

The pendulum swings back

Practicing paradoxical leadership

Ivo Brughmans



Growing up in the 1970s, it was very normal that during my long summer holidays I usually disappeared for the whole day without my parents knowing where I was or what I was up to. Cycling around, wandering in the woods, setting up camps, crossing rivers, but also more exciting things like setting fires, climbing over fences of construction sites and sneaking around in half-built houses. All very risky and totally irresponsible if you look at it from today's perspective, but at that time ignorance was bliss. Fortunately, there were no mobile phones for keeping track of you, and no cycling helmets. How times have changed... I noticed that I allowed my own children much less at that age, I clearly set more boundaries and kept a closer eye on their comings and goings. 'Watch out', 'Be careful', 'Where?', 'What?', 'Who with?'... This trend is still continuing. The perimeter in which we give our children space has shrunk spectacularly. If it would be possible, we would have a drone flying above them to constantly keep an eye on everything, because you never know in this unpredictable and hazardous world... And you automatically go along with this trend. After all, you don't want to give the impression that you are an irresponsible parent. However, I recently heard on the radio that VeiligheidNL (the official safety awareness agency in The Netherlands), whose role is actually to promote safe behavior, is advocating more 'risky' play for children. Why? Because we need to avoid our children become greenhouse plants who are afraid to take any initiative, who never take their eyes off their screens and never learn from falling out of trees or scraping their knees. In short, the pendulum swings steadily back and forth and is now on its way back: taking risks is fashionable again!

Here's a similar example from the management world: a conceptually strong top management team develops a brilliant new strategy behind closed doors. The top then delegates implementation to middle management without giving them much to go on and then distances itself completely, because it prefers to work on new projects and is not all that enthralled by the daily operation. However, after a while top management realizes that the totally perplex middle managers are not making much

headway, reclaims everything and reverts to micro management. This pattern of swinging between exerting extreme control and letting go entirely repeats itself again and again. This leads to a lot of irritation and tension back and forth ('middle management just doesn't have the skills' and 'those at the top have no idea what they're doing') and there is an increasing polarization.

Both examples show that sooner or later, every complex system (person, organization or a society or economy) that focuses one-sidedly on just one value and quashes the opposing value, becomes unbalanced and has to correct itself by swinging right back to the other side. So we keep swinging, often unaware, actively contributing to an extensive destruction of value and taking the 'collateral damage' as a given. Yet we do this quite a lot, after all, if we reaped the benefits of a particular one-sided approach in the past, we tend to continue to use that approach, even if it has become totally dysfunctional since then. In many cases, we are not able to distance ourselves enough to see the underlying pattern, or our memory is too short or too selective.

The principle of paradoxical leadership is that you always need to include both opposites to achieve a sustainable result. The challenge is to find creative ways to blend water and fire and in so doing, maximize the power of both. Not by extinguishing the fire with water, but by using fire to power a steam engine.

It may sound logical and familiar, but how do you tackle that? How do you break through this value-destroying pendulum swing? In this video the basic principles are explained:

<https://youtu.be/obhv8WWE92Y> (in Dutch with English subtitles).

In order to apply this to organizations, the following recommendations can be made:

1. **Recognize the effect of polarities in your organization and deal with them consciously:** We are often trapped by polarities without being aware of it. The continuously recurring pendulum swing between the extremes may be visible from a distance or to an outsider, but not to those involved or in the midst of it. In those cases, the conversation is mainly about the incidents that are the direct result of them: 'Little Hugo fell out of the tree. How on earth could it happen that he managed to climb a tree without any parental supervision?' or 'Our middle management hasn't realized much of our plan. We should explain it once again'.

It helps to create some critical distance and search for the underlying polarities that cause these recurrent movements. How do you do that? For example, as a manager full of ambitious plans, talk to the people who have been working for the organization for a while. They can often tell you subtly that your 'brand new direction' was also proposed ten years before as the redeeming way forward, after which Nothing new under the sun. These employees are the memory of the organization and can often pinpoint the pendulum swing extremely accurately. But, you will have to (dare to) ask them. Or ask a critical outsider to observe from a distance and be specifically on the lookout for recurring patterns. In the example of top versus middle management, as the issues were trust and power, only a neutral outsider was in a good position to point this out. The board reacted surprised, but open. They were absolutely not aware of it. They immediately took this with middle management and were willing to act in a more supporting and coaching way. Frequent tensions and recurring conflicts are also a good indicator of an underlying polarity. Where the pendulum swings, there are usually different factions that each embody one of the two opposing poles and form separated and often polarizing camps. One camp stands for more guts and entrepreneurship, the other for greater safety. Depending on whether the pendulum swings left or right, one or other faction will have the upper hand.

Identify these polarities explicitly and challenge people to provide concrete examples of where this went well in the past and where this led to derailments. You can have this discussion with individual staff members and board members first and then with the entire organization. Then the logical follow-up step is to define your strategy not in terms of one direction but rather in terms of

polarities: risk AND safety, structure AND freedom, autonomy AND control, innovation AND stability... Always two complementary paths that are necessary to reach your final destination.

2. **Emphasize the equality of opposites, including the 'negative':** in other words, top-down is just as important as bottom-up; groundbreaking innovative projects have as much value as small incremental changes; sustainability is just as important as short term results. This is not evident, since we have the tendency to replace an the old value with the new: 'central steering is old school and self-steering is the new thing'; 'agile is hot, waterfall is out.' The challenge is in fact to combine the power of central control with that of autonomous teams and to see how you can combine the strengths of 'agile' with the strengths of 'waterfall'.

Be careful not to present this as if you want to please everyone, and end up freezing the assumed positions. Then everyone feels he has been proven right and sticks firmly to his position: 'Let them scrum, I will just keep on doing waterfall.' What is really important is to connect the two opposites and encourage the flow between them. You can do this by challenging people to systematically come up with solutions that always contribute to both goals. A standard question for submitted proposals could be: 'How does this proposal contribute to our safety and our expansion? How does this improve both quality and speed?'

This also means that you must recognize and value apparently 'negative qualities' like failure, doubt, introversion, passivity, cowardice, decay or autocratic leadership and give them the necessary space. These 'dark forces' are also needed for a good operating organization and for creating balance. An organization that doesn't fail doesn't feel the need to improve and therefore stagnates; a management team that doesn't experience doubt, plunges into reckless adventures; a crisis manager that doesn't know how to push unpopular measures, is unable to avert bankruptcy. How? By lifting them out of the shadows and admitting that these are also part of life and that we all have them in us, instead of trying to brush them under the carpet. This latter costs a disproportionate amount of energy and is counterproductive. The more you brush something aside, the bigger it becomes and the more extreme forms it takes on in an effort to be heard.

How do you do this? By showing your vulnerability as a leader and sharing concrete examples of how you yourself have made blunders or have felt cowardly or insecure. Or admit that you do in fact have a couple of Putin traits, but are doing your best to soften the sharp edges. Notice how this openness can change the atmosphere, and how a sense of relief and liberation can arise. Or do like one consultancy firm did, by awarding an annual cup to the consultant who let a project go down the drain. Of course, it's not nice to receive an award like that, but it's also really brave, because throughout the whole organization, people appreciate the courage it takes to talk about your own failures. In fact, you cannot become a Partner in this firm unless you have received the cup.

3. **There is more than just black, white and gray:** Paradoxical leadership is not a plea for faint compromises. The point is to hone the area of tension between opposite poles, so that they neither counteract or neutralize each other, nor cause a short circuit or polarization.

How? By challenging yourself and your team to bring both opposites together at a higher level, by using the strength of both sides and not getting stuck in a diluted interim solution. You can do this by defining the desired outcome in terms of dual objectives: how can you increase both impact and participation? How can you avoid accidents and learn from trial and error? It is also inspiring to describe the desired outcome in terms of a paradox, like secure audacity, structured chaos or loving neglect. Paradoxes are ideally suited to 'deregulating' traditional, linear thinking and forcing you to look deeper, beyond the obvious, for a solution. Then you bring people with different perspectives together to come up with creative solutions that do justice to both sides. Different

paths may emerge from this creative process, you choose the alternative that best contributes to the dual goal here and now.

In some specific situations, a good synthesis of a higher order is not always possible or even desirable. Sometimes it comes down to making a situational choice for one approach or the other. Depending on the context, you will sometimes have to be predominantly controlling and sometimes very supportive, and all shades of gray in between.

Whether you opt for a creative combination or a situational choice, it is important that your decision is always a conscious one. Although you consider both opposites to be fundamentally equal, you let the degree to which you aim to integrate both poles with each other depend strongly on your level of ambition and on the feasibility. Sometimes a compromise is perfectly fine, sometimes the highest you can achieve is to have both poles side by side in clearly separated silos and sometimes you can be fully creative in looking for the ultimate synthesis. To make a conscious choice, the polarity wheel, as explained in the video, can be a useful compass.

[Ivo Brughmans](https://paradoxical-leadership.com) is a philosopher and management consultant. Ivo is fascinated by paradoxes and the challenge to bring together opposite approaches, both in personal leadership, organisations and society as a whole. Ivo has written several books on this theme, developing a 'both/and' perspective as a radical alternative to our current way of living, managing, governing and coaching. Ivo lives in Antwerp, Belgium and works with public and private organisations around the globe. See also <https://paradoxical-leadership.com>.