

# How to Be Paradoxically Competent

## *Eight Critical Skills to Navigate Polarities*

Ivo Brughmans



*The text below is an excerpt of the book by Ivo Brughmans, Paradoxical leadership. How to Make Complexity an Advantage (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2023), p. 271 – 284.*

Paradoxical leadership starts with ourselves. We first need to learn how to recognize and consciously deal with our personal polarities before “tinkering” with those of our teams, colleagues, or organizational structures. The inside and outside worlds are inextricably linked. Paradoxical competence requires a number of skills that many of us possess but have not always fully developed.

Talent expert and coach Silvia Derom and I have worked to identify the core skills needed to deal effectively with paradoxes. Based on our own professional experience and literature research,<sup>1</sup> we have distinguished eight skills, all on the level of inner leadership and self-awareness:

1. Self-observe and take a metaposition
2. Self-analyze and put the inner world into words
3. Allow discomfort
4. Practice an exploratory attitude
5. Consciously deploy different personal styles
6. Use both/and thinking
7. Engage in dialogue
8. Demonstrate vulnerability and humility

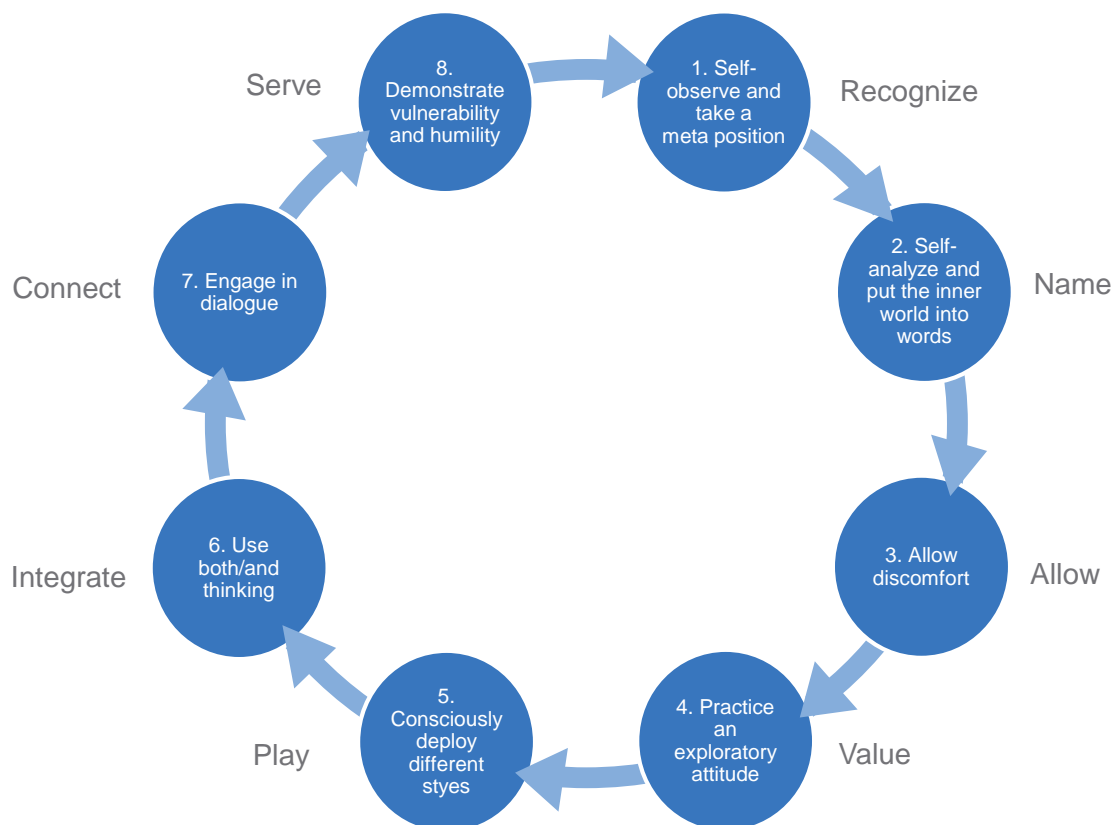
---

<sup>1</sup> Including authors such as Susan David, Adam Grant, Carol Dweck, and Brené Brown.

These skills apply to everyone, regardless of role or position, although the contexts in which they are used may strongly differ. Each skill has an internal as well as an external aspect: how to harness the opposing forces within ourselves and how to make tensions in our relations with others productive. We can link these skills to the steps that we need to take to deal effectively with polarities:

| How can I deal effectively with polarities?                                  | What skills do I need?                             |
|--|--|
| 1. <b>Recognize:</b> become aware of polarities and how they work            | 1. Self-observe and take a metaposition            |
| 2. <b>Name and explore:</b> identify and get to know our own Polarities      | 2. Self-analyze and put the inner world into words |
| 3. <b>Allow:</b> allow for tension as a productive force                     | 3. Allow discomfort                                |
| 4. <b>Value</b> both sides   | 4. Practice an exploratory attitude                |
| 5. <b>Play:</b> switch back and forth between opposite poles                 | 5. Consciously deploy different personal styles    |
| 6. <b>Integrate:</b> experiment with combining and connecting opposite poles | 6. Use both/and thinking                           |
| 7. <b>Connect and communicate:</b> Engage Others and Reach Out               | 7. Engage in dialogue                              |
| 8. <b>Serve:</b> Contribute to a Higher Purpose                              | 8. Demonstrate vulnerability and humility          |

The eight paradoxical skills are therefore interconnected and build upon each other. For example, in order to associate with a polarity in an open and exploratory way (Skill 4), we need to have noticed it (Skill 1), explored and named it (Skill 2), and allowed it despite discomfort (Skill 3). To consciously switch between the two sides of a polarity depending on the situation (Skill 5), it helps if we have already been able to explore both sides in an open and appreciative way (Skill 4). I illustrate this interconnection in the figure below.



However, you do not need to develop these skills step by step and master the first one before moving on to the second one. Personal development is not linear; it is an iterative process in which all the skills develop together, in a continuous cycle. It's important to start somewhere in this cycle; this will automatically trigger all the other required skills.

Let's illustrate these eight skills with the following case. Sarah is a team leader. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, the interpersonal relations and the mood in her team have changed significantly. Economic uncertainty is causing a lot of unrest and stress. Working from home might remove the stress of the morning commute, but it makes it much more challenging to keep in touch with colleagues. Everyone deals with it differently: some struggle with drawing the line between work and private life, others have difficulty coping with the lack of personal contact, while a few unexpectedly blossom. The situation increases the existing tension between "extroverts" and "introverts" even more. And finally, Sarah is used to having her team physically around her and holding all the reins, but that's not possible now. Which skills can help Sarah deal effectively with all this?

### 1. Self-Observe and Take a Metaposition

This skill is the ability to consciously monitor and consider what you are feeling, thinking, or doing in this situation. Essential to this skill is the mental flexibility to fluently switch between focusing on the external world and being aware of what's going on inside yourself. You monitor your moods, tensions, emotions, beliefs, motives, and needs as if you were observing another person. You can temporarily step out of the action and take a moment to self-reflect. However, this process can even take place simultaneously: you are both in the action and taking the position of inner observer.

Taking this metaposition gives you a broader context. You may be trapped in a certain role that does not necessarily help you or the situation. Or your behavior may be based on ingrained trigger-response patterns, which have proven their usefulness in the past but are not functional in the current situation. By observing these patterns within yourself, you are no longer completely coinciding with them. Becoming aware of your inner world enables you to take full responsibility for it and provides the necessary space to make changes.

This requires more than detached intellectual activity. It requires paying attention to subtle and concrete signals (physical, emotional, mental). What do you feel and experience? What does this do to you? In this way you will also have a better sense of which response a particular situation requires.

But no matter how self-reflective you try to be, you will always have blind spots. That is why it is so important to actively seek feedback. Where self-observation inevitably falls short, feedback from others can tell you what you need to know.

#### **Sarah's situation:**

Instead of immediately switching to a problem-solving mode, Sarah has learned to zoom out for a moment and to take the time to self-reflect: "What tensions does this situation evoke in me? What do I feel about them? What seemingly conflicting things do I want at the same time?" For example, she finds it especially difficult not to have clarity herself. Therefore, she cannot provide clarity to her team, which makes her feel inadequate as a manager. She also questions her team about the tensions they experience.

### 2. Self-Analyze and Put the Inner World into Words

This skill is the ability to actively explore and explicitly name the areas of tension that you experience. It is a combination of further investigation and finding the right words for what specifically affects you.

The challenge here is to pinpoint the root cause of the tension without getting sidetracked or focusing on superficial forms or manifestations.

The challenge is to dig deeper: what is this tension really about? Which sides of yourself seem to contradict each other? How would you best describe the underlying polarities? Can seemingly different tensions in your life or work emerge from a common core polarity? Is it possible for you to describe these polarities in neutral terms, without a pronounced positive or negative emotional charge, such as the tension between “deciding” and “exploring” as opposed to that between “getting things done” and “indecisiveness”?

This skill also involves being willing and able to raise difficult issues in your relationships with others. Everyone may feel these issues that no one dares to talk about. The challenge here is to make these issues as specific and concrete as possible, while remaining close to your own perception and responsibility, and without accusing or attacking others.

#### **Sarah’s situation:**

Sarah has made it clear to herself what she finds most difficult. She is mainly concerned with the tension between wanting to provide structure on the one hand and going with the flow on the other. Sarah also tries to get a hold of the underlying tensions within the team. She notices that the more extroverted colleagues struggle the most with the lack of stimulating feedback, confirmation, and encouragement, and that the more introverted team members are often relieved that they have less distracting stimuli to deal with.

### **3. Allow Discomfort**

This skill is the ability to allow tension, resistance, loss of control, not knowing, making mistakes, and negative feedback to exist without trying to brush them aside or fix them. Tension and discomfort may lead to new perspectives and ideas because you are no longer able to rely on familiar routines and existing patterns. Do you dare to critically question yourself and go outside your comfort zone? What will happen if you step outside the boundaries of a familiar and safe position? Will you really lose face and feel the ground under your feet disappear, or will something new arise and provide you with the means to create a new balance? Can you learn to be comfortable with discomfort?

Discomfort arises from the confusion of contradictory values. It is the fear that your solid and cherished identity and your basic convictions about the world are at risk. One way to make this bearable is to articulate and express your distress and feelings of discomfort.

Another aspect of this skill is a willingness to face parts of yourself that you don’t like. You may notice things about yourself that do not please you or match the image you have of yourself. Most people also have a conscious or unconscious tendency to filter out perceptions, convictions, and intentions that are undesirable in order to maintain a bright and shiny version of themselves. But these are aspects of yourself that play a specific role in who you are as a whole. They are necessary for your inner balance. In some cases, they may even be hidden talents that you could use in a constructive way. This also applies to allowing emotions that may be difficult to understand or may seem inappropriate or undesirable; these emotions tell you when something inside of you is out of balance. “Allowing” in this context means allowing these aspects to exist. You don’t have to like them, but you shouldn’t fight them or push them away.

Finally, this skill is about showing compassion toward yourself and others. No one is perfect and everyone has rough edges; fighting imperfections takes a tremendous amount of energy, without any guarantee of success. You can benefit much more from being kind and compassionate to yourself and by spending this energy in a positive way.

**Sarah's situation:**

Instead of trying to be upbeat and energetically moving forward in a contrived way, Sarah offers herself and the team the space to share their feelings of discomfort. She expresses to her team how uncomfortable she sometimes feels. In turn, the team recognizes these tensions in themselves and the discomfort they all experience becomes more bearable. This openness brings them closer together as a team: everyone seems to be struggling and looking for answers.

**4. Practice an Exploratory Attitude**

This skill is the ability to be open and curious about views, values, beliefs, or behaviors that are unfamiliar or, at first glance, contradict your long-standing convictions. This skill goes beyond allowing tensions and contradictory aspects of yourself; it's about discovering the value of both sides and diving into each of them. Your first reflex might be to judge and condemn, or perhaps to feel apprehensive or afraid. But after this initial shock, you can try to understand where these views are coming from, what they mean, and what role and function they play. You should maintain the underlying assumption that there's a positive motive and function behind every view or behavior even though the apparent form may be despicable or destructive.

You may recall the "golden triangle" (Figure 6.2), where two apparently oppositional poles overlap; this is when you leave behind the level of appearance (which might be negative) and explore the underlying (positive) needs, concerns, values, and goals. The best way to do this is to be curious, ask questions, listen, observe attentively, and withhold judgment. Withholding judgment is difficult because humans are undeniably emotional beings, and emotional judgments help determine which way to go and how to survive. This doesn't mean that you need to agree with every position, but you can make an effort to understand where oppositional impulses come from and how they might be channeled more positively.

**Sarah's situation:**

Once Sarah and her team have opened up to each other, Sarah realizes that there is power behind uncertainty. It can be a breeding ground for innovative ideas that would never arise under normal circumstances. She also notes that her more introverted colleagues enjoy working from home because they have time to work on their own, without distractions. She wonders how she can maintain this strength, even after the COVID-19 crisis. How can she better take into account the different styles and needs of individual team members? How can her more extroverted colleagues also reap the benefits of low-stimulus moments or days?

**5. Consciously Deploy Different Personal Styles**

This skill is the ability to consciously activate or deactivate your different sub-selves, identities, roles, or values, depending on what the situation requires. For example, in one context, you might call upon your action-oriented side, whereas in another you may need your reflective side more. Using the previous skills, you are already aware of both sides and have accepted them as part of your multifaceted identity. But with this skill, you can call upon both poles when necessary. In other words, you control these opposite sides to some degree and are not just controlled by them. This makes you flexible and able to respond quickly and appropriately to different situations. It also provides you with more space and freedom to choose your own course of action. You are no longer trapped in automatic stimulus-response patterns but can consciously decide to take a completely different path.

**Sarah's situation:**

Sarah uses the current situation as an opportunity to develop a side of her that has up to now remained untapped. When team members come to her with their questions and concerns, she learns not to immediately look for the solution herself, but to respond with a question in return and leave the

responsibility with them. The team members feel more ownership, and Sarah frees up some time and space. Within the team, Sarah can now alternate between driving for results and reflecting together on team atmosphere and perceptions.

## 6. Use Both/And Thinking

This skill is the ability to come up with new combinations of seemingly opposing elements (Strategies 6 and 7 of the Polarity Wheel). This requires you to look beyond the world of concrete manifestations and to get to the essence of both poles. From there, you can develop new creative combinations. In short, this is the ability to fully grasp the complexity of a given situation, use your imagination, and think outside of the box. Or, as F. Scott Fitzgerald aptly put it: “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.”

### **Sarah’s situation:**

Sarah experiments with a new meeting format in which, in addition to all operational matters, there is also room for deeper exchange and personal contact. She abandons the classic agenda structure, leaving operational matters for her team to sort out among themselves. Instead, she starts every team meeting with something unexpected, whether it is a meditation, an inspiring video, or an exciting story. Soon, team members come with their own inspiring suggestions; thus providing inspiration has now become a team effort and responsibility. What Sarah retains is her ability to create a safe environment and to provide guidance when needed.

## 7. Engage in Dialogue

Where the previous skills focused on how to deal with your own polarities, this skill focuses on your relationship with others in a polarity-driven interplay. You are part of many different social systems and thus also part of all kinds of polarizing movements that take place within these systems. For example, in a working relationship, you might be the creative pole and your colleague the procedural pole, or “the system” might be forcing you into the role of caregiver, leader, or rebel.

In addition to an open and exploratory attitude (Skill 4), dialogue requires you to empathize with others who might be very different from you and to try to recognize these points of difference in yourself. The challenge is to acknowledge that what irritates you in others is often a part of yourself that you have not yet accepted.

Dialogue also requires you to consciously switch between different levels of communication: between abstract and concrete, content and process, rational and feeling, explicit and implicit, surface and undercurrent, the expected outcome and the relationship, and between different idioms and paradigms. The challenge is to fully engage in the exchange, but at the same time be able to take a meta-level position and switch to another communication level when required. It requires you to listen and observe carefully, being attentive to unspoken messages, body language, and processes that happen just below the surface (such as mood changes, role switches, or power plays).

Finally, being able to conduct effective dialogue means balancing between many opposing values, like a tightrope walker. For example, it is a challenge to be open to the views of others without losing sight of your own values and interests.

### **Sarah’s situation:**

Sarah puts “introverts” and “extroverts” together in pairs to work on improvement projects, with the challenge of arriving at a joint approach by listening carefully to each other. If she notices that in a discussion about business content other sensitivities play a role, Sarah stops the conversation to reflect together on what is happening below the waterline. As Sarah shows a strong commitment to put the

principles of effective dialogue into practice – which is not always easy to do – she also sets an inspiring example for her team to do the same.

## 8. Show Vulnerability and Humility

This skill is the ability to put your own position (perspective, role, contribution, pride, image, status, etc.) into a broader perspective and acknowledge its relative importance. It means you are willing and able to put aside your ego when it gets in the way of a better solution or a higher goal and admit your own failures, mistakes, and shortcomings. However, you should be able to admit to your shortcomings without losing your fundamental sense of self-worth. Adam Grant named this interesting paradoxical concept “confident humility.”<sup>2</sup>

When you dare to be open and honest about your needs, drives, fears, and emotions, to share your dilemmas and struggles in a vulnerable way, and to sometimes drop your facade of having everything under control, you create the opportunity for authentic connection with others.

Finally, it is helpful to not always take yourself too seriously. If you can look at yourself with humor, you can also bring a necessary lightness to tense situations.

### Sarah’s situation:

Sarah originally thought she was indispensable to keep the team afloat, but she now sees that the team can often manage just fine without her. This frees her to pursue new projects and ideas. She can now make jokes about her urge to control situations, which reduces tension, creates an atmosphere of openness and trust, and stimulates others to do the same.

\* \* \*

Practicing all these paradoxical skills helps Sarah to be much more confident and resilient in situations of uncertainty and tension, and to give more responsibility to the team. Team morale has been boosted as people feel recognized and know that their different talents are valued. They feel free and safe to share their concerns and struggles and empowered to find creative solutions. As a consequence the team is very engaged and highly productive in a context where one might expect exactly the opposite.

## How to Use the Paradoxical Skills?

### Metacompetencies

How do these paradoxical skills relate to the competencies we have always used, such as result orientation, conscientiousness, sociability, teamwork, or persuasion? Classic competencies usually focus on a specific characteristic or quality. The eight paradoxical skills are instead metacompetencies. They define how good we are at activating, deploying, combining, and balancing these classic qualities in different contexts. For example, should we take control, let the process run its course, or work out a combination of both?

### Development of Paradoxical Skills

The paradoxical skills require self-awareness and an ability to observe your inner world. Some people are more naturally inclined to introspection, while others need to learn it through active and conscious effort. However, this is a muscle you can train with exercise. Introspective methods like mindfulness

<sup>2</sup> Adam Grant, *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don’t Know* (London: W.H. Allen, 2021).

exercises can be helpful here, along with interactive methods like systematically asking for and giving feedback. Every development process starts with a good baseline measurement. To give managers and professionals a clear insight into where they stand on the paradoxical skills, Silvia Derom and I have developed the Paradoxical Skills Inventory. You can fill it out freely [here](#) and receive your profile with practical development tips.

### Authenticity

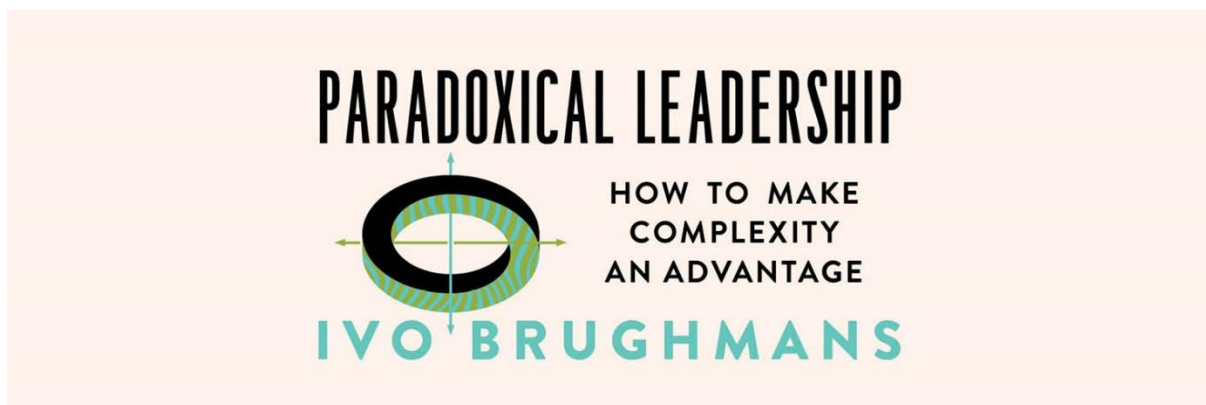
You could also use the paradoxical competencies instrumentally to prove yourself right or even to manipulate others. For example, you might pretend to value the other person's point of view, to conduct an open dialogue, or to be willing to question your own principles, when in fact you're only going through the motions to get what you want and to push your agenda.

Having the right intention is just as important, if not more important, than mastering the skills. The true aim is to achieve more balance and openness; it should not just be about using some new tricks.

---

**Read more:** Ivo Brughmans, *Paradoxical leadership. How to Make Complexity an Advantage* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2023).

Order the book [here](#).



---

[Ivo Brughmans](#) is a philosopher, political scientist, management consultant, and author of several books on paradoxes. He is a lecturer at leadership academies and management schools, such as University of Amsterdam Academy and AOG School of Management at the University of Groningen. Ivo gives keynotes, leads training programs and works with public and private organisations on how to develop a both/and perspective on complex business and societal challenges. More info on <https://paradoxical-leadership.com>.