

## DESTRUCTIVE LEADERSHIP PARADOXES<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

The paradoxical side of leadership is being increasingly studied by management and organization scholars. Organizational paradox theory has generally favored a synergistic understanding of paradoxical tensions, seen as opportunities to obtain competitive advantage through the generative integration of opposing but equally desirable results. Less attention has been given to the other side of paradoxical tensions: as destructive forces. We explore this darker side of paradox by discussing how leadership may impose irrational absurdities in the form of pragmatic paradoxes (self-defying demands that cannot be discussed or realized), and suggest ways to mitigate or neutralize their destructive effects.

Keywords; leadership, destructive leadership, organizational paradoxes, pragmatic paradoxes.

## INTRODUCTION

Organizational paradox theory studies organizations as sites rich in tension, contradiction and even absurdity (Berti et al., 2021; Gaim et al, 2024; Smith & Lewis, 2011). The theory is emerging as an important lens to study the leadership of organizations (Knight & Paroutis, 2017; Lewis et al., 2014; Smith & Lewis, 2012), by exploring paradoxes, understood as persistent interdependent oppositions between different requirements imposed by organizing (Smith & Lewis, 2011). For example, decision makers need to balance the need for customization (to increase customer satisfaction) and standardization (to control costs); or between assigning specific objectives (which increases accountability but can cause individuals to lose sight of the bigger picture) and providing a more general vision (which has the opposite effect). Leaders can leverage such paradoxes as possible sources of generative synergy and competitive advantage by transcending contradictions with a so-called “both-and” approach, integrating rather than separating opposites in a “either-or” way (Smith & Lewis, 2011, 2022).

In this chapter we depart from this ‘generative’ perspective of leadership and paradox to discuss the *mismanagement* of these tensions creating pragmatic paradoxes (Berti & Simpson, 2021; Cunha et al., 2023). They arise from a leader’s (here understood as organizational members occupying a management position, hence our use of leaders and managers as synonyms) absolute commands and silencing of any views other than his/her own, leaving no opportunity for discussion on how to navigate a challenging situation. Alike other paradoxes, pragmatic paradoxes imply contradictory requirements and are characterized by an element of undecidability, i.e., the incapacity to provide a coherent logic justifying action (Berti & Cunha, 2023). However, in this case the person who has to make a choice does not have the power to seek a compromise or to adaptably navigate the divergent requirements. For example, picture the situation experienced by a shop attendant who is demanded by their boss to satisfy every customer’s whim; at the same time, the boss, aiming to skimp on cost, does not adequately

staff the shop, so that the shop attendants have to serve too many customers. Thus, the employees are in an absurd position: satisfying one customer means making another customer unhappy. The situation could be resolved with an open discussion about the issue, discuss or renegotiate contradictory requirements, but if dialogue is thwarted then an absurd, incapacitating situation will persist.

In general, these situations occur when organizational members encounter paradoxes while lacking agency to reframing the issue or addressing it with flexibility, without being given the opportunity to question or negotiate the order (Berti & Simpson, 2021; Watzlawick et al, 1967). These can also occur when a follower is demanded by the leader to perform a self-defying task. For example, a manager lambasting subordinates because of their lack of initiative is putting them in an impossible situation, since any attempt to take initiative could then be construed as a mere reaction to the demand, signifying lack of initiative. The logical breakdowns introduced by paradoxes renders trade-offs inherent to organizing (for instance, between efficiency and effectiveness, or between change and stability) difficult to navigate, but it is the lack of opportunity to discuss, clarify or question the leader's commands, that makes things even more complex, as it denies followers agency and reduces access to resources needed to address the challenges.

Pragmatic paradoxes are destructive because they confront people in positions of dependence with impossible situations, exposing the organizational absurdity that is patent in ideas such as organizational catch 22s (Ashforth, 1991), Kafkaesque bureaucracies (Clegg, et al., 2016), irrational organizations (Brunsson, 1985), or managerial stupidity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). To explore the under-researched role of paradox in destructive leadership, we structure the chapter as follows. First, we provide a general overview of organizational paradox theory to familiarize our readers with this approach. Next, we study the role of absurdity as central in organizational paradox and discuss its destructive effects. We then specify the problems created by leadership while navigating contradiction and paradox and explain how the destructive effects of pragmatic paradoxes can be mitigated. Overall,

we cross-fertilize two domains that have been insufficiently bridged: leadership and destructive pragmatic paradoxes.

## **LEADERSHIP, PARADOX, AND PARADOXICAL LEADERSHIP**

Organizational paradox theory studies the tensions and contradictions of organizing not as exceptions or anomalies but as rich spaces in tension and contradiction and as a condition inherent to complex systems (for recent reviews organizational paradox see Berti et al., 2021; Gaim et al., 2022; Pradies et al., 2023). People face contradictory demands in the exercise of their professions, for example between desire to care for clients and financial imperatives (Pradies, 2022). Contradictions also derive from the coexistence of multiple interests and competing values (Cameron & Quinn, 2011), different objectives (Gaim et al., 2021), and multiple logics (Smith & Besharov, 2019) that characterize complex organizations. These tensions may constitute competing demands but they gain paradoxical attributes by the interdependence of the opposites, combined with organizational conditions that lead to condition of undecidability, the impossibility to justify rational account for action (Luhmann, 1995). The manifestation of paradoxes, which are persistent because inherent to organizing, which are more likely in conditions of resource scarcity, change or plurality of interests (Smith & Lewis, 2011), confront decision-makers with situations of the lose-lose type (Smith & Lewis, 2014). The Covid-19 pandemic illustrates these situations, confronting leaders with difficult decisions on how to protect public health while preserving the economic conditions necessary for people to toil, live, and take care of their health (e.g., Giustiniano et al., 2020; Lê & Pradies, 2022).

The fact that paradoxes are especially salient in moments of crisis does not mean that they are absent at other times. It has been defended that most organizational processes can be studied through the lens of paradox (Cunha, Clegg, Rego et al., 2021), an idea superbly captured by March and Weil (2009) in their depiction of leaders as poets (idealists, visionaries) and plumbers (pragmatic, goal-oriented), as well as in leadership as a process with Quixotic resonance, a combination of passion and goal clarity

(Augier, 2004). As all these authors have noted, paradox management is integral to leadership, not an extraordinary requirement. As examples of paradoxes facing managers, scholars have considered cases such as exploration vs. exploitation, change vs. stability, short-term vs. long-term, local vs. global, or differentiation vs. integration. Smith and Lewis (2015) argue that the inter-connected global environment has added to organizational complexity, necessitating leadership competencies in paradox management. They propose four leadership skills as vital to paradox management: (1) cognitive complexity, (2) confidence, (3) conflict management and (4) communication. From an analysis of leadership in five global organizations (including Unilever, IBM and Lego), Lewis et al. (2014) identify five paradoxical leadership practices that enable strategic agility: (1) valuing paradox as vital to high performance, (2) proactively identifying and raising tensions, (3) avoiding the traps of defensiveness and anxiety, (4) consistently communicating a both/and vision, (and 5) separating efforts to attend to both sides of a paradox. Simpson et al. (2022) analysed the paradoxical leadership of a national leader and identified two “power steering strategies” for managing paradoxical tensions. First, while “integrative rhetoric” was used to reframe and transcend tensions between the leader’s idealistic values and pragmatic decisions that did not always live up to the ideal, but got things done. Second, “controlled oscillation” was used to steer a course between tensions of rational-legal processes and more emotional human gestures and considerations.

Given that leadership implies the tackling of paradox, leadership is never far from the absurd (Newark, 2018). The way leaders and organizations handle tensions thus defines the quality of the leadership and the way organizations accomplish their missions. Paradoxical tensions can be tackled in adaptive and defensive modes. While adaptive responses imply a paradox mindset (i.e., openness to accept and be energized by the presence of tensions), defensive responses fail to integrate opposites, as they lean towards denial or the selection of one force (either-or) (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). Leaders sometimes integrate opposites in a balanced way, potentially supporting virtuous cycles of renewal (Simpson et al., 2022); at other times, they fail to reach this balance and engage in the production of vicious circles.

These circles, when unbroken for a significant period of time, may originate destructive leadership presiding over highly dysfunctional organizations, as habits are repeated and reinforced. This may degenerate into organizations that deviate from their mission, such as law maintenance organizations that engage in criminal behaviors (Cunha et al., 2023), namely not fighting crime but participating in organized crime (Gordon, Clegg & Kornberger, 2009).

If contradiction is not as a sign of dysfunction that needs to be addressed and solved but as an element inherent to organizing, leadership can be represented as the management function responsible for the articulation of contradictions (Knights & Paroutis, 2017; Lewis et al., 2014). Classic, mechanistic theories of organization saw management as the exercise of control, as in the formulation of management as dealing with planning, directing, organizing and controlling. Contemporary organization theory complements these classical functions with needs for improvising, supporting, dis-organizing, and empowering. In this formulation, designing and managing organizations consists, to a great extent, in an exercise of incorporating paradoxes via structural mechanisms (Cunha et al., 2023; Simpson & Berti, 2020). There is a challenge, though: paradoxes cannot be managed as normal, ordinary organizational processes. They cannot be “tamed” (Cunha & Putnam, 2019) and the tackling of one tension may originate new tensions, as paradoxes are interwoven.

### **UNDERSTANDING PARADOXES: THE ROLE OF UNDECIDABILITY**

As noted, opposition, interdependence and persistence have become established as the key attributes of paradox (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Yet paradox is more than a source of generative balancing of forces. It is also characterized by a dimension of undecidability (Berti & Cunha, 2023). Undecidability refers to the impossible assimilation of one entity to either side of an opposition. In this view, paradox involves the impossibility of choice, the negation of the chance to take sides. Consequently, the complexity of one issue cannot be managed and rendered simpler through some process of rationalization/organization, because no rational account of a choice can be provided.

As Luhmann (2018) observed, any paradoxical choice will make the alternative more salient, which means that choosing one alternative will render the opposite alternative more visible and attractive. The problem with decision does not lie in the presence of some trade-off. Trade-offs can be approached through either-or approaches: one pole is selected, and the decision made. The problem is that the choice cannot be justified via some rational account. Given the importance of technical rationality for modern, Weberian organizations, this lack of rational logic and justification is highly problematic, because it put agents in a very awkward situation: they are required to make rational decisions, but whatever decision they make is not just dysfunctional but can also be constructed as irrational (Berti, 2021; Berti & Cunha, 2023). A friend described us one such scenario: an operating room nurse was assisting a notoriously cranky senior surgeon when she realized that the doctor's elbow was about to hit a tray containing sterile instruments. The doctor was focused on a very delicate procedure, and he would have snapped at her if she distracted him from his task. At the same time, touching the tools would have made them unusable and would have caused a delay in the operation (for which she would have been reprimanded, too). In this case, it is the fractured relationship between the surgeon and the staff that is at the source of the issue.

Vicious circles in which a lack of mutual trust and cooperation that further undermines collaboration and performances are often at the source of pragmatic paradoxes, and the possibility of finding situations of this type has increased by changing societal expectations. Once, organizations could justify without much contestation, in that they followed clear missions. Business firms were expected to create shareholder value and the state was meant to serve the public. Over time, different expectations emerged, which now favor stakeholder rather than shareholder views, and new public management pressured public organizations to embrace market-like management practices. The result is that different values, interests and expectations from different stakeholders are turning undecidability into a common experience in organizations, given the difficulty of making decisions that will respond to the expectations of different audiences.



Undecidability, per se, may be simply a sign of the complexity and pluralism of organizations, where the interests and voices of different stakeholders are increasingly seen as legitimate and relevant. The proliferation of actors and goals creates complexity in decision, the defining element of an organization's identity according to Luhmann (2018). Under conditions of plurality, different actors expect different outcomes (Ashforth & Reingen, 2014); but even in face of undecidability and doubts about how to match different expectations, leaders still need to make decisions, even if it means pushing a decision up or down the organizational hierarchy to avoid being held personally accountable (Jackall, 1988). When decisions are based on unclear motives, leaders may engage in processes of escalation of commitment, not because of some (non-existing) rational motives but to rationalize decisions (Aronson, 1973), in order to save face and manage impressions. Leaders can further hubristically pull rank to disallow further discussion or questioning of what may be a poor decision, holding followers accountable although with little agency. In that way, they end aiming to successfully implementing something that objectively has no chance of success. Thus, leader-follower power differentials may play a role in transforming complex organizational challenges into pragmatic paradoxes.

It is not only leaders who may impose pragmatic paradoxes on others, however; they may themselves be operating under conditions that impede them from navigating contradictions with the necessary degrees of freedom. As an example, senior hospital executives confronted with non-negotiable goals such as good care, high efficiency and lack of price elasticity, may be easily confronted with the condition of undecidability (Batista et al, 2016). Political pressure from several parties with conflicting agendas may impede them from turning the paradoxical condition into a simpler trade-off, as Patagonia did when confronted with both user safety and environmental protection. As explained by O'Rourke and Strand (2017), the company split the opposition into two sequential decisions that were tackled consecutively. The company's reputation has possibly given executives time to break the paradox in two. Patagonia embraced the tension one at a time. In contrast with Patagonia, when making decisions

with fewer resources (including reputation and good will), managers may be less blessed with options to navigate undecidability. They may feel the power of paradox in full force, its absurdity and lack of logic. In this case, paradoxes may show their destructive power.

## **CONTROL AND CONFLICT OVER INTERESTS**

### **Producing vicious circles**

Paradoxes have a generative potential that can be harnessed in order to turn contradictions into sources of organizational innovation (Smith & Lewis, 2022), but the productive use of paradox is not inevitable. In fact, for the reasons considered above, paradoxes can be a source of depletion of organizational capabilities. As expressions of contradiction, paradoxes make clear why leaders have sometimes to make decisions for which there is not a clear logic and justification. Why do managers engage in the production of vicious circles via the adoption of contradictory ends and means? There are several reasons.

First, as societal expectations have evolved and expanded, it may be politically (and reputationally) inconvenient or even impossible to avoid goals that would be better dismissed. But that impossibility may be made impossible by other inescapable goals. For example, top managers may find it difficult to ignore intense pressures from owners to create value and make the numbers, as well as public calls for social causes and environmental issues. Emmanuel Faber, at the helm of Danone, a company whose motto is “One planet, one health”, is case in point. He was ousted as CEO *and* chairman by shareholder activists who blamed him for a “chronic underperformance compared with larger rival Nestlé” (Abboud, 2021, p. 6) and demanded a separation between the chairman and the CEO position. Two ironic paradoxes in this process are worth mentioning. On the one hand, Danone is an “*entreprise à mission*”, i.e., “a company whose social and environmental objectives are aligned with its purpose and

set out in its Articles of Association” (Samans & Nelson, 2022, p. 153). Therefore, Faber was doing what it is statutorily expected from a “*entreprise à mission*”. On the other hand, “It is not without irony that a purpose-driven company (...) seeking to champion governance was pressured to recognize the need for essential separation of function between the CEO and chairman's role” (Van Gansbeke, 2021). The so-called triple bottom line is, inevitably, a source of tension for those torn between different sorts of metrics.

Second, even when goals are impossible, the lionizing of ideas such as “stretch goals” (Sitkin et al., 2011) may have created the fear that admitting their impossibility amounts to nothing more than personal insecurity; therefore, it is better to keep one’s fears for oneself, convey a reputation of being an “effective leader”, and go happily in the direction of the impossible. Carrie Tolstedt, the former leader of Wells Fargo Community Bank (once praised as “the best banker in America”) is a case in point. The company’s aggressive sales culture, supported by a program of *literally* impossible goals, led to the fake account scandal that ruined the organizational reputation and financial performance. According to the Independent Directors of the Board of Wells Fargo & Company (2017) that investigated the case, “Community Bank leadership recognized that their plans were unattainable — they were commonly referred to as 50/50 plans, meaning that there was an expectation that only half the regions would be able to meet them” (p. 19).

Third, there are cases showing that some organizations have turned the art of managing paradoxical demands into a source of competitive advantage. Companies such as Toyota (Osono et al., 2008) and Southwest Airlines, the relational low cost-high quality bureaucracy (Gittell, 2004), have been repeatedly presented as benchmarks of high-quality paradox management. These cases suggest that even though paradox is difficult, it is not impossible to manage. Therefore, senior managers may try to use the “power of AND” (Freeman et al., 2020) to revitalize and sustain competitive advantage. Managing paradox, though, is a difficult process, as paradoxes dynamically persist (Cunha & Clegg,

2018), which means that any form of balance is temporary. Managing through *both-and* is a delicate process of balancing opposite forces (Andriopolous, 2003), that are connected with other forces. Paradoxes being interwoven (Smith, 2014), means that the tackling of one paradox may be reverberating throughout the organization in unexpected ways, originating other paradoxes.

Managers can also purposefully create pragmatic paradoxes as a way to preserve dominance. They achieve this result by making trade-offs difficult to manage, transforming them into paradoxes, for example by setting mutually incompatible goals (e.g., the command to “be spontaneous”, or to “innovate but don’t make mistakes”), or by reducing agency and access to resources, thus engendering pragmatic paradoxes (Berti & Simpson, 2021). These may create cycles of dysfunctional responding that, once installed, can be sustained despite its inadequacy. This type of strategy is not just unethical but is also based on a fundamental error: mistaking power-over (the capacity to impose one’s will on others) for power-to (the actual capacity to achieve desired collective outcomes). A leader who removes opportunities for self-determination in their followers because he/she believes this is the most efficient way to ‘get things done’ are indeed undermining their own efficacy (Follett, 1924).

The fact that a circular dynamic was installed does not mean that it can be countered. On the contrary, circular dynamics are resistant to intervention; they are processes out of control, in which solutions often become part of the problem, aggravating difficulties and making established routines more impermeable to future change (Tsoukas & Cunha, 2017). Even when solutions are intended to solve a problem, sometimes they bury the roots of the problem even deeper, making it more challenging to interpret and, by consequence, to manage. This helps to explain, for example, why attempts to increase gender balance may end up furthering imbalance (Padavic et al., 2020), or why initiatives to reduce bureaucracy create extra-layers of bureaucracy which increase the paperwork as the new bureaucrats justify their anti-bureaucracy efforts (the recent example of Brexit is a case in point). These cycles are

often the result of two processes that we discuss next: a coercive understanding of control, and the coexistence of multiple and contradictory motives.

### **A coercive view of control**

Paradoxes can result from a coercive understanding of rules and bureaucracy. Sociologist Max Weber described bureaucracy as operating as a noble organizational system, promoting impersonal rules that would allow new forms of management based on competence and merit, rather than tradition and nepotism (Du Guy, 2000). Bureaucratic rules are a means to an end. Over time in a bureaucracy, however, rules can become an end in themselves. In a sense, organizations can serve rules rather than the other way around. As contexts change but rules are not updated to meet new demands, rules can become problematic and even stupid (Goffee & Jones, 2013). Sometimes an obsolete rule may continue to be followed due to rule tropism (Clegg et al., 2016). Although all parties may scoff or complain that the rule is obsolete, as long as it remains “on the books”, it continues to be dutifully obeyed, significantly reducing organizational efficiency and effectiveness. Obsolete rules that are not rescinded can collide with new rules, particularly when the old rules are used in ways that serve to protect the bureaucrat rather than the bureaucracy.

Leadership may reinforce this approach when a defensive understanding of rules – for reasons good or bad – puts the rule above the mission. In a sense, the mission of a coercive bureaucracy consists in following the rules. In this case, the noble mission of the bureaucracy (Du Gay, 2005) is corrupted by officers that neglect the mission and use the rules to protect their turf. Members of the organization are thus faced with a paradox: they have to follow rules, knowing that some rules make no sense and that, by obeying them may lead to problems for which they will be reprimanded. This absurdity does not preclude people from making decisions. Batista et al. (2016) illustrated this process in a hospital emergency room. Doctors, it was observed, in some cases followed all the necessary bureaucratic procedures after treating the patient and sending her away, for compliance reasons. The practice is, of

course, inefficient and absurd, but allows professionals to conduct their work properly, while avoiding problems with the system's bureaucratic structure. The fact that the practice is absurd may not necessarily lead to change for two orders of reasons. First, undecidability is not an obstacle to action, i.e., people can decide even in conditions of undecidability; second, actors engage with this absurd practice because they feel unable to solve the problem and because the process protects them in case of legal action from some patients. As such, the system is absurd as it is rational.

Such a condition of learned powerlessness is aggravated in organizations that, by their nature, raise important constraints to agency not only of regular employees but also their managers. As a result, people at different layers may feel equally constrained by an organizational system that appears labyrinthine and unbreakable – as any good Kafkaesque organization (Clegg et al., 2016). Given their nature, State organizations are especially well qualified to function as exemplars of this dynamic. Omnipresent rules sometimes impede the substantive fulfillment of the mission even when all the human and material conditions are in place because some formal permission was not obtained (Cunha et al., 2019). Again, a rule prevails over a mission. Leaders may perpetuate this state of affairs by action or omission.

### **Multiple interests**

Organizational theorists, as discussed, have defended the power of “and” (Smith & Lewis, 2022). Nevertheless, using such power is easier said than done. Different organizational groups and constituencies may not only have divergent interests but also an interest in keeping differences salient and active. Moreover, the poles of paradox need to be ‘protected’, since particular groups may have an interest in silencing instances that distract attention and resources from the objectives that they pursue (Huq et al., 2017). Identity issues help explain the process of polarization: identities are preserved and separated in order to affirm a group by reference to other groups, creating polarization rather than integration. Polarities may be tackled via a paradoxical mindset, but not all organizational

participants are inclined towards integrative solutions, namely for power reasons (Cunha, Neves, Clegg, Costa & Rego, 2019).

Emerging organizational phenomena such as employee activism, happening outside the boundaries of organizations, suggest that the potential for conflict over social issues is significant. Conflict is part of the dialectical process (Berti & Cunha, 2023) and can be used productively to unfreeze change. Organizations may create spaces for conflict to emerge more rather than less productively. The coexistence of interests should this be assumed as a source of conflict and polyphony, making paradox theory more sensitive to power and thus less power neutral, suggesting that paradox is not addressed only via integration but also through conflict.

## **REMEDIES AND RESPONSES**

If leadership can originate destructive paradoxes, what remedies and responses do leaders and employees have against the unfolding of pragmatic paradoxes? In this section we discuss two responses (irony and reduction of expectations) and two remedies (empowerment and collective paradox mindset development). Pragmatic paradoxes are caused, as noted above, by the lack of a paradox mindset and by power dynamics that impede people from navigating tensions with flexibility. To remedy this condition, organizations can empower their employees and construct a collective paradox mindset.

### **Empowerment**

The use of the positive potential of paradox implies a sufficient degree of agency: the dynamics of disempowerment may originate pragmatic paradoxes (Berti & Simpson, 2021). Without enough agency, followers will not have the space to cope flexibly with contradictions or to negotiate ways through competing demands. Leaders may empower people so that they can express the difficulties of articulating paradoxical demands. For example, rejecting impossible goals may be a way of preserving

and protecting an organization's integrity and reputation. As explained by Berti and Simpson (2021), one of the reasons why organizations create pragmatic paradoxes is due to power asymmetries that impede followers from questioning received orders. When this happens, people are confronted with challenges that are mutually incompatible, such as commands to "take individual initiative and be a team player, or being invited to speak and up and chastised for insubordination due to speaking up (Cunha, 2019).

When orders of this type cannot be discussed, because of the leader's own narcissism and insecurity, supported by a hierarchical organizational structure and culture, pragmatic paradoxes can become normalized as features of the irrationality of an organization's everyday life. Absurdity can be normalized (Bal et al., 2022) to the point that it becomes culturally established and no longer questioned, with followers justifying the game of "just doing my job" as a rational for the irrational. Empowerment may counter follower resignation in the face of the absurd. However, empowerment is not without its limitations, since it can become a source of new tensions, as a consequence of an empowerment paradox: are individuals truly empowered if their possibility to act emanates from someone who exercises power over them (the leader who is delegating) (Boje & Rosile, 2001; Cunha et al., 2021)?

### **Constructing a collective paradoxical mindset**

Paradox mindset, the state of comfort in the presence of tension and contradiction, has been studied mostly as an individual characteristic (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). However, in organizational settings, individual's ability to handle paradoxes should be expected, to some extent, to depend on the favorability of the context. Accordingly, it can be hypothesized that individuals with a paradox mindset will have difficulties in thinking paradoxically when the "tone at the top" is not favorable to paradoxical interpretations. We thus suggest that the construction of a collectively shared paradox mindset (Keller et al., 2021; Miron-Spektor & Paletz, 2017) is critical for the avoidance of the



destructive expressions of paradox. Ashforth and Reingen's (2014) work illustrates this with the case of a food cooperative that managed to cultivate such a mindset. The two types of members composing the coop found a delicate yet functioning equilibrium that allowed the organization to integrate economic and social missions in a balanced way. This exercise involved not only broad philosophical understandings of the organization's purpose, as well as practical, behavioral expressions of respect towards the other group, avoiding polarization while keeping the tension.

## **Irony**

One possible response to paradoxical situations consists in the use of humor and irony (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017). The fictional character of Švejk, the good soldier created by the writer Joseph Hašek, illustrates the approach (Fleming & Sewell, 2002). In face of absurd organizational requirements, Švejk accepts that nothing works better than just going with the flow, happily complying committedly with the system, even when it becomes incomprehensible. This puts him in an interesting situation: at once, he denounces the absurdity of the setting, while, at the same time, he complies and thus avoids punishment and even criticism, as there is nothing in his devoted behavior to be criticized. Irony thus can be considered itself as a paradoxical condition, a liminal place of agents who are simultaneously inside and outside the system, a condition that the urban artist Banksy has carefully cultivated (Cunha, Clegg, Berti et al., 2021). The same sort of approach characterized the court jester of medieval times, a role sometimes emulated in modern organizations (Clegg et al., 2022).

## **Reducing expectations**

The tension caused by paradoxical conditions may also be alleviated via the reduction of expectations (Li, 2021). If tension is caused by the expectation that decisions should have a rational basis and be explained via some rational account, then tension can be reduced, and the paradox "solved" by reducing expectations. To face reality, people may thus conduct an exercise of de-paradoxification

(Luhmann, 2018). The social de-construction of paradox helps them navigate the complexity of the world not by developing complexity but by simply accepting absurdity as a condition of the world. If one simply accepts this fact as a truth, then suddenly the world gets less paradoxical and more comprehensible.

## **CONCLUSION**

Tension and paradox are a condition of life in organizations (Clegg et al., 2002) and, accordingly, effective leaders today are expected to be capable of navigating and addressing tensions of complexity and apparent conflict (Smith & Lewis, 2012; Lewis et al., 2014; Knight & Paroutis, 2017). Leaders manage organizational paradox via integrative, both-and approaches. When leaders themselves originate or ignore contradictions, and limit means of redress, however, it may raise difficulties, namely as destructive pragmatic paradoxes. In this chapter we have explored and explained the destructive potential of paradox, via the consideration of the role of leaders in the enactment of absurd, paralyzing workplaces. These, we argued, can amplify organizational simplicity in a complex world, unleashing a false sense of control with a very destructive potential. One conclusion seems plausible: leaders ignore paradox at their peril.

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