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The Eight Paradoxes of Great Leadership

Embracing the Conflicting Demands of Today's Workplace

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Leadership / Leading Teams

Take-Aways

- Turbulent times require a new kind of leader with eight sets of paradoxical skills.
- Leaders must be confident and humble.
- Leaders must be visionary and conquer their blind spots.
- Leaders must commit to their goals in public while working behind the scenes.
- Leaders should be firm in their convictions and open to new ideas.
- Leaders need to be “both deeply personal and inherently collective.”
- Leaders must teach and learn.
- Leaders must exemplify excellence and forgive others' mistakes.
- Rare, wise leaders dominate their eras and their ideas endure.

Recommendation

The accelerated pace of change in the 21st century has created the need for more agile and nuanced leaders. Dr. Tim Elmore offers unique insights into the conflicting demands of today's ever-changing world as he profiles outstanding historical and contemporary leaders from every walk of life. These personal stories of visionary innovators introduce readers to people who helped shape their societies and excelled at paradoxical skills. Elmore provides practical tips to concretize each of the eight types of leadership his profiles exemplify.

Summary

Turbulent times require a new kind of leader with eight sets of paradoxical skills.

Transformational times demand leaders who can steer their organizations in a global, networked economy. Information technology and more demanding stakeholders in an increasingly volatile political and social environment call for executives with new skills. Collaborative leaders have replaced the traditional command and control hierarchies of mass-scale industrial production.

“Leadership is seldom easy, but today it affords us the challenge of collaborating with a more educated, more entitled, more savvy population that has greater expectations of satisfaction and rewards than in past generations.”

Workers and consumers know more today and prove less loyal to corporate cultures or traditional brands than they did in the past. The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically disrupted the workplace and accelerated trends toward remote work and the gig economy. Self-awareness and emotional intelligence today prove more sound markers of leaders' likely success than expertise and cognitive abilities ever can.

Isaac Newton, for example, used a year of disruption – 1665 to 1666, when the Great Plague of London forced him to leave Cambridge University to return home – to develop his most extraordinary ideas in mathematics and physics. Newton used the lacuna created by the pandemic of his era to reflect and break away from traditional models to imagine new and unconventional solutions to eternal questions.

As the workplace and workers become more diverse and more demanding, leaders face a complex landscape that calls for paradoxical skill sets. Eight sets of contrasting abilities mark the “uncommon leaders” who can rise to today's challenges.

Leaders must be confident and humble.

Great leaders have a quiet self-confidence that allows them to ask questions and acknowledge the expertise of those they wish to lead.

In 2005, people did not regard Bob Iger, for example, as the most obvious replacement for Michael Eisner as chairman and CEO of the Walt Disney Company. Iger had neither the original vision of Walt Disney nor Eisner's charisma. Still, Iger had demonstrated his effective leadership style within the company. When Disney's board chose Iger to fill Eisner's position, he empowered his collaborators and admitted he needed

the expertise of his subordinates. At the same time, Iger remembered that his primary job was to inspire trust in his leadership and vision.

“What is rare...(are leaders) who bring a stunning form of insight into complex situations and find ways to achieve their goals.”

Leaders must never display overconfidence, overbearing egotism or arrogance. The old corporate culture in which senior executives could lead by the strength of their higher titles has lost its credibility with today's more educated and aware corporate teams. Great leaders gain subordinates' trust and loyalty by demonstrating the humility and self-confidence to solicit and value their expertise.

Leaders must be visionary and conquer their blind spots.

Sara Blakely owes her success to her initial lack of understanding of conventional wisdom in the women's apparel industry. This lack was Blakely's "blind spot" when she invented Spanx, hosiery with girdle-like firming strength, and became obsessed with selling her product.

Blakely had created a better product, but knew little about standard marketing channels. She met with a women's apparel buyer at Neiman Marcus, who agreed to carry Spanx in seven stores. The new product was a hit, and the high-end retailers Bloomingdale's, Saks and Bergdorf Goodman soon offered Spanx as well.

Blakely sent Spanx samples to Oprah Winfrey and sold 8,000 units through the QVC network in six minutes. As it turns out, Blakely founded an entirely new fashion segment – "shapewear." She became a billionaire, and *Forbes* magazine named Blakely one of the 100 most powerful women of 2014.

“Many (founders) might even say that without the blind spot, they might have been too scared to begin.”

Blind spots or "rookie smarts" have been responsible for product innovation or the reshaping of entire industries. Marketing consultants explain that CEOs may possess so much expert knowledge of their sector that they can't see their companies and markets with a fresh perspective; they overthink and thus overlook new opportunities.

Executives need to be aware that their blind spots may help boost their creativity, but remain as potential vulnerabilities. Staying focused on solving the customer's problems requires maintaining an experimental and iterative approach to product development or corporate strategy.

Leaders must commit to their goals in public while working behind the scenes.

Martin Luther King, Jr. understood the power of his charismatic personality and the need for him to provide a clear, articulate voice as a leader of the American Civil Rights movement. He sought to bring public attention to his cause, not to himself, personally.

Martin Luther King, Jr. became an iconic leader for racial equality in the 1950s and 1960s. He understood that peaceful protest would be far more effective than violence in changing American public opinion. By holding peaceful demonstrations that white police and civilians responded to with arrests and vicious

attacks, King, Jr. showed the world that citizens and authorities in southern states abused Black men and women and enforced inequality and unfair treatment.

“King...knew words were not enough to spark change; it required an example of sacrifice and suffering.”

King, Jr. offered personal leadership, but made the fight for civil rights the moral focus of his political actions and principles. Even as he became a legend in his lifetime, King, Jr. understood that an effective movement cannot rely on any one individual leader. An effective campaign needs a cadre of organizers, spokespeople, activists, marchers, donors, and sympathizers. King, Jr. groomed an entire generation of future leaders and shared a coherent goal that propelled his movement forward.

Leaders should be firm in their convictions and open to new ideas.

Leaders with strong guiding principles can be more open to new ideas and suggestions from their team. Ego does not drive these leaders; principles do.

Samuel Truett Cathy, for example, founded the Chick-fil-A fast-food restaurant chain in 1946. He struggled to keep his first restaurant afloat as he sought to develop the best possible recipe for a grilled chicken sandwich. After decades as the owner of a single restaurant, Cathy built Chick-fil-A into one of America's largest, most financially successful franchises. Although Cathy was flexible about menu choices, he insisted on maintaining his winning chicken sandwich recipe. He also insisted on strict quality control in all franchise outlets.

“Cathy’s stubborn belief in being closed on Sundays also makes business sense: You attract more business when you care for your people and create scarcity.”

Throughout his life, Cathy remained true to his core values and principles. He demanded that his restaurants courteously serve Black diners despite racial discrimination in the South. He believed all his employees should have Sunday off to rest, be with their families and worship if they chose to do so. The average Chick-fil-A is open six days a week and grosses \$4.2 million per year, compared to the average McDonald's, which stays open seven days a week and grosses \$2.6 million annually.

Leaders such as Cathy encourage their subordinates' ideas, as long as those ideas align with the leader's bedrock values. His or her values, in turn, provide the business and its employees with a clear mission.

Leaders need to be “both deeply personal and inherently collective.”

Mother Teresa became a symbol of selfless caring for the poorest, most ill people on the streets of Kolkata, India. She died in 1997, and the Catholic Church recognized her as a saint in 2016. Mother Teresa was a nun, teacher and missionary in India for 20 years. Disturbed by the desperate poverty around her, she found her calling by starting an order with other young nuns dedicated to taking care of those most in need. Mother Teresa gave her full attention to each man, woman and child.

“We must not fall in love with an idea but fall in love with a problem.”

The work of Mother Teresa and her order soon became famous. They attracted thousands of other people who replicated her work and started five new organizations dedicated to her mission. Her insistence on keeping her work private and one-on-one had an inspirational quality that testified to her authenticity and made her work legendary. Mother Teresa's type of leadership requires the ability to show kindness to each individual even as you realize that you cannot help everyone. Her kindness caused others to seek her out and emulate her message and her work.

Leaders must teach and learn.

The best leaders are lifelong learners. Michelangelo, for example, was still studying at age 87. Cellist Pablo Casals continued to practice at 90.

Apple founder Steve Jobs shared his insights as a teacher, and created a learning environment for continuous improvement in his companies. In his 2005 commencement speech at Stanford University, Jobs spoke about his past and present challenges. He discussed dropping out of college, being fired from the company he founded and struggling with cancer. Jobs demonstrated he could be open and vulnerable, an attitude that opened the door for others to ask questions, learn and seek his guidance.

“Steve Jobs metaphorically stepped down from his pedestal while he was standing at the podium. Suddenly, the playing field felt level. Everyone was learning.”

In 2006, experienced CEO Angela Ahrendts took the helm of the then-declining British clothing company Burberry. After consulting senior executives, she met with younger junior managers and realized that Burberry needed to attract a new generation of consumers. She set out to learn their preferences and successfully developed a marketing strategy to attract the youth and young adult market. In seven years at Burberry, Ahrendts increased the company's valuation from two billion to more than seven billion pounds. After Burberry, Ahrendts joined Apple as senior VP of retail in 2014. One great attraction of her new job was that Apple vested in a learning culture.

Leaders must exemplify excellence and forgive others' mistakes.

Harriet Tubman was a proud revolutionary, not a consensus politician. She accepted no compromises in her work to free enslaved Black people from the Confederacy. In contrast, many leaders correctly believe their job is to find common ground with their organization's disparate stakeholders. But, when fundamental issues are at stake, compromise and consensus may not be possible or defensible.

Tubman demanded extraordinary courage and daring from everyone who worked with her Underground Railroad. Timid volunteers faced her wrath and, on occasion, the barrel of her gun. At the same time, Tubman understood her colleagues' fears and quickly forgave them for their missteps when they completed their missions.

“Harriet knew someone's weak heart or faltering will could put others in danger...Yet when they 'came to their senses,' Harriet was quick to forgive them of their weak moment and release them to continue.”

In 1933, Joseph Strauss was the chief engineer during the construction of San Francisco's famous Golden Gate Bridge. Bridge construction leaves no room for error or miscalculations. Strauss required the highest standards of excellence from everyone, from architects to construction workers.

Construction site fatalities were common at that time, but Strauss would not tolerate the risk to workers – although he appreciated the importance of staying on time and on budget. To protect his workers, Strauss built the first-ever safety net on a construction site.

The best leaders accept that failures and shortcomings are inevitable on the road to success. William McKnight, former chairman of 3M, for example, encouraged experimentation with the knowledge that many projects would amount to nothing. The accidental discovery of the glue for Post-it Notes became the lasting hit that justified McKnight's optimism.

Rare, wise leaders dominate their eras and their ideas endure.

Today's leaders must vest in timeless values. Walt Disney, for example, knew that all good fairy tales and children's stories addressed life's timeless fears, struggles, hopes and triumphs. He built a media empire by meeting children's and adults' needs for storytelling. He understood that stories must connect to current audiences, and that ancient tales evolve to serve each generation.

“Walt's insistence on excellence and his fondness for the past made Americans feel safe enough to join him in his exploration of the unknown future.”

Leaders face a world in which pandemics, rapid social changes and disruptive smart technologies threaten the historical context of moral decision-making. Advances in artificial intelligence will test society's ability to establish moral guard rails for technology at times when information is abundant, but wisdom may be scarce. In such times, uncommon leaders will matter more than ever.

About the Author

Dr. Tim Elmore is the founder and CEO of Growing Leaders, an Atlanta-based nonprofit organization created to develop emerging leaders. He has written many books including *12 Huge Mistakes Parents Can Avoid: Leading Your Kids to Succeed in Life*; *The Pandemic Population: Eight Strategies to Help Generation Z Rediscover Hope After Coronavirus*; and *Habitudes for Life-Giving Leaders: The Art of Spiritual Leadership*.



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