

LEADERSHIP PARADOXES

Leadership remains one of the most sought-after qualities in contemporary society, yet after centuries of research, education and debate it remains just as elusive as ever. *Leadership Paradoxes: Rethinking Leadership for an Uncertain World* argues that the key to understanding and enhancing leadership education, theory and practice lies in the recognition of its paradoxical tendencies.

Through in-depth analysis of seven interconnected paradoxes the international team of contributors illustrate the tensions, dilemmas and challenges faced by leaders and managers in organisations, and suggest ways in which they can be reconceived as opportunities to be embraced rather than as problems to be solved. This book is supported with reflective and discussion questions for each chapter as well as a companion website at leadershipparadoxes.com which offers further material and also a channel for discussion.

Leadership Paradoxes will be valuable supplementary reading for students of leadership at advanced undergraduate, postgraduate, and post-experience level.

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Nigel Linacre is a co-founder of Extraordinary Leadership Ltd and is an affiliate of the Centre for Leadership Studies, University of Exeter, UK.

Finally, a leadership text which reveals the paradoxical and messy reality of leadership rather than providing over simplified 'how to' recipes. Bolden, Witzel and Linacre have produced a radical text which is a must-read for the serious student of leadership.

Donna Ladkin, *Professor of Leadership and Ethics, Plymouth University, UK*

Elegantly written throughout, and deeply rooted in both research and practice, each chapter offers novel variations on the central theme of paradox. This is a thought provoking and refreshing antidote to numerous damaging myths about leadership.

Dennis Tourish, *Professor of Leadership and Organization Studies, Royal Holloway University of London, UK*

The early part of the twenty-first century, to date, has been rife with complexity, uncertainty, ambiguity, and unpredictability. One of the inevitable products of the dynamics of our age is the ongoing creation of seemingly thorny, insoluble paradoxes. One cannot lead well without being able to comprehend paradoxes, and to artfully navigate them in ways that edify the group of people one leads. This topic is largely neglected in leadership courses – both in business schools and in broader leadership development efforts in industry and government. This book is an excellent response to this deficit, and a worthy introduction for students and managers who desire to increase their 'paradox navigation' skills as leaders.

Mark E. Mendenhall, *Ph.D., J. Burton Frierson Chair of Excellence in Business Leadership, University of Tennessee, Chattanooga, USA*

Another strikingly original text to come out of the Exeter Centre for Leadership Studies and its wide circle of contacts. Adding something new to a crowded field is not easy, but this distinguished band have done it again!

Stephanie Jones, *Associate Professor, Organizational Behavior, Maastricht School of Management, the Netherlands*



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LEADERSHIP PARADOXES

Rethinking leadership for
an uncertain world

*Edited by Richard Bolden,
Morgen Witzel and
Nigel Linacre*

First published 2016
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Leadership paradoxes : rethinking leadership for an uncertain world / edited by Richard Bolden, Morgen Witzel and Nigel Linacre. — First Edition.
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Leadership. I. Bolden, Richard, editor. II. Witzel, Morgen, editor. III.

Linacre, Nigel, editor.

HD57.7.L434345 2016

658.4'092—dc23

2015034355

ISBN: 978-1-138-80711-2 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-80712-9 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-75128-3 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo

by Swales & Willis Ltd, Exeter, Devon, UK

One must not think slightly of the paradoxical . . .
for the paradox is the source of the thinker's passion,
and the thinker without a paradox
is like a lover without feeling:
a paltry mediocrity.

Søren Kierkegaard

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PREFACE

It seems somehow appropriate that a book about paradoxes should have its origins in a coincidence. A chance conversation between Roger Niven, then a Fellow of the Centre for Leadership Studies (CLS) at the University of Exeter Business School, and Bob MacKenzie, one of the editors of the journal *e-Organisations and People*,¹ led to an invitation to CLS members to edit and contribute to a special issue of the journal on the subject of leadership. After a short discussion with Bob and his co-editor David McAra, the editors of this book, Morgen Witzel, Richard Bolden and Nigel Linacre, volunteered to edit the special issue.

We had a journal and we had editors, but what was the special issue to be about? 'Leadership' is of course a vast subject, and unless we narrowed the focus considerably there was a risk that we could end up with a collection of articles that had little, if any, relationship with each other. For various reasons, all three of us were very much interested in the idea of paradox, and more specifically, how paradoxes affect leadership and leaders. Casting around, we found that while the subject had been discussed before, the coverage was limited and there seemed plenty of room to make some new contributions. More to the point, we found other authors interested in the subject and happy to write about it.

There was, we freely admit, nothing scientific about the selection of authors. The initial call for papers was limited to members of the CLS academic staff and professional network. Once we had an overview of what content we could expect from CLS we invited selected outside contributors from our own personal networks, people who we knew (a) had an interest in the subject and (b) could write and deliver an article in the specified, fairly short time frame. Our other main concern was to strike the right balance between theory and practice. CLS had a strong reputation in both the academic and practitioner worlds, and indeed, part of its mandate was to bridge the gap between theory and practice and find a forum wherein the two could inform and influence each other. We tried to carry that same approach into the articles for *e-O&P*. Each article had to be rigorous and, where relevant, grounded in theory, but at the same time each had to have something important to say to leadership practitioners.

All this led to quite a subjective approach to article selection, and there are many other people who could have (and perhaps should have) been invited to contribute. Space and time proved to be the final arbitrators, and sadly we had to leave aside some potentially excellent contributions where authors had too many other commitments to allow them to complete on time, and others that we felt duplicated too closely articles already selected for inclusion. The final selection of articles was published in the autumn 2013 issue of *e-O&P* and we would like to take this opportunity once again to thank Bob and David for all their hard work in editing and producing the journal. We hope they were as pleased with the final output as we were.

After publication the question arose: what now? *E-O&P* ran several follow-up discussion sessions, but we felt it would be useful to disseminate these ideas still further. It was at this point that Routledge, our publishers, entered the picture. Would we be willing to edit and expand the articles to form a book? We were, and Bob and David at *e-O&P* gave the project their blessing. Thus this book was born.

The book has a slightly different focus from the original journal issue. First, this book is directed more at students of leadership than practising leaders (although in many cases we expect readers will be both). That meant that not all the original articles were necessarily appropriate; and those that were selected all needed to be considerably fleshed-out and expanded. Second, not all the original authors

were available. We ended with the present collection of nine chapters, which we think preserve – and indeed expand considerably upon – the ideas of the original, and will we hope prove to be stimulating food for thought for anyone looking to enquire further into leadership paradoxes.

This book makes no claims to have all the answers about either leadership or paradox. Most of the chapters presented here, as will quickly be seen, ask more questions than they provide answers. Our aim was to stimulate new thinking and debate, and to encourage more and wider reading and study of paradox and ambiguity and how they impact on leadership (to that end, we have provided reading lists with each chapter which should form a beginning for a programme of future study).

We have also developed a website – leadershipparadoxes.com – which offers further material and also a channel for discussion. We hope that these chapters will stimulate reflection and ideas of your own on the subject of leadership and paradox: if they do, then please feel free to share them with us and other readers through the website. In that way, we can develop a learning community that will take the ideas of this book forward; and maybe then, more answers will start to come.

We would like to thank everyone who has been involved in this project from the beginning. The *e-O&P* team have already been mentioned, but we would also like to thank Nicola Cupit and her team at Routledge for their enthusiasm and support for this book. Finally, we want to thank our fellow authors for their patience and hard work. Our names may appear on the cover, but yours was the endeavour that made this book possible.

Note

1 *e-O&P* is the journal of the Association for Management Education and Development (AMED). For more about *e-O&P*, visit the following website: www.amed.org.uk/page/our-lively-and-engaging. AMED's main page can be found at www.amed.org.uk/.

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INTRODUCTION

*Morgen Witzel, Richard Bolden
and Nigel Linacre*

This chapter introduces the main themes of this book – beginning with the concept of paradox and its relevance to the study and practice of leadership. Morgen Witzel, Richard Bolden and Nigel Linacre suggest that, in a quest for clarity and simplicity, leaders and their organisations all too often apply the wrong tools to the problems, and propose paradox as an alternative perspective. An overview of the structure of the book, including a brief summary of each chapter is then given, followed by a specific note for students of leadership. The chapter concludes with a number of questions for discussion and reflection.

Paradox *n.* a seemingly absurd though perhaps well-founded statement; self-contradictory or essentially absurd statement; person or thing conflicting with pre-conceived notions of what is reasonable or possible.

(Oxford English Dictionary)

Why is leadership so difficult? And it must be difficult; surely there is no other reason why so many organisations around the world are so poorly led. If leadership were easy, anyone could do it and we would have a lot fewer problems in our economy and society. We know leadership is difficult too because despite the publication of more than

20,000 books on leadership over the years, we are still not entirely clear what leadership is, or how it works, or even who leaders are.¹

It is a truism, too, to state that there is no universally agreed definition of leadership. Put twenty leadership scholars and practitioners into a room and ask them to define leadership, and you will probably get twenty-two definitions (at least two will change their mind during the course of the discussion). How can it be that such a vast body of work has been produced on a subject that no one can define? Is there any other subject (apart from perhaps religion) where so much discussion had produced so little illumination?

This book makes no claim to delivering full and complete answers to those questions. Its purpose, instead, is to suggest that instead of attacking the problems of leadership using the standard tools of Cartesian logic and problem-solving, we should perhaps stand back and consider another way.

One of the problems, we believe, that has so far prevented better understanding of what leadership is, how it works and who leaders are, is that leadership is full of paradoxes. These are features of leadership that defy logical analysis; and, as we and our fellow contributors shall show, understanding these paradoxes is also central to the understanding of leadership. Until leadership scholars, consultants, developers and leaders themselves come to terms with the concept of paradox and incorporate it into thinking and practice, then scholarship will never be able to complete its investigatory task, and leaders will continue to struggle to make a lasting impact on the organisations they are supposed to lead.

The nature of paradox

The logician Willard Quine (1966; see also Orenstein, 1998) grouped paradoxes into three categories:

1. *Veridical* paradoxes, which sound at first to be absurd but in the end turn out to be logically true. Schrödinger's Cat² is a famous example of a veridical paradox. Another is Jevons's paradox, which states that increases in efficiency of energy consumption will lead to increases in demand for energy. This sounds wrong: an increase in efficiency ought logically to result in a decrease in consumption.

- In fact, increased efficiency often leads to falling energy prices which stimulates demand past the original level (as has happened, for example, with oil over the past twenty years).
2. *Falsidical* paradoxes which appear to be false and, upon analysis, turn out to actually *be* false. Zeno's paradox which states that an arrow travelling towards a target will never actually reach the target – it will travel halfway to the target, then half of the remaining half, then half of the remaining quarter and so on, so that it will always be fractionally short of its destination – sounds logical but in fact is quite wrong; we can see, quite clearly, whether an arrow has hit its target or not.
 3. *Antinomy* paradoxes, in which we find two equally logical but contradictory statements that no amount of logical reasoning can dispel. This concept was put to good use by Kant to demonstrate the limits of scientific and philosophical inquiry and is characterised by expressions such as 'there is no absolute truth' (a statement that would be proven true if false and vice versa).

It is these antinomy paradoxes that people find most troublesome (especially in the West; people from East Asian cultures tend to be rather better at understanding these paradoxes). For many people, their first impulse upon being confronted with a paradox is to try to 'resolve' it, to render down the conflicting statements so that they agree and the apparent contradiction can be made to go away. We are hard-wired to regard anything difficult as a problem needing to be fixed.

Elsewhere, paradoxes thrive. Western observers of China's economic development have often remarked on the paradoxes they see there, such as the fact that China professes to be a communist state and yet has a capitalist economy (the Communist Party of China is more popular than ever, with nearly eighty-eight million members in 2014, more than double the total at any point during the regime of Mao Zedong (Xinhua, 2014)). One of the most profound remarks ever made about China by an outside observer was Stephen King-Hall's (1927) comment that any statement made about China is both true and, simultaneously, not true. His point was that China is a complex place and cannot be described in simple statements. This is still true today. We can say, for example, that China is an economic superpower (it is the world's second largest economy) and that China

is a developing economy (one in six of its population live in absolute poverty). Both statements are true (and to take King-Hall's point, both are therefore not true). It might be possible to reconcile both statements to come up with a single agreeable statement, but in doing so, a great deal of richness of understanding would be lost.

Let us take an example a little closer to home where leadership is concerned, the issue of stress. Stress has been blamed, and still is blamed, for many workplace problems including poor employee mental and physical health, low productivity and low quality (see, for example, Deming, 1986). Leaders are urged to do all they can to reduce stress, to 'drive out fear' in Deming's famous phrase, in the belief that stress-free workplaces will be more productive and more efficient. But this has been questioned repeatedly by others, including Handy (1976), who argue that an element of stress can make people *more* productive and *more* efficient, literally keeping them on their toes. Eliminating stress altogether, attractive though it might sound, can also eliminate the push factors that lead people to perform and excel. The stress paradox, sometimes also called the self-absorption paradox, suggests that people need to experience a degree of discomfort in order to perform effectively; what is bad for them is, at the same time, also good for them.

It could be argued that one of the tasks for the leader is not to eliminate stress but to understand the paradox and work out where exactly the optimal level is;³ to identify the fine line where stress ceases to be a positive externality and turns into a negative one. Instead, though, much of the popular work on managing people – featured in trade magazines, on blogs, in professional conferences – continues to follow the Deming route and urges the elimination of stress.

The central point to be made about antinomy paradoxes is this: they are not puzzles to be solved or opposites that can be reconciled. They simply *are*. Rather than dissecting them, we need to learn to accept them as wholes and learn to live with them and manage them. Yet Western people, in particular, tend to be very bad at doing this.

The wrong tools for the wrong problems

When seeking a better understanding of leadership, it is important to recall the advice of the Irish postmaster to the lost motorist seeking the

road to Dublin that ‘you can’t get there from here’. We are attempting to analyse a necessarily complex phenomenon using a set of tools designed to make things simple, using the wrong tools to solve what are very likely the wrong problems as well.

As Hodgson (2007) and others have remarked, the vast majority of leadership theory over the past fifty years has emanated from American research establishments, and most of what remains has come from northern Europe: the UK primarily, but also France, Germany and Scandinavia. Witzel (2012) has noted how there is virtually no original theorising on leadership in management coming out of Asia today, despite the vast richness of leadership literature in those regions from antiquity; most of the work that has been published is derivative and based on Western thinking with little attempt at cultural context (there are a few honourable exceptions, of course).

Living with an antinomy paradox requires us to do something which is, in descriptive terms, quite simple: accept that there is no black and white, no right and wrong, and that two or more logically incompatible positions might well be true – yet, in reality, most of us find this difficult. Partly this is because, as Witzel (2012) points out, Western thinking about management has been heavily conditioned over the past hundred years by the Taylorist concept of the ‘one best way’; there is only one ‘best’ way of doing things and all others are inferior. Taylorism tends to push us into narrow channels of thinking reliant on Cartesian logic and step-by-step approaches.

And Cartesian logic is, to repeat the phrase, the wrong tool. Cartesian logic is very good at breaking problems down into their component parts and working out cause and effect. But when there is a discontinuity between cause and effect, or when the cause leads to multiple and contradictory effects, our logical tools break down. In terms of analysing leadership, it may be that cause-and-effect analysis has taken us about as far as we can go. It is time, perhaps past time, that we stopped and stood back and looked at leadership not as a series of problems that can be solved, but as a series of contradictory, puzzling and obscure concepts that need to be managed and lived with. The purpose of this work, then, is to introduce some of the paradoxes of leadership and to suggest some ways that leaders and organisations may learn to live with them (although we make no claim whatsoever to complete coverage of either of these subjects).

Structure of the book

We begin this book by looking at paradoxes that affect how we think about leadership and define it and how we view leaders. Morgen Witzel suggests that there is a paradox at the heart of our definition of leadership. It is generally accepted that people *need* leaders, but do they *want* them? This chapter argues that there is a tension inherent in our attitudes towards leadership, and that even as we accept the control that leaders have over us we also kick back against it and try to assert our own control over our leaders. Richard Bolden continues this line of argument through an exploration of the paradoxes faced when researching leadership. In particular, he suggests, there is an enduring tension between individual and collective perspectives on leaders, leading and leadership that results in us frequently looking in the wrong places for the wrong kinds of evidence.

These paradoxes of understanding lead in turn to paradoxes in the practice of leadership. Nigel Linacre suggests that leaders are also caught in a spatial and temporal paradox that requires them to be both 'here' and 'elsewhere'. Leaders must be part of the group; but at the same time, their status as leaders sets them apart. And leaders must manage in the present; but at the same time, they must also think constantly about the future. Scott Allison and Jennifer Cecilione go on to describe the often paradoxical ways that we create heroes out of our leaders, and note that whilst we may all agree on the idea of heroism, we usually have quite different ideas about who our heroes are. Strangely, the heroes that most people agree have heroic status are often characters from fiction. We also tend to ascribe heroic status to people only once they have gone. Thus our only truly heroic leaders are either dead, or never existed at all.

Paradox also has implications for leaders themselves, and paradoxes are responsible for many of the strains and stresses placed on them. John Lawler and Jeff Gold argue that most leaders don't really understand how leadership works, and that they don't really control what they lead. Most leaders operate in a 'fog' in which their sense of control is often illusory. These limitations clearly offer a challenge to common understandings of what it means to lead. Inmaculada Adarves-Yorno takes up a similar question in relation to the concept of authentic leadership, and finds that this too places paradoxical demands and

expectations on leaders. Feeling the pressure to be authentic, leaders may find themselves needing to adopt inauthentic behaviours and actions in order to make themselves *seem* more authentic; in effect, they learn how to fake sincerity. Finally, Jennifer Board considers the idea of moral courage, often described as an essential attribute of leadership, and asks whether this is always true. There may be times when moral courage requires leaders to turn a blind eye to ‘wrong’ in order to achieve the ‘right’ result. She cautions that while necessary, judgements about the ethics of leadership can be dangerous and frequently misleading.

The book concludes by highlighting some of the key themes raised throughout and considering their implications for leadership theory, practice and development over the coming years. While leadership and in particular leadership development would be easier if we were all the same and so could lead in the same way, we all turn out to be different, and these differences amongst us will be reflected in the way that we lead. Discovering how you can best lead is a job only you can do.

It is our hope that these chapters will provide useful food for thought and discussion in your own leadership thinking, learning and practice. We hope, too, that the publication of this book is not a one-way street. We encourage you to contact us through the book’s website, and look forward to hearing your own thoughts and experiences of paradox. Of course, one of the implications of Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle is that the more we study a subject the less precise our knowledge of it becomes. But maybe this is a case where we need less knowledge, and more understanding.

‘The supreme paradox of all thought is the attempt to discover something that thought cannot think’, wrote the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. ‘This passion is at bottom present in all thinking, even in the thinking of the individual, in so far as in thinking he participates in something transcending himself.’ Logical thinking is critically important, for leaders as for everyone around them. But not everything submits itself to logic; think for example of transcendence. We can use paradox as a tool to understand the realms of thought and sense where logic cannot take us. If the chapters in this book do nothing else, they show us that there is more – much more – to leadership than conventional understanding would have us believe.

A note for students of leadership

Whilst this book is written for a broad audience we would like to conclude this chapter with some specific advice for those reading it as part of a taught course or programme of study. For such readers the need to demonstrate their learning through written and/or practical assignments is likely to be of particular concern; and will be assessed against criteria such as critical thinking, reflection, integration of theory and practice, and engagement with a wider body of literature. This book has been written with these points in mind and each chapter is supported by a number of questions for discussion and reflection (either individually or in groups; in or outside of class) as well as recommendations for further reading. There is also a companion website with additional resources, including short videos from the contributors and links to useful resources.

This, however, is not a traditional textbook. Rather than providing a definitive set of concepts to be learnt and applied the ideas within each chapter should be taken as provocations and catalysts for further enquiry. As the famous saying goes: 'you get out what you put in'. By assimilating the contents of this book you will learn a number of things, but not nearly as much as you will learn by questioning, challenging, testing and further exploring the ideas in relation to your own experience, aspirations and context (organisational, cultural, professional, etc.).

This book also differs from more traditional textbooks through the way(s) in which we engage with theory in relation to practice. Our aim is to illustrate the lived experience of leadership and how this informs, and is informed by, mental models and assumptions about the dynamics of power, influence and identity, rather than to explore leadership theory *per se*. In order to do this, whilst we engage with a range of theories and concepts such as leader–follower relations (Chapter 2), distributed leadership (Chapter 3), team leadership (Chapter 4), heroic leadership (Chapter 5), leadership traits and styles (Chapter 6), authentic leadership (Chapter 7) and ethical leadership (Chapter 8), by-and-large these concepts are addressed indirectly, through a problem-centred approach, rather than as discrete concepts to be studied and analysed in their own right. For more detail and explanation of particular theories, including their strengths and limitations, you will need to refer to other sources including, but not limited to, those in the recommended reading section of each chapter.

The overall framing of this book is around leadership in contexts of complexity and uncertainty. There may well be times when leadership is far more straightforward than this book might suggest – for example where the nature of the task is clearly delineated and there is widespread agreement about the best way forward – but even in apparently simple situations leadership is often contested and elusive. Keith Grint, a well-renowned UK leadership scholar, recalls that when he first started studying leadership following a successful career outside of higher education he was pretty sure of what he knew about leadership. A few years later, after much research and enquiry, he realised that he was far less certain of what he knew about leadership than before. Whilst many would despair of this fact – regarding those years of work as a futile endeavour – Grint saw it as a sure sign that he was beginning to make progress, testament to his growing understanding of the socially constructed nature of this concept and the complex processes through which we come to recognise and describe certain things, and not others, as leadership (see Grint, 2010, pp. 1–4).

By exploring the ideas in this book, we hope that you too will gain a greater appreciation of the breadth and depth of leadership studies and begin to recognise the limitations, and precarious foundations, of much existing knowledge. As Joanne Ciulla argues in the conclusion to the book *The Quest for a General Theory of Leadership* (summarising the outcomes of a five-year process of enquiry and debate between an interdisciplinary group of leading US leadership scholars):

It takes more than one scholar, discipline, or theoretical approach to understand leadership. The study of leadership forces us to tackle the universal questions about human nature and destiny. For those questions, there will probably never be a general theory.
(Ciulla, 2006, p. 233)

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Consider the following paradox: a thing can be both right and wrong at the same time. Do you think this is true? Can you think of any examples in your own work, or life? Do you find that you are comfortable living with and working with paradoxes, or do you find them an irritant, something that you want to resolve or make go away?

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2. Think about leadership as you have experienced it and/or studied it. What kinds of paradoxes might leaders face? Make a list of as many as you can. If you are working in a group, suggest to your colleagues that they do the same, and then compare your lists and discuss.
3. 'The supreme paradox of all thought is the attempt to discover something that thought cannot think.' What does this mean to you?
4. How do different cultures perceive leadership? Do Chinese and Indian people have different perceptions and expectations of leadership from Europeans or Americans? You may need to do some research on this; when you have completed your research tasks, list as many cultural differences in perceptions of leadership theory and practice as you can.
5. And following on from this, from your experience or your studies, can you think of any situations or concepts which leaders from one culture might find paradoxical and uncomfortable, but leaders from another culture might regard as normal?

Notes

- 1 The estimate of 20,000 was made by Grint (2006) and has certainly increased since then. A recent search on Amazon showed over 110,000 titles, some of which may discuss leadership only tangentially.
- 2 A thought experiment designed by the Austrian physicist Edwin Schrödinger to demonstrate a principle of quantum mechanics that requires two competing suppositions (in this case that a cat in a sealed box is both dead and alive) to be maintained until an empirical observation can be made to verify which is correct.
- 3 Leadership scholar and consultant Ron Heifetz calls this the 'zone of productive disequilibrium' (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009).

Recommended reading

- Grint, K. (2010) *Leadership: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Heifetz, R., Grashow, A. and Linsky, M. (2009) *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing your Organisation and the World*, Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press.
- Quine, Willard V. (1966) *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays*, New York, NY: Random House.

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