RESEARCH INSIGHTS

Pandemic Paradoxes and How They Affect Your Workers

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Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic tensions and contradictions are being felt and experienced across the US at many levels: societal, organizational, and individual. A recent survey of 3,454 adults found at least half of the households in New York City (53%), Los Angeles (56%), Chicago (50%), and Houston (63%) report serious financial problems including depleted savings, trouble paying bills, or affording medical care (NPR, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, & Harvard, 2020). The same survey found 43% of rural households have family members who have lost their jobs, been furloughed, or had wages or hours reduced since the start of the outbreak, with 66% of these households reporting serious financial problems.

Financial stresses are just one of many tensions workers are experiencing. Workers were forced to adjust to working from home and to remain productive while adapting to new technologies and workspaces (Lanzolla et al., 2020). Essential workers struggled with the desire to deliver care and services to those in need without risking themselves and their families' lives (Kniffin et al., 2020). Working parents struggled to pursue their work goals while home-schooling their children (Power, 2020).

One way to understand, work through, and address some of the tensions that workers are experiencing is through "paradoxical thinking." Paradoxical thinking helps to see on-going, unresolvable, contradictory tensions as forces that can fuel innovation and performance (Tabesh & Vera, 2020; Ingram, Lewis, Barton, & Gartner, 2016). Using a paradox lens, this paper was written to help make sense of the crises leaders and workers are experiencing as the COVID-19 pandemic stretches on. The paper begins with a brief overview of the sources of data, the meaning of paradox, and illustrates five paradoxes experienced during the pandemic by providing information on the potential impact of COVID-19 on workers. Finally, empirically proven strategies for dealing with paradoxes are presented.

Data Sources and Collection

Data presented in this paper are based on a scoping review of available literature. A scoping review is used to rapidly address emerging topics from articles with diverse study designs, without assessing the quality of the included studies and synthesizing the literature to answer a specific research question (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). A literature search was performed during August 2021 using Google, Google Scholar, EBSCO Business, and EBSCO Psychology as databases. Only articles in the English language and only studies conducted in the US were included. Publication types included articles in scientific journals, newswires, web news, medline, and book chapters. The literature search was restricted to works published between March 2020 and August 2021. To include relevant literature about the impact of COVID-19 on workers, a specific string of search terms is used. The terms included: (1) population - workers, employees, (2) workplaces – any, (3) condition - COVID-19, SARS-CoV-2, 2019-nCoV, coronavirus, epidemic, pandemic, and (3) outcome - psychological health, mental health, well-being, mental illness, psychological disorders, stress, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, suicide/suicidal thoughts, work loneliness, videoconference fatigue, death awareness, anxiety, depression, job insecurity, isolation, fear, employee satisfaction, employee engagement, exhaustion, and burnout. A total of 45 articles from 35 journals were collected, screened, and reviewed.

The Meaning of Paradox

A paradox refers to contradictory yet interdependent elements that are present and operating equally at the same time (Cameron, 2017). The tension between the two elements is referred to as paradoxical, reflecting the need for accommodating the contradictory demands (Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008). Paradoxes show up in all facets of organizational life including leadership (control and empowerment), teamwork (task and relationships), strategy (competition and collaboration), structure (centralize and decentralize), and in the individual him or herself (work and home). They have been acknowledged as far back as 5,000 years ago (e.g., masculine and feminine in Hinduism and yin and yang in Taoism) and have roots in Eastern and Western philosophies.

While paradox is an old concept, paradox theory is a relatively new application in management literature (i.e., Smith & Lewis, 2011; Van de Ven & Poole, 1988). At its core, paradox theory offers an approach to understanding the nature and responses to competing demands and unsolvable tensions. Studies of paradoxes explore how individuals, teams, or organizations simultaneously handle competing demands to achieve better outcomes. Managed paradoxes have been associated with leadership effectiveness (Denison, Hooijberg, Quinn, 1995; Smith & Tushman, 2005), career success (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006), organizational performance (Cameron & Lavine, 2006; Tushman, Smith, Wood, Westerman & O'Reilly, 2010), high-performing groups (Murninghan & Conlon, 1991), and virtual teams (Leslie & Hoole, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in extraordinary levels of uncertainty and tension. The next section presents examples that illustrate how these tensions represent paradoxes for workers across the US (see Table 1).

Table 1: Pandemic Paradoxes

PANDEMIC SURVIVAL			
Left Pole	Saving the Business	Saving Lives	**Right Pole**
SUSTAINABILITY			
Left Pole	Be Productive	Do More with Less	**Right Pole**
LEVERAGED WORK AND HOME OFFICE			
Left Pole	Equip Workers	Manage Expenses	**Right Pole**
BALANCE			
Left Pole	Work	Family	**Right Pole**
ESSENTIAL WORKERS			
Left Pole	Importance	Precariousness	**Right Pole**

Pandemic Survival Paradox:
Saving the Business and Saving Lives

California was the first state to issue a COVID-19 related "shelter in place" order. Shelter in place instructions, designed to help limit the spread of COVID-19, mandated that residents stay in their homes and limit travel to only necessary trips (e.g., grocery store, doctor's office). As state after state issued similar orders, organizations were forced to find a balance between the safety of employees and keeping their organizations solvent. Organizations' survival focused on saving money and making money while shifting workers' workplaces (e.g., marking six-foot distances on floors with tape, installing plexiglass partitions at counters and cash registers, setting up hand sanitation stations, improving ventilation) caught many workers by surprise. The fear of coronavirus infections created unforeseen workplace hazards especially for workers whose infection risks were greatest (Shaw et al., 2020). Healthcare workers experienced a lack of protective equipment (PPEs), a lack of critical equipment (e.g., ventilators, intubation chambers), and the potential of creating moral injury through having to decide which patients would receive life-saving treatment and who would not (Sasangohar et al. 2020).

Many organizations struggled to protect workers from harm in the workplace. It wasn't until the end of January 2021 that an executive order was signed to protect worker health and safety. The executive order instructed officials at (OSHA) to issue, within two weeks, revised guidance to employers on workplace safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. At that same time, the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) had a total of over 13,000 COVID-related complaints yet had initiated an inspection in response to only a small portion of those complaints (OSHA, 2021).

The Sustainability Paradox:
Be Productive and Do More with Less

During the pandemic, the "do more with less" mantra became an expression of do as much work as possible with as few resources as possible to keep the organization afloat. Millions of US workers experienced a reduction in workforce that changed the dynamics of their work. In many workplaces, workers who left (i.e., retired, resigned, dismissed) were not replaced and their workload was redistributed to the remaining employees. One study of 1,292 employees, found 82% feel that when their teams were restructured or reduced, but the workload was not reduced (VitalSmarts, 2020). With increased workloads, job security fears, and uncertainty about the economy, many workers put in longer hours. SHRM reports that nearly 70% of professionals who transitioned to remote work because of the pandemic say they now work on the weekends when they did not previously, and 45% say they work more hours during the week than they did before (Maurer, 2020). A report from the National Bureau of Economic Research (DeFilippis, et al., 2020) shows that the average workday lengthened by 48.5 minutes in the weeks following stay-at-home orders and lockdowns across the US.

The focus on cutting costs and "saving the organization" pushed employees to do more with less while at the same time, be ever more productive.

Leveraged Work and Home Office Paradox: *Equip Workers and Manage Expenses*

In March 2020, organizations across the US began instructing employees to "work from home" in response to the pandemic. Work from home forced workers and employers to examine the equipment, tools, and resources needed to do jobs outside of the office. Equipping workers with technology to connect and collaborate remotely became critical. Employers provided equipment directly or through reimbursement to workers for equipment such as computers, monitors, keyboards, mouses, headsets, required cabling, printers, printer ink, paper, and high-speed internet, if these tools were required to do their jobs (Gruman, 2021). Many employees, however, covered costs normally assumed by the office (electricity bills, water bills, phone data plans, internet, supplies for their home office). A FlexJobs survey found four out of ten remote workers spent between $100 and $500 on their home office during the pandemic, and 12% said they spent over 1,000 unreimbursed dollars (Pelta, 2021). Few organizations advised workers on the ergonomics of their home workspace, a function organizations typically promote to ensure health, safety, efficiency and productivity. Effective ergonomics (e.g., having a suitable chair, adjusting monitor height) is critical for avoiding repetitive strain injuries that a bad workspace setup can cause (Gruman, 2020). Remote work is here to stay bringing into question makeshift workspaces and needs for worker and employer rules about equipment and services needed to do the work.

The Balance Paradox: *Work and Family*

Most often referred to as the work-life balance, this paradox dramatically took center stage during the pandemic. A generally accepted definition of work-life balance includes elements of equilibrium, satisfaction, and fulfilment in both worker and family member roles (Beauregard & Henry, 2009). Many workers, however, find an imbalanced or either/or approach to work and non-work commitments helps avoid the debilitating emotions associated with desires to succeed in both (Aust et al., 2017). COVID-19 further disrupted ideas and practices of "balance." The work from home mandate, not the freedom to work from anywhere, coupled with closing schools and childcare facilities placed significant pressure on working families. Overnight the tasks associated with work and childcare happened simultaneously. Kitchen tables turned into workspaces, Zoom calls were interrupted by family members, and parents became online school facilitators. A recent survey reports 66% of American workers lack work-life balance and those numbers are expected to grow (Kovachevska, 2020).

This paradox is more challenging for women as they tend to perform a disproportionate number of domestic roles and remain primary caregivers. Research has consistently found that women, even among dual-career couples, provide more domestic work and childcare than do men (Shockley & Shen, 2016). These factors may result in a particularly acute paradox for women.

Essential Workers Paradox: *Importance and Precariousness*

COVID-19 clarified how much our survival depends on various kinds of essential workers. The term, "essential worker," was not in most people's vocabulary until the pandemic. The CDC included essential workers in Phase 1 of the US vaccine rollout and defined them as paid and unpaid persons serving in healthcare settings and workers who are essential to maintain critical infrastructure and continue critical services and functions that US residents depend on daily (CDC, 2020). We are grateful for our healthcare workers (e.g., medical staff, ambulance drivers, cleaning workers) who helped to save and sustain countless lives. We are also indebted to many workers who could not afford to stay at home. These include people whose labor kept us alive by responding when called for help, preparing food, stocking shelves, working on farms, driving trucks and delivering packages, collecting garbage, and operating our utilities so that we have lights and water. One study found workers, who believed they were invisible and undervalued prior to the crisis, found their sudden visibility and new status as temporary, and they treated it with skepticism, incredulity, and as devoid of genuinely transformative power (Hennekam et al., 2020).

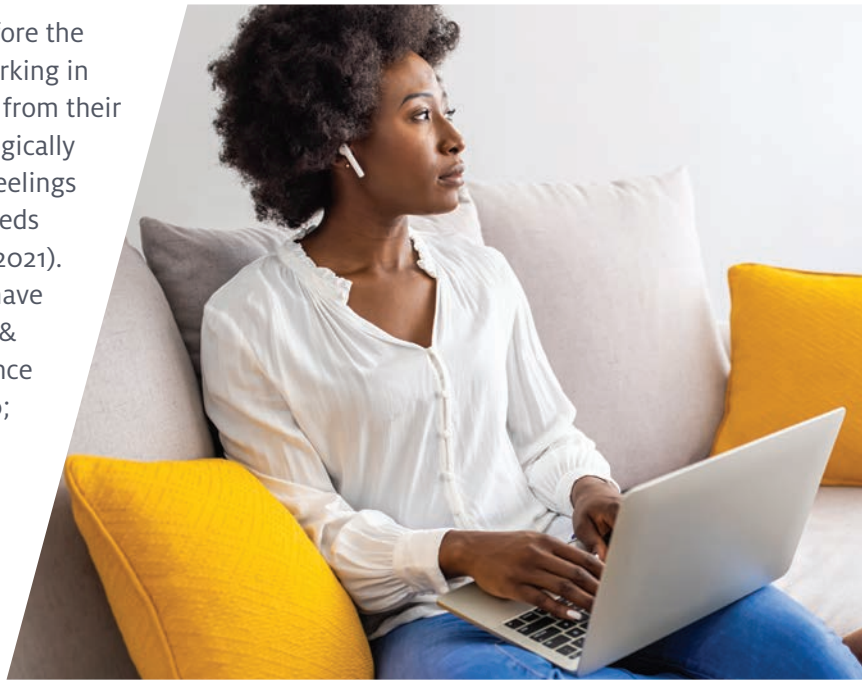
The coronavirus pandemic made evident essential workers as those whose jobs keep us alive. Social science research makes it clear these are not the workers whose jobs return high organizational profit. Many of the workers identified as essential are in fact in low wage jobs, jobs that lack security, prestige, and sustainable incomes. Most low-wage occupations in the US are overrepresented by black, Latinx, and immigrant workers (Blundell et al., 2020; van Dorn, Cooney, & Sabin 2020). The COVID-19 crisis exacerbated existing issues regarding limited access to affordable health care, childcare, and stable income for low-wage workers, with workers of color disproportionately experiencing the worst impacts of the pandemic (Ananat & Gassman-Pines, 2020; Blundell et al., 2020; Cubrich 2020; van Dorn et al., 2020). Many workers found they had no choice to be essential (those whose jobs were deemed important but who could not work remotely) and at the same time vulnerable to intensified precarity.

Impact of COVID-19 on Workers

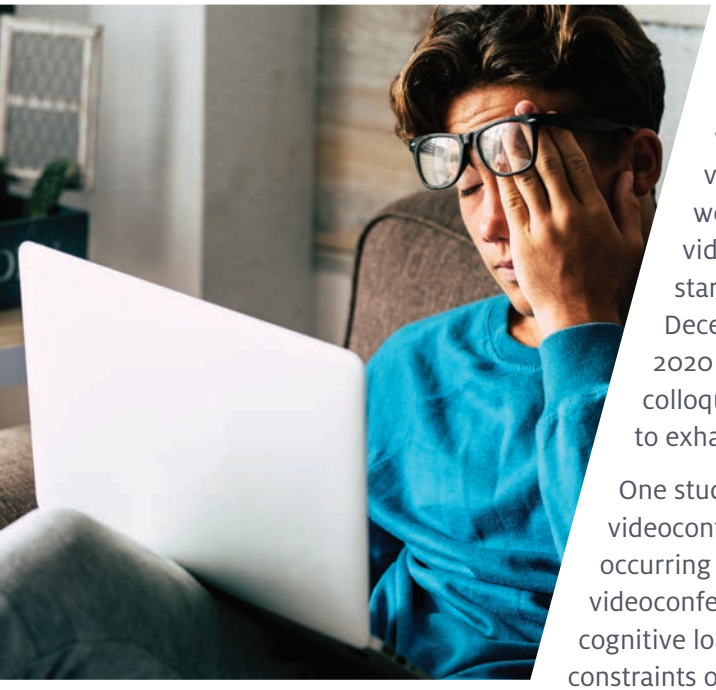
The previous section presented paradoxes that workers are experiencing during the pandemic. This section addresses the possible consequences of these tensions on workers' wellbeing.

Work Loneliness

Feelings of loneliness were rising in North America before the pandemic. Cigna's national survey of 10,400 adults working in the US, for example, found a 7% increase in loneliness from their 2018 survey (Nemecek, 2020). Loneliness is a psychologically painful emotion that results from people's subjective feelings that their intimate, social, and "sense of belonging" needs are not being met (Cacioppo et al., 2006; Andel et al., 2021). Research on workplace loneliness has been shown to have negative relationships to employee well-being (Anand & Mishra, 2019), and is associated with poorer performance and less helping behaviors at work (Gabriel et al., 2020; Lam & Lau, 2012; Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018).



The loss of social connections and resulting work loneliness are likely to impact workers negatively for the foreseeable future as the COVID-19 delta variant threatens many organizations' return-to-office plans.



Videoconference Fatigue

Videoconference fatigue is defined as the degree to which workers feel exhausted, tired, or worn out after engaging in videoconferences (Bennett et al., 2021). Workers and the media were the first to report symptoms of "Zoom fatigue," the free video conferencing brand that grew during the pandemic. Zoom started with approximately 10 million daily meeting participants in December 2019 to 200 million in March 2020 and 300 million in April 2020 (Iqbal, 2020; Chawla, 2020). Zoom fatigue has since become the colloquial name for all virtual meeting interface tools whose use can lead to exhaustion.

One study reported 93% of 55 employees interviewed experienced videoconference fatigue after a meeting with more instances of fatigue occurring later in the day (Bennett et al., 2021). Possible explanations for videoconference fatigue include excessive amounts of close-up eye gaze, cognitive load, increased self-evaluation from staring at video of oneself, and constraints on physical mobility (Bailenson, 2021).

Health and Well-Being

COVID-19 has been particularly stressful for healthcare workers who are at significant risk of psychological strains that may lead to burnout, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and an elevated risk of suicide (Cullen et al., 2020). A 2021 Kaiser Family Foundation brief reported essential workers compared to nonessential workers are more likely to report symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder (42% vs. 30%), starting or increasing substance use (25% vs. 11%), and suicidal thoughts (22% vs. 8%) during the pandemic (Panchal et al., 2021). A survey of 10,017 nursing professionals found 61% of nurses are concerned about burnout and 40% are concerned about personal mental health (Nickitas, 2021). A surge in hospitalizations due to the Delta strain have increased the physical and mental exhaustion of healthcare workers amplifying psychiatric symptoms and anxiety that they may contract COVID-19 and infect their family and friends (Rommer, 2021).

Anti-Asian discrimination and assaults increased significantly during the Coronavirus pandemic contributing to a "secondary contagion" of racism (Chen et al., 2020). Asian American workers, many who are in essential work roles, have been affected by COVID-19. Filipino Americans, for example, represent at least 28% of registered nurses and 30% of COVID-19 registered nurses' deaths (Constante, 2020). Discrimination in the workplace leads to job strain, decreased job satisfaction, and turnover intention coupled with physiological deterioration (Le, 2021).

Reduction in Workforce

The US Bureau of Labor Statistics reports significant job losses in restaurants and bars, travel and transportation, entertainment, personal services (e.g., housekeeping, hairdressing, beauty treatment, animal care grooming), sensitive retail (e.g, department stores, car dealers) and sensitive manufacturing (e.g., aircraft and car manufacturing) industries due to the pandemic (Dey et.al., 2020). April 2021 revealed the start of a trend towards workers voluntarily leaving their jobs and by July, 4 million US workers quit resulting in 10.9 million open jobs (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Referred to as the "Great Resignation," and the "Big Quit," the trend is contradictory to patterns of the past where higher numbers of workers quit when there is high economic stability and low unemployment. Studies attribute the resignation rates to workers reaching breaking points causing them to rethink their work and life goals (Cook, 2021), a disengaged workforce (Gallup, 2021), and "turnover shock," a life event that precipitates self-reflection about one's job satisfaction (Holtom et al., 2005).

There are negative spillover effects for those who remain employed (Kniffin et al., 2021). Research shows that when organizations reduce overall staffing, there tends to be lower levels of organizational commitment, job involvement, and greater stress among remaining workers (Trevor & Nyberg, 2008).

Death Reminders

At the time of this writing (October 2021), more than 701,000 people in the US and more than 4.8 million people worldwide have died of COVID-19, with the number of deaths still growing (John Hopkins University of Medicine, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic is an omnipresent mortality reminder to workers. Heightened awareness of their mortality and vulnerability is linked to workers' anxiety, fear, and other negative emotions (Grant & Wade-Benzoni, 2009; Mo & Shi, 2020; Pyszczynski et al., 2015) maladaptive outcomes, such as burnout, post-traumatic stress disorder, absenteeism, aggression and disengagement (Sliter et al., 2014; Stein & Cropanzano, 2011).

Dealing with Paradoxes

Defensive responses (e.g., denial, repression, forced choices) to paradoxes can spark vicious cycles in which tensions are perpetuated, resulting in counterproductive outcomes (Es-Sajjade et al., 2021; Lewis, 2000) such as psychological paralysis, disengagement, division into groups, and resistance to change. Proponents of paradox theory have argued that individuals should acknowledge the contradictory demands and address them simultaneously to achieve better outcomes (e.g., Smith & Lewis, 2011). A "both/and" or "ambidextrous approach" gives rise to virtuous cycles—positive action loops in which paradoxical tensions are navigated constructively and iteratively to enable long-term success (e.g., Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Despite the noted benefits of paradox management in the workplace, less is known about how to achieve it. Preeminent paradox scholar Marianne Lewis (2000) offered a way forward noting that managing paradox means capturing its enlightening potential by dramatically rethinking past perceptions and practices. Leading paradox practitioner, Barry Johnson (2020), offers a five-step process consisting of: (1) seeing (determining if the source of tension is a problem that can be solved or is a paradox), (2) mapping (writing down the benefits and limits of each pole to see the whole picture), (3) assessing (measuring how well the paradox is being leveraged), (4) learning (making decisions using the assessment results), and (5) leveraging (identifying steps to get the best out of each pole).

With a paradox lens and 2x2 table, both positive and negative consequences of two poles (in this example, work and family) can be identified and seen as in Figure 1. Effective paradox management is achievable with the dual pursuit of the upsides of both poles while avoiding the limits of either. The relationship between poles shifts episodically in response response to ambiguity (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009) but are otherwise constant (Smith, Lewis, Jarzabkowski, Langley, 2017). There may be times, for example, when workers need to take a leave of absence from work to attend to sick loved ones. While success requires a balance, the precise mix of work and family devotion that is optimal is hard to specify. In general, individuals need to be able to flexibly cycle between the differing poles within environments that are changing.

Figure 1: Example Work and Family Paradox

WHAT WE WANT: SATISFACTION & FULFILLMENT	
Positive aspect of left side of the paradox	Positive aspect of right side of the paradox
• Earn a living; pay bills • Social reinforcement; Social interactions • Utilizing skills; learning	• Strong family relationships • Feeling safe; relaxed • Resilience; health
Left pole **Work**	**Family** Right pole
• Strained family relationships • Feeling insecure; stressed • Burnout; loss of physical health	• Can't make ends meet • Feeling isolated • Not learning, growing
Negative aspect of left side of the paradox	Negative aspect of right side of the paradox
WHAT WE DON'T WANT: EMPTINESS & HARDSHIP	

While tensions generated by COVID- 19 may be "triggers for change," transformation can only begin once we realize our present understanding is no longer sufficient, begin experimenting and taking in new information and viewpoints, and generate new frameworks that accommodate conflicting perspectives (Bartunek, 1988). This paper offers new ways of thinking about elements that appear to be in opposition to one another, but are interrelated and connected by a series of implicit links. By making these links explicit, you and your organization can come to understand that even seemingly great differences are potential opportunities and advantages. By using paradoxical thinking and maps (Leslie, Li, Zhao, 2015) you and your organization can:

- explore opportunities and advantages in tensions or contradictions rather than suppress or deny them
- look for clues in mixed messages for a source of hidden paradox
- illustrate perceptual differences and hidden views when debating topics of contrasting value
- escape vicious cycles and work towards continuous improvement (virtuous cycles)
- shift views from only a few people being responsible for managing polarities to it being a process of a group
- sensitize the organization to a paradoxical lens
- reframe your organization's problems so they become complementary and codependent (a healthier stance)
- be observant of the contexts and times when contradictions are present (e.g., the times when the organization is in profitability mode and when global catastrophes like COIVID-19 hit)
- understand how cohesive and divergent groups and the people who link them work in your organization, in your organization's culture
- respect the fact that successful leaders must act paradoxically to be effective (e.g., delegating responsibility and maintaining control)
- interpret and expose recurring chronic issues, especially those that might be globally based
- work through resistance to change

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic offers us a chance, an opportunity to look closely at persistent tensions we may have forgotten, ignored, or taken for granted. Times like these reveal the "paradoxical nature of human existence" and paradoxical thinking is a provocative lens for identifying, understanding, and changing social and economic inequities that have been imbalanced for some time. Financial, housing, and food insecurities, symptoms of psychological distress, job loss, work-life imbalance, and the prevalence of these hardship for minorities, women, and certain working classes were part of the US power and privilege structure long before the pandemic. We as leaders are uniquely placed to respond to and positively impact workers' lives. Reflecting on what you have read in this paper, where do you feel the most tension exists in your organization? Is there some aspect of your leadership where you feel torn between two values or competing commitments (e.g., social and economic values)? Do you know when your leadership should emphasize one direction over the other? Do you feel strained, tired, and impatient from going so far in the one direction? Have your workers expressed feeling excluded or disadvantaged because one direction has been preferred? Can you see the value, wisdom, and benefits in both directions simultaneously? Finally, are you as a leader ready to grapple and dig in to and produce solutions that can reap the benefits of your paradoxes in the service of a thriving and sustainable organization?

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