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Navigating Leadership Paradox. Engaging Paradoxical Thinking in Practice

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Book & Resource Reviews

***Navigating Leadership Paradox. Engaging Paradoxical Thinking in Practice*, by Rikke Kristine Nielsen, Frans Bévort, Thomas Duus Henriksen, Anne-Mette Hjalager, and Danielle Bjerre Lyndgaard. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023. 214 pages, hardcover.**

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“Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Being willing is not enough; we must do.”

—Attributed to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Paradox scholarship has equipped us with a rich vocabulary to understand organizational life’s persistent, contradictory, and interdependent tensions. With strong theoretical foundations, there is no shortage of frameworks explaining why these tensions matter. But what if you already understand the theory and still do not know how to work with paradox in practice, in the classroom, during a tense team discussion, or in the midst of a critical decision where trade-offs cannot wait? What if you are eager to teach, lead, and research by harnessing the power of contradictions, yet the concepts remain elusive—insightful in theory but challenging to translate into action?

If the ample body of paradox scholarship sharpens our understanding, *Navigating Leadership Paradox: Engaging Paradoxical Thinking in Practice* (Nielsen, Bévort, Duus Henriksen, Hjalager & Lyndgaard, 2023) brings it down to earth by offering a structured, tool-based approach for those ready to move from insight to collective action and activate paradox’s generative potential. The authors present a thoughtfully constructed framework—hands-on, research-based, practice-oriented, and grounded in real leadership challenges. Organized into five developmental phases, the book walks readers—including paradox scholars, educators, and practitioners—through a sequence of tools and approaches designed to surface tensions and make them workable (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008).

Nielsen et al.’s (2023) work almost serves as a handbook that conceives paradox not just as a conceptual lens but as a practical journey that requires a GPS. Supported by 20 cases, 10 paradoxes, 15 tools,

and 25 “learning coordinates,” the book demonstrates how a paradox is not a barrier to leadership but a source of movement that demands reflection, coordination, and, most of all, co-creation. In doing so, the book contributes to ongoing conversations on paradox learning (Griffin, King & Reedy, 2022) and its co-creational nature, highlighting how learning through paradox can foster collaborative action in practice (Sharma, Greco, Grewatsch & Bansal, 2022).

LEARNING TO LEAD THROUGH PARADOX: TOWARD COLLECTIVE ACTION

Paradox is not something you engage with on your own. Nor is leadership. Both are inherently relational: they take shape through (inter)action, feedback, and mutual adjustment. Leadership paradoxes, thus, arise not in isolation but in these very relationships—not as puzzles to be solved but as lived tensions embedded in actions, shaped by connection, resistant to neat resolution. Yet, how do we lean into paradoxes to shape action together, shifting from individual challenge to collective change? That’s where this book makes its mark. In our view, its most vital contribution lies not in the richness of the tools themselves but in what they make possible: a shift from leading alone to navigating paradox together in ways that enable shared learning and collective action. We argue that the book fills a critical gap between awareness and action in paradox management learning. Often, once individuals recognize a paradox and begin to understand what is at stake, they are left wondering: What now? How do we move forward? How do we differentiate and integrate not just conceptually, as paradox scholars have long advocated, but practically, with others? Nielsen et al.’s (2023) book offers a structure for that next step. We argue that the book opens—and occasionally misses—opportunities to support paradox as a collective learning practice, one that enables shared reflection, situated action, and more responsible forms of leadership.

MANEUVERING IN THE FOG, MOVING THROUGH COORDINATES, AND BALANCING COLLECTIVELY

The book invites leaders to approach paradox not with the expectation of resolution but as an ongoing and situated practice. As Nielsen et al. (2023: 6)

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write, “Balancing is not something you have [...] Balancing includes the aiming for a moving target, a bit like looking for the place where the rainbow ends.” This metaphor captures the lived experience of leading through uncertainty, of maneuvering in the fog with no fixed destination, guided instead by coordinates that help orient rather than direct. The book’s “learning coordinates” serve this purpose well, offering shared language and structure to make paradox more approachable in action. One example is the shift “from showing to exposing” (Chapter 9), which reframes leadership not as the display of clarity but as the act of making tensions visible, inviting others into ambiguity rather than shielding them from it as a form of relational strength to move from reflection to co-action. It holds space for others to step in, not with answers, but with presence. This collective dimension of maneuvering is paradoxically both the book’s greatest treasure and a powerful insight that could have been explored even more deeply.

While the book emphasizes leadership as a “team sport,” where collaborators shape one another’s room to maneuver, its developmental structure still begins with the individual leader. Across the five phases—framing, investigating, choosing, acting, and reflecting—the emphasis remains largely on personal insight and cognitive reframing. The more collective dimensions of paradox work—facilitation, dialogue, and organizational development—are present but not emphasized. This is not a flaw but an invitation. As the authors illustrate, paradoxes are not only personal tensions to be managed and then shared—they are social, embodied, and co-constructed from the very beginning. They are lived between people as much as within them. This echoes calls for dialogic, relational engagement with paradox learning (Griffin, King & Reedy, 2022). Starting from this understanding might shift not just how paradox is approached, but how learning unfolds. In addition, if we are genuinely maneuvering in the fog, we rarely start by walking alone but rather begin by reaching out tentatively, relationally, and together. What Nielsen et al. (2023) ultimately enable is not just better tools, but a compass that orients leaders toward collective learning and shared navigation. Perhaps that, more than balance, is the real promise of its practice.

WARNINGS AND PRECAUTIONS FOR USE

Like an effective medicine, *Navigating Leadership Paradox* delivers clear benefits but calls for a few precautions. While the book succeeds in making paradox more accessible through structured phases

and tools, its approach requires care—especially for researchers and educators looking to use or extend it. Tools can illuminate, but they can also constrain. There is a fine line between making paradox workable and (over)simplifying what it demands.

Can paradox bear the promise of tools without risking instrumentalization—luring users into a false sense of mastery of tensions? Or do such tools risk inadvertently seducing users into a distant view of complexity, offering the illusion of accessibility that, paradoxically, reduces paradox embracement to a mapping or communication exercise and a framework to sketch desirable and achievable actions? The very tools we use to engage paradox may end up taming it, stripping it of its absurdity, surprise, and generative tension (Cunha & Putnam, 2019). To their credit, Nielsen et al. (2023) acknowledge this risk, particularly in Chapter 12, where they note the risk of “deparadoxification” and the difficulties in keeping tensions alive throughout the process. When this happens, paradox becomes overly neat, risking reduction to a conceptual convenience rather than an opportunity to confront its experiential depth. While there is no doubt that paradox navigation can be paralyzing and must be somewhat simplified in complex decision-making contexts, when does simplification become oversimplified? Without recognizing this threshold, tools may inadvertently lead their users to address symptoms rather than root causes. By doing so, they might end up privileging the socially constructed dimension of paradox while neglecting its ontological depth.

Tools, then, should be understood not as end-points, but as invitations—a first step in shifting how we relate to tension. They can foster learning by offering shared language, enabling saliency while staging and denouncing polarization (Greco, Torres, Danaj & Smith, 2025), and slowing the urge to resolve prematurely by creating space for reflection before co-action (Sharma, Greco, Grewatsch & Bansal, 2022). Nevertheless, tools alone are not transformative. They require interpretation, context, and dialogue. They can support learning, but not guarantee it.

The issue we are advocating for is a profound tension that paradox scholarship must continue to investigate. The field has yet to fully grasp how to balance abstraction, situatedness, generalization, and context. How do we develop approaches that travel across settings without flattening what makes each one distinct? How can paradox theory recognize that not all paradoxes are created equal and that the ability to navigate or leverage them can transcend

individuals, leaders, and organizations' own abilities, motivation, agency, and possibilities? Growing societal polarization—the division of opposites into extremes—is putting these ideas to the test. No matter the tool and leadership approach, paradox navigation and leverage can at times feel naïve or even delusional. In emotionally charged and socially complex environments where defensiveness cannot be overcome, paradoxes are not simply both—and nor balancing acts (Pradies, 2023), but enduring struggles shaped by histories, identities, and path dependencies. The work of engaging them requires not only technique but care, humility, and, often, the courage to sit with what can neither be harnessed, leveraged, navigated, nor ever become productive or generative.

Navigating Leadership Paradox (Nielsen et al., 2023) contributes to this conversation by operationalizing paradox, encouraging scholars and practitioners alike to see it as a practical challenge—beyond a label, a lens, or a theory (Sparr, Miron-Spektor, Lewis & Smith, 2022). However, it also reminds us that the real work lies not only in naming, mapping, staging, and leveraging paradoxes but in living them—together, reciprocally, even when the actions required extend beyond our immediate sphere of influence. The authors do point toward a North Star: paradox learning, theory, and practice are relational and thus must be a collective effort. Paradox is not a lonely job but a practice we share. It lives in and between us, and it is only together that we learn to live—and, hopefully, thrive—with it.

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