantastic object into which people pour meaning, even reverence, reinforcing the challenges of grappling with this material illusion.

The paradox of paradoxes

The definition of a paradox used for this paper is “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382). The IPA research demonstrates a consistent perspective that many organizational paradoxes are *not* persistent. Three themes from the interviews support this finding. First, people note that how an individual’s perspective, which is a function of their location within a system and their experiences and capabilities, strongly impacts the degree to which paradox is experienced. Recall the lost-in-paradox intrapreneur noting how being in a law firm explained her experience of paradox. Second, people sometimes use past tense to describe areas that are described in the academic literature as paradoxes, saying a version of, “Oh yeah, that *used to* be something we couldn’t figure out, but then someone re-framed it.” This contrasts with classic paradoxes described by interviewees, such as ones appearing in nature, religion, and science. Third, experienced paradoxes that have yet to be resolved aren’t viewed as inevitabilities. Rather, they are mysteries to be explored, or puzzles to be resolved. Several interviewees came to this conclusion during the discussions. One advisor noted how he was “lazy” in his definition of paradox, noting that true paradoxes are “few and far between.” An intrapreneur discussing the paradoxical leader behavior of enforcing work requirements while allowing flexibility described how the COVID-19 pandemic opened new solutions that transcended this apparent paradox. “Gosh. Does that mean it’s not paradoxical? The world changed. It was obvious we needed to change the way we did things.”

While there is substantial evidence that many if not most organizational paradoxes are largely illusions, the interviews also suggest a materiality to these perceived paradoxes. There are recurrent themes about how seeking to address paradox is attractive and produces benefits. The benefits ranged from describing thinking about paradox as a “dose of serotonin” to an assertion that “all great meaning comes from paradox.” Several interviewees noted that struggling with paradox led to individual and institutional growth. Recall the executive that described how his efforts to address apparent paradoxes led to him becoming “something more.” An intrapreneur noted their desire to “create the playbook rather than follow a set of instructions.” The academic literature corroborates the substantial benefits that come from grappling with what appears to be a paradox.

My summary perspective therefore is that organizational paradoxes are, indeed paradoxically, *material illusions*. The idea of paradoxes as illusions emerged early. The wonders of interview transcriptions with my occasional lapsing out of interviewer mode shows that this is not a false memory. During my seventh interview, with the off-the-line-seeking executive, I said: “My basic argument, I think, is that organizations paradoxes are primarily perceptual. That people use paradoxes essentially as reflective mirror to see in themselves what they want to see, and if they want to see themselves being great, they’ll see that if they want to find a way to essentially shift blame over to it, they will do that.” Further space and reflection led to the addition of the idea of materiality, which is a more nuanced (and potentially positive) view of paradox.

The struggle to build and use the capabilities to transcend paradox

Systems psychodynamics are a set of tools to “study the interaction between collective structures, norms and practices on the one hand and the cognitions, motivations and emotions of members of those collectives on the other” (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020, p. 413). Systems psychodynamics help to identify and make sense of “beneath the surface” factors for individuals and groups. Both the academic literature and the IPA interviews highlight how confronting paradox creates significant amounts of fear and anxiety. Taking a systems psychodynamic perspective on paradox involved a significant amount of scribbling, reflecting, and sighing on the part of the researcher, comparing interview notes, the literature review, and the frameworks taught in the INSEAD Executive Master in Change program. The end hypothesis that resulted from this exploration is that pursuing paradox poses threats to both group cohesion and an individual’s connection to a group. Couple these twin threats with the fact that developing the capacity to confront paradox can require an individual to question their self-identity or address previously suppressed issues, and it is understandable that many individuals underinvest in developing a paradox mindset or following paradoxical leader behaviors. In other words, questionable payoff and substantial investment inhibits the development of paradox-related capabilities.

Pursuing paradox threatens group identity

Organizations are complex systems with interdependencies and feedback loops. A failure to change is, along some dimensions, a successful defense of the status quo, though a success that comes at a cost (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020). Organizations seek to coalesce around a primary task, something free of psychological forces that simplifies and focuses activities and

makes goals and belief concrete (Hirschhorn, 1999). That primary task is balanced by a primary risk that can stand in the way of achieving that primary task. Transcending an apparent paradox provides clear benefits. It, however, also has the potential of changing an organization's primary task. That means that, yes, here it comes, paradoxically, pursuing paradox can be considered a form of primary *risk* in an organization. Even if the end result is better for the organization, transcending an apparent paradox requires systematic change, such as shifting strategic direction and redesigning key systems and structures. What would it look like for the leaders of the lost-in-paradox intrapreneur to redesign systems to break the paradox of seeking innovation grounded in precedent? It would require nothing short of an organizational identity change. The interrelationship between the identities of the organization and its members would make this change wrenching. Social defenses exist to protect groups from just this kind of anxiety (Krantz, 2010). Isn't it easier for a group to lock itself in a prison of paradox, saying that this simply is our lot in life versus challenging a system at such a foundational level?

Pursuing paradox threatens an individual's connection to a group

Organizations are collections of groups. Moving from being a "singleton" to being a member of a group requires a conscious or unconscious contract where an individual gives up or suppresses some part of themselves to be part of the group (Turquet, 1975). There are two ways in which pursuing paradox threatens an individual's connection to a group. First, "flexing" the capabilities to confront paradox can isolate an individual from a group. Behind the behaviors and mindsets that research shows help to confront paradox is a common enabling ingredient: integrative complexity. However, research shows that people with high degrees of integrative complexity are, in layperson's terms, perceived to be aloof jerks (Tetlock et al, 1993). During one of the IPA interviews, an advisor discussed the leadership characteristics required to overcome paradox. The advisor noted how confronting paradox required leaders who are visionary, have a growth mindset, and are courageous. I noted that basic intelligence didn't appear on the list and asked whether it was possible to be a "stupid visionary." The advisor laughed and said "You could. You could be brave and stupid like you can go up to the bear that's clearly going to eat you. Which would be brave and stupid." How is it perceived, however, if the bear runs away or the leader somehow lucks into beating the bear? They aren't perceived to be stupid. They could see what others could not; they could do what others could not. Indeed, there is an attraction to brave stupid leaders, who hold to single, simple-to-understand messages, who don't vacillate or contemplate the existential

nature of life in organizations. These leaders, including ones that at an extreme demonstrate the characteristics of narcissists, often succeed in organizations (O'Reilly & Chatman, 2020). What, then is the perceived benefits of developing or using integrative complexity, of questioning fundamental assumptions about an organization and the system in which it operates? Do people seek out the off-the-line-seeking executive, or do they want people who keep life simple, keep marching on the line, and avoid asking the hard questions?

Second, organizational role analysis suggests that an individual's role is a complex combination of the history of the role, the organization's history, the individual's history, and the circumstances (Long, 2006). Leaders of organizations carry the weight of the system with them. That means there can be a desire to continue to follow past practices even though they could be "toxic or dysfunctional" (Chapman & Long, 2009, p. 63) because they are embedded within a role that fits within a group that fits within a system. Trapped in a system that demands perpetuation, the would-be paradox seeker simply shrugs their shoulders.

Developing the capabilities to confront paradox isn't worth the (lack of) payoff

Individuals can consciously follow paradoxical leader behaviors, can adopt a paradox mindset, and in doing so can strengthen their integrative complexity. But the two threats described above make it natural that individuals would under-invest in building capabilities that could be intrinsically undervalued by groups or organizations. Nor is the work to develop these capabilities straightforward. Being willing to tolerate different interpretations of the same event (evaluative differentiation) and find nonobvious connections (integration) can require, as noted by one of my interview subjects, "invalidating part of your own identity," or questioning long-held assumptions. It brings to mind the iconic scene in the movie *The Matrix*, where Morpheus offers Neo the chance to take the "red pill," which will show Neo the truth, that he has lived his life as a slave. "You take the blue pill and the story ends," Morpheus says. "You wake in your bed and you believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill and you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes. Remember that all I am offering is the truth. Nothing more."

Pause at the reference to the rabbit hole. Imagine you are a successful leader, holding the metaphorical red pill in your hand. You see the rabbit hole in front of you. What will you find in it? Certainly, there is one frame where going into the rabbit hole is a glorious journey of self-discovery, where what emerges is a stronger, more resilient self. But there is another frame that leads to potentially dark places. Perhaps there are things that you have walled off

in your subconscious, for very good reasons. Perhaps there are rocks you would rather not turn over, because you know what lies underneath and you'd rather not deal with them. Perhaps there are weaknesses and flaws that you have learned to cover or compensate for; perhaps there are hard truths and past traumas that are painful to explore and even more painful to try to address. Perhaps there is the painful realization that the apparent paradox you need to confront is one that you created.

A hard journey with questionable payoffs is one that many people naturally choose not to take. Hence, the hypothesis that the two threats help to drive systematic underinvestment in developing or using the capabilities to confront paradox.

Paradox as a phantastic object

The use of the systems psychodynamic lenses was more challenging than I thought. The three components described in the previous section (threat to group identity, threat to individual connection to group, and resulting reluctance to do the work to develop integrative complexity and related capabilities) became clear reasonably early in the process of analyzing my interview themes. My challenge was determining linkages between the three. Was one a higher level than the other? In which direction did causality run? In the end, I decided I was seeking an overly rational answer to a complex problem. The three challenges are related. They reinforce and reflect off each other, turning paradox simultaneously into a prism that refracts and creates possibility and a prison that contains and constrains; a mirror that allows for reflection and a microscope that allows for deeper investigation. I offer the thought, then, that paradox inside organizations is a symbol into which unconscious wishes are poured, otherwise known as a “phantastic object” (Tuckett & Taffler, 2008).

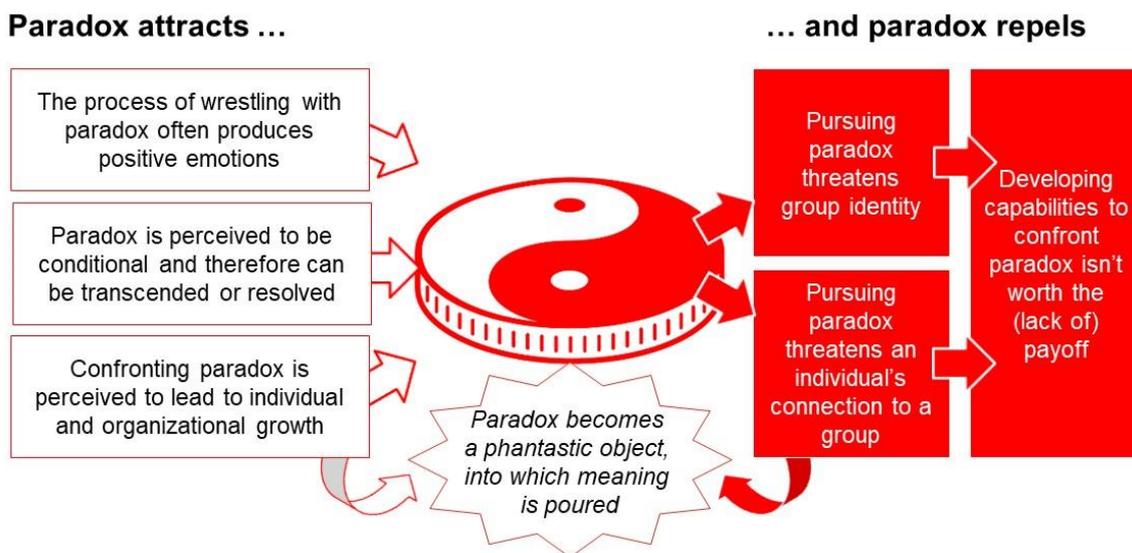
The immunity to change framework serves as a useful way to describe how this phantastic object is created and perpetuated. Immunity to change suggests that “competing commitments” are natural ways for people to put “one foot on the gas pedal and one foot on the brake” and protect themselves from making changes (Kegan & Lahey, 2009). These competing commitments typically suggest a “hidden commitment,” which can be unearthed by thinking about “the fear, the concern, the worry, maybe even a sense of shame or a sense of loss that emerges if you were to do the opposite” of the competing commitments (Lehman & van de Loo, 2019). This is the notion of the immune system, where someone protects themselves from fear, concern, worry, or shame based on a “big assumption,” or “deeply

rooted beliefs” that “put an order to the world and at the same time suggest a world that can go out of order” (Kegan & Lahey, 2001, p. 88).

Imagine, then, a leader debating (unconsciously, surely) whether they should become the stupid visionary that rattles their saber at a bear, or the off-the-line seeking executive. They might say that they want to stare paradox in the face, turn either-ors into both-and into more-thans by reframing, reimagining, reconfiguring. Their competing commitment is to mythologize paradox, claim the impossibility of transcending it (it is right in the definition of paradox after all!), and therefore claim powerlessness in its presence. The hidden commitment is to avoid the pain that comes from questioning their self-identity, from breaking their tie to a group, from breaking the group itself. The “big assumption” is that developing capabilities to confront paradox will be painful and personally challenging and that using those capabilities will threaten group cohesion. And, so, paradox becomes a phantastic object. It is a subject of reverence that keeps a system in order by acting as a convenient vehicle to avoid difficult issues.

Figure 5 summarizes the analysis of paradox that emerged from this research. Paradox attracts and repels. On the one hand, there are substantial perceived benefits to addressing paradox. On the other hand, there are significant issues that sit below the surface that make it hard to develop and use the capabilities to grapple with paradox. The net result is that perceived paradoxes become a phantastic object that saves people from hard work or tough choices.

Figure 5: Organizational paradoxes as phantastic objects



Limitations

There are several obvious limitations to my study. First, the sample size is very small. While there definitely were common themes across the 11 interviews, there also were significant points of divergence. That could indicate that conducting similar analysis with a different group of participants could lead to very divergent results. Second, my relationship with the interview participants could have influenced the discussion. Third, while I tried hard to “turn off my synthesizer” during the discussion, I did note that on average I took up about a third of each interview with questions and comments. Reviewing the transcripts, I clearly stepped out of research mode at least once in every discussion (though, to my credit, I was conscious of it and noted it in the discussion!). Fourth, the phenomenon of paradox is very broad, and, while my use of the paradoxical leader behaviors survey helped to ensure that everyone had some point of connection, the vast difference in experience might obscure key findings. Fifth and finally, my own personal biases and perspectives could have influenced both the identification of key themes from the interviews and the interpretation of root causes. My conclusion that paradoxes are illusionary could be me conceptualizing paradoxes as illusionary as a way to “hold” frustration with consulting projects that failed to have their intended impact because leaders did not act on our recommendations.

Future research

There are four directions in which future researchers could extend the work advanced in this paper. First, the approach could be replicated on different samples. Rather than seeking diverse groups across different companies, it would be interesting to pick a single company seemingly caught in the tempest of paradox and conduct an IPA to see how multiple group members experience it. Second, I do believe more applied action research using a derivative of the paradox toolkit would provide further insight into what makes it challenging to confront perceived paradox within organizations. On a perhaps more tactical note, the third potential stream of related research would seek to integrate the various instruments that have emerged to assess paradoxical behaviors, mindsets, and underlying capabilities to create a more “mass-market” tool to help assess and sharpen one’s capabilities to confront challenges that look like paradoxes. Finally, while the hypotheses of root causes that lead to the paradox of paradoxes are consistent with the systems psychodynamic literature, they have not been directly tested in the field. Perhaps that is another opportunity for an action research project.

Conclusion

“Who would have thought that there was so much to explore with a single word?”

In September 2000, I entered into a classroom in the basement of Aldrich Hall on the idyllic Harvard Business School campus. A giant measuring six-foot-eight inches, or 203 centimeters, ambled into the room and began lecturing about his research into a phenomenon he called disruptive innovation. Clayton Christensen’s words mesmerized me. He described how organizations could do everything that are supposed to do—listen to their best customers, innovate to meet their needs, produce the best products and services on the market, push prices up, push margins up—and fail in the face of a game-changing disruptive innovator that competed through simplicity, convenience, or affordability. I have spent the subsequent 20 years of my life working with colleagues to help organizations confront what seem to be the paradoxical implications of Christensen’s research. Listen to and ignore your best customers. Sustain and disrupt your current business model. Support and undermine your current value network.

In October 2000, Marianne Lewis published a powerful article in *Academy of Management Review* describing the opportunities and challenges of confronting paradox in organizations. Researchers spent the subsequent 20 years further sharpening the definition of paradox, detailing the circumstances that influence paradox, exploring options for how to respond to paradox, defining techniques to aid high-impact response strategies, delineating enabling capabilities to support these techniques, and examining the benefits and challenges related to confronting paradox. Diving into this research was exhilarating, as it seemed to contain the building blocks for a practical toolkit to confront the dilemmas of disruption. A question began to form. Why weren’t more people accessing and using this research? As I began to explore this question, a related question emerged. Could paradox, at least in organizations, be an illusion? I subsequently designed research to more deeply understand how people experience the phenomenon of paradox.

The perceived power of paradox is striking. People describe paradox in reverential terms, citing examples from philosophy, religion, and nature. They detail the challenges in addressing paradox, the anxiety it creates, the threats it poses to one’s very identity. And they extol the virtue of transcending paradox as it drives personal and organizational growth.

Reflecting on the unconscious start of the research journey in Aldrich Hall in 2000 and the findings that emerged from this research, I am struck by something so simple and obvious that I missed until writing this conclusion. Christensen called his first book *The Innovator's Dilemma*. Not *The Innovator's Paradox*. Our friendly off-the-line executive said that paradox is not a “problem to be solved, but a dilemma to be resolved.” However, definitionally, a paradox is *not* a dilemma to be resolved. A paradox rises above a tension, duality, tradeoff, or dilemma. A paradox consists of “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382). Christensen's choice of the word dilemma versus paradox might have been accidental, but it was prescient. The challenges of disruptive change can be overcome. As can many of the perceived paradoxes facing modern executives. There's no law of nature that says law firms have to use past precedent when looking at innovation projects. Anyone can be an off-the-line-seeking executive. Individuals can change a group and still remain a part of it; individuals can change themselves without losing their sense of self.

Organization paradoxes are material illusions. They are generally artificial constructs, sometimes of a system, many times of the mind. They fail to meet the literal definition of a paradox because they are not irreconcilable. Yet, these illusionary objects persist as groups and individuals protect themselves from the perceived challenges of addressing them. Paradox isn't a paradox but a perceptual prison to protect people from hard work, hard truths, or the pain that comes with change. Paradoxes are masks we hide behind. They are blinds covering the truth. Paradoxes are phantastic objects. Yet, they demand engagement. Why engage with an illusion? Because the process of engagement reveals the illusion, develops a deeper sense of self, and builds an organization's capabilities. Perceived paradox can be a mirror, or it can be a microscope, allowing you to see things that you would otherwise miss.

Leaders who feel like they are facing a paradox should ask themselves four questions:

1. Is the perceived paradox truly a law of nature, or a difficult choice?
2. Are you imposing a constraint that is creating the perceived paradox?
3. Are you hesitating to act because the perceived paradox is the result of the system you helped to construct and perpetuate?
4. Is there a “point off the line,” or a different frame that offers a different way to approach the paradox?

There is indeed so much to learn from a simple word.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: The Paradox Toolkit

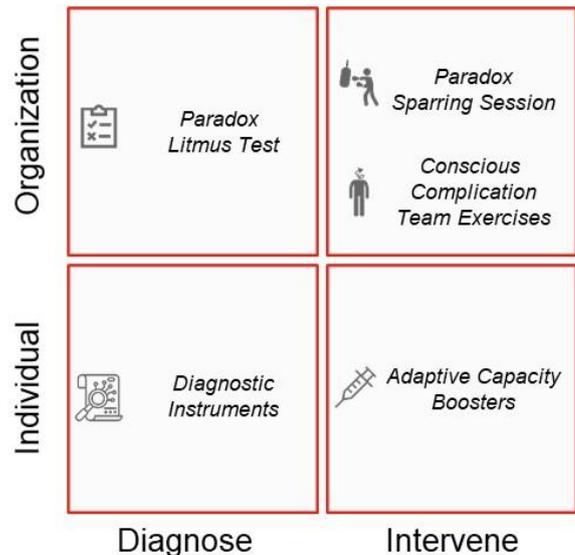
Table of contents

1. Part I: Overview of Paradox
 - a. Definition of paradox
 - b. Example of classic paradoxes (e.g., “I know that I know nothing”)
 - c. Categories of organizational paradox (e.g., “purpose-driven profit maximization”)
 - d. Description of broad paradoxical behaviors (e.g., “comfort with discomfort”)
 - e. Activity: Rank order paradoxical leader behaviors (see **Appendix 3**)
 - f. Benefits of successfully confronting paradox
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 - h. Description of avoiding strategies (either-or)
 - i. Description of confronting strategies (both-and)
 - j. Deep-dive on using “liberating constraints” as a “both-and” solution to paradoxical tensions
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 - g. Organizational intervention: “Paradox sparring session”
 - h. Tips to engage with material more deeply
 - i. Learning log to capture reflections during and after application

Summary matrix of tools

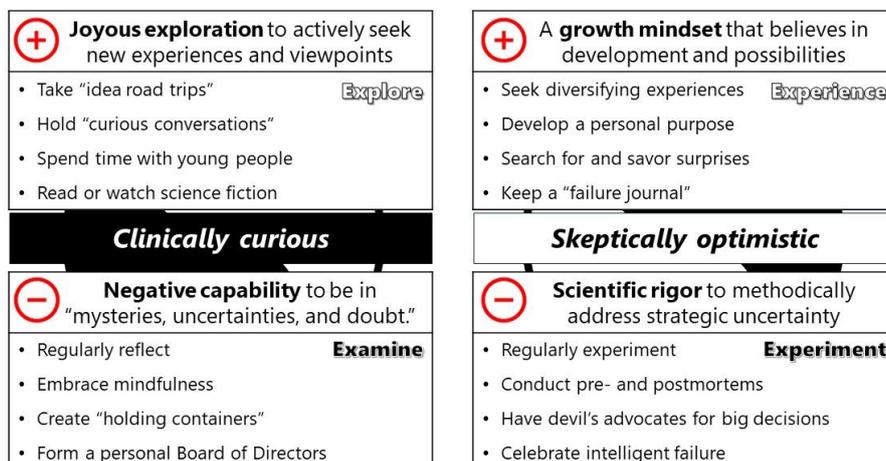
This matrix shows specific tools in The Paradox Toolkit.

- Diagnostic instruments summarize the paradox mindset battery from Miron-Spektor et al. and the paradoxical leader behaviors from Zhang et al.
- The paradox litmus test is a short set of questions to determine the degree to which a perceived issue is indeed a paradox.
- The paradox sparring session summarizes the process Lüscher & Lewis used at Lego.
- Conscious complication team exercises are ways to build integrative complexity by working together to stretch mindsets and capabilities.
- Adaptive capacity boosters are ways to build underlying components to be “clinically curious” (combining “joyous exploration” to seek new experiences with a “negative capability” to not get overwhelmed by these experiences) and “skeptically optimistic” (combining a “growth mindset” that believes in possibility and “scientific rigor” to identify and address key uncertainties).



Adaptive capacity boosters

This shows four ways to boost each of the components of an individual’s adaptive capacity. It combines findings from the paradox literature with core concepts in the EMC program.



Appendix 2: Interview guide

Hello. The approach I am following is called Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The phenomenon we are exploring is paradox. I am going to spend the first half of the interview asking you about your experiences and associations with paradox broadly, and the second half focusing specifically on the short survey you completed. To ensure consistency across discussions I am going to stick to my script reasonably strictly. This is intended to be about 60 minutes in length.

I'm going to be taking notes while we discuss. Is it ok if I record this as well, simply for transcription purposes? All individual responses will be kept strictly anonymous, so please speak freely as we go through the discussion.

I have 12 open-ended questions on my questionnaire. We don't have to answer all of them. Let's see how the conversation goes!

Broad questions about paradox

1. What does the word "paradox" mean to you?
2. What would you say are representative experiences you have had with paradox in either life or business?
3. What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon? In other words, are there contexts where paradox is more or less likely, more or less acute, etc.?

Broad questions about the survey

The next questions relate to the questionnaire you completed that asked you to rank order nine specific "paradoxical leader behaviors" in order of pertinence for leaders trying to drive strategic transformation.

4. Tell me how it felt to complete the questionnaire. Did you have a mental image in mind as you filled it out? How long did it take?
5. I now want to discuss the top two behaviors you identified. Let's go through them individually. You had *Behavior 1* at the top of your list. How does that phrase make you feel?
6. Is there a specific moment with a client or inside your own organization that you associate with this?

7. Let's now talk about *Behavior 2*, which you had second. How does that phrase make you feel?
8. Is there a specific moment with a client or inside your own organization that you associate with this?

Comparative questions about the survey

Next, I want to explore areas where your answers diverged the most from the other people who have completed the survey. Survey respondents do not represent a statistically meaningful sample, but enough people have filled it in that at least it is interesting to explore.

9. The behavior that had the biggest positive gap between your ranking and my sample was *Positive gap behavior*. You ranked it X, the average placement was Y. What do you make of this?
10. The behavior that had the biggest negative gap between your ranking and my sample was *Negative gap behavior*. You ranked it X, the average placement was Y. What do you make of this?

Summary questions

11. We have been talking about paradox for [x] minutes. How do you feel now?
12. How do you feel as you reflect on the discussion?

Appendix 3: Results of paradoxical leader behavior survey

Interview subjects were asked to complete a short online survey. The survey asked them to rank order nine paradoxical leader behaviors from 1=most to 9=least pertinent for leaders looking to drive strategic transformation. Survey options were presented alphabetically. The table below shows the nine behaviors, the average placement across the 11 subjects, the highest and lowest ranking (1=high, 9=low), and the standard deviation.

Paradoxical Leader Behavior	Avg	Max	Min	St Dev
Maintaining short-term efficiency and long-term development	2.6	1	9	2.7
Conforming to and shaping collective forces in the environment	3.3	1	6	2.0

Maintaining decision control while allowing autonomy	3.7	1	7	2.0
Maintaining stability and flexibility	4.5	2	8	1.9
Focus on shareholders and the stakeholder community	4.9	2	7	2.0
Enforcing work requirements while allowing flexibility	5.0	2	9	2.6
Maintaining both distance and closeness with subordinates	6.9	3	9	2.3
Combining self-centeredness with other-centeredness	7.0	3	9	1.8
Treating subordinates uniformly while allowing individualization	7.0	3	9	1.9

Note how seven of the nine behaviors had a span of at least six between the highest and lowest rankings.

Appendix 4: Sample PowerPoint slide used during interviews

When I got to question 4 in the interview, I shared my screen and showed participants a slide with the nine paradoxical leader behaviors they were asked to rank.

PARADOXICAL LEADER BEHAVIORS RANKING EXERCISE

Rank order the following nine categories of paradoxical behaviors from 1=most pertinent to what leaders need to do to manage strategic transformation to 9=least pertinent.

- Combining self-centeredness with other-centeredness
- Conforming to and shaping collective forces in the environment
- Enforcing work requirements while allowing flexibility
- Focus on shareholders and the stakeholder community
- Maintaining both distance and closeness with subordinates
- Maintaining decision control while allowing autonomy
- Maintaining short-term efficiency and long-term development
- Maintaining stability and flexibility
- Treating subordinates uniformly while allowing individualization

I then shared some of their specific responses.

PARADOXICAL LEADER BEHAVIORS RANKING EXERCISE

Rank order the following nine categories of paradoxical behaviors from 1=most pertinent to what leaders need to do to manage strategic transformation to 9=least pertinent.

- Combining self-centeredness with other-centeredness
- Conforming to and shaping collective forces in the environment
- Enforcing work requirements while allowing flexibility
- ▲ Focus on shareholders and the stakeholder community
- Maintaining both distance and closeness with subordinates
- ▼ Maintaining decision control while allowing autonomy
- 2 Maintaining short-term efficiency and long-term development
- 1 Maintaining stability and flexibility
- Treating subordinates uniformly while allowing individualization

The blue circles with numbers represent the behaviors ranked first and second (questions 5 and 7). The green arrow pointing up represents the behavior the interviewee ranked relatively more important than the average survey respondent (question 9). The red arrow pointing down represents the behavior the interviewee ranked relatively less important than the average respondent (question 10).

Appendix 5: Quotes illustrating finding that paradox is perceived to be powerful

True paradox is timeless	Religion	That then which nothing greater can be imagined or that then which nothing greater can exist ... I love the God paradox, because when you really think about it, the paradox is it's unsolved ... the paradox is that we can both conceive of something in principle that is God, which is infinite—that then which nothing greater can be imagined—and yet we can't imagine it. That to me is a lovely paradox from 700 years ago.
	Nature and math	People who believe things are in a state such as rain or sun I kind of ask very simply, just a question, have you ever seen a rainbow? And the answer is of course. Well then, it's not either rainy or sunny sometimes it's rainy and sunny and the result is a rainbow ... A paradox is kind of a search for a rainbow.
Confronting paradox leads to growth	Resolution of problems	Paradoxes can be resolved. And when they're resolved there's often brilliant innovation and breakthroughs. Continual creativity comes from paradox ... it's the doorway into creativity ... All great meaning comes from grappling with paradox Since I believe that it's not a problem to be solved but it's a dilemma to be faced, I think the paradox is grounded in a contextual metaphor so if I could only see the context, I might be able to deal with the paradox differently. So I'm searching for new context. And that new context to me is metaphorical because in that new context, if we could make more progress, then it's a useful metaphor.
	Personal development	It's really hard to do but when you do it, you realize I've become something more and at an organizational level I'm more effective and at a personal level I'm either a better person or I'm at least a more self-aware person.
Examining paradox leads to reflection	Surfaces subconscious issues	I mean it didn't quite feel like a therapy session, but it was good to talk about this as a concept, because it's something that I've never articulated but now, having talked about it with you, I can see why that would absolutely impact your, not wellbeing, but motivation, performance, etc. at work if you're having to work within what you perceive at least to be a paradox. It's interesting. Who would have thought that there was so much to explore with a single word? It has been an interesting chat. ... It has got me thinking about things that I don't consciously think about much. I've enjoyed the process of reflecting on clients on the ideas that I'm thinking about.
	Raises questions	I feel like I've lost track of time a little bit. I have not been looking at the time. I've just been walking around enjoying the conversation. I feel like I was a bit fragmented and my brain was in other places coming into the conversation ... I wonder if I had read something or read three different things like would the train of thought or conversation gone in a totally different direction, and how does that influence your research. Did other people do different types of their own pre thinking or put space before this and how does that change outcomes? I just have a bunch of thoughts or questions in my head about you and your research. To be honest.

Appendix 6: Quotes illustrating finding that paradox generates a range of emotions

Positive emotions	Curious	<p>Maybe I seek them out because they're really intriguing because there's something new there.</p> <p>Quite a lot of what drives me into the things I'm doing is trying to test what can be done in unusual circumstances where you do not have a lot. I guess that's coming from a third-world context. In an emerging market you frequently have many problems to solve. So I guess wicked problems that require complex system solutions are the ones that appeal to me.</p>
	Excited	<p>Maybe there's something about how someone like me being challenged is kind of like having a little shot. I like that, and maybe for other people it isn't. It's not a huge amount of serotonin right, but I do feel a little bit, like, simulated, like in the middle of a great chess game.</p>
	Empowered and engaged	<p>If I ran an experiment and the point falls on the line, that's good in some way, but it's almost like [sigh] I didn't need to run that experiment. And when the point falls off the line the energy of everybody is to explain the error and look at the process and determine why that point is really on the line. My joy is, uh it didn't fall on the line and so maybe it means I have the wrong axis. That point has all the information. The line has all of the information but it's not new information it's old information. ... I just think paradoxes are a gift. They're a gift.</p>
Negative feelings	Fear	<p>You have a little bit of fear when you do that because to do that, sometimes, you risk chasing rabbits and so, in six months in a year you're not actually further towards your goal. You've hit your milestones every month, but you're never growing who you need to become as a person or as an organization.</p>
	Pain	<p>I think it's painful because inherent in a paradox is the logic that becomes part of your identity, part of your being, part of your self-worth even. And so to let go of that logic to embrace the other one you have to invalidate something you're good at, you have to invalidate part of your own identity.</p>
	Powerless	<p>It's a little bit demotivating ... It also feels there's some frustration there. And it feels like I'm stuck in the middle. I'm not in a position to say okay let's go and change these structures that are impeding our work. And I'm also not in a position to say well let's be honest about what we're doing and clearly state that we're only doing these few things and we're not actually doing this groundbreaking stuff, so it feels disempowering in a way.</p>
Paradoxical feelings	"Unsettled but good"	<p>Paradoxes create conflict. Internally or organizationally. And you resolve these organizationally by portfolio management. It's a lot harder to portfolio manage yourself. You can't compartmentalize your life quite as easily as you can compartmentalize an organization with separate divisions. I can't be Mr. Kind and Warm in my home and be Mr. Combative at the office. They're going to affect each other, you know, for good and bad.</p>
	"A pleasant struggle"	<p>If I had to put on paper a working definition, I will struggle. But it's a pleasant struggle. The struggle is, you have a problem, and you know there's an answer, and you will find an answer and you know that it will be extremely rewarding and this this problem solving it's a pleasure ... The struggle is it's hard. Of course.</p> <p>While it is admittedly very stressful and I know I don't sleep, and I get quite tense etc. But also, I think the, "Wouldn't it be great" overcomes and overwhelms every other negative emotion.</p> <p>There's a sense of anxiousness. But there's also optimism. And I think decisiveness, is the third word I would associate with it because we need to be decisive and quick in terms of going ahead and doing something.</p>

Appendix 7: Quotes illustrating finding that context heavily influences the experience of paradox

Structural influencers	Individual role	If you are in a factory of auto workers or a warehouse full of people moving boxes around, maybe that's [enforcing work requirements and enabling flexibility] more important but it is less circumstance relevant to somebody working or leading, in this country at least, more knowledge-oriented work.
	Type of organization	Without the context of the law firm, then the paradox would arguably not exist, because maybe there would be more room for innovation and more suspension of disbelief or more willingness to try new ways of working
Individual perceptions & capabilities	Time horizon	Right now, it feels to me like close to impossible, but change does happen, it happens slowly, so if you're looking at a longer-term perspective, then it's probably achievable. I think it's perspective, right? What for one person might seem not possible for another person is achievable.
	Experiences and social context	[Asked why distance and closeness with subordinates was ranked lower] ... I think that's probably just from personal experience. I can understand it intellectually, but as a business founder, who is no longer a manager that that is not something that is paradoxical to me. I think I struggled with it more when I was managing people and when I was making pay and promotion decisions, but I think it's because I personally don't experience that anymore that's why I ranked it low.
	Mental capacity / capabilities	I'm looking at the survey through my level of development, someone else is looking at the survey through their level of development or they're thinking about the people they consult with or their clients and their level of development, their set of concerns, their customers. The level of depth of how someone resolves a paradox will give you a measure of how richly that person can organize their internal psychology and cognition, but also how they can cognize the world around them.
	Frame of analysis	Sometimes the problem that is looks intractable we call a paradox, because what we are doing is putting up sort of an either-or trade off lens on it, and it would seem as though there is no solution. And the seeming is, and again I go back to the face of it, through a specific lens of analysis, the paradox has no solution. But if you alter the frame in some way, shape, or form, use a different type of map use a different lens or change the rules of the game, the paradox can actually be so-called solved.