

**Marianne Lewis** argues that deans need to adopt a 'paradox' approach towards the tensions involved in leading a business school

# Paradoxes of Business Schools



Tensions pervade schools as they do industry, wider society and our personal lives. Consider a common priority list of a business school dean:

- Build an academic institution that creates knowledge, inspires learning and impacts practice *and* grow revenue to meet rising costs, support university ambitions and enable re-investment.
- Nurture and reward world-leading research and engage faculty in enhancing the student experience, collegiate community and external partnerships.
- Fuel innovation to confront digital, workplace and macroeconomic disruptions and ensure offerings and systems align to current national, accreditation and university requirements.

Through two decades of research I have found that what distinguishes thriving organisations is not that their leaders make better trade-offs when facing such tensions but that they apply a “paradox” approach.

Experiencing the tug-of-war of tensions our natural tendency is to seek order and consistency. We see a dilemma, weigh the pros and cons and make a trade-off accordingly. This traditional approach works well when an issue is isolated and immediate – do we develop a programme ourselves or with a partner; do we build capacity to meet a new requirement or outsource to an existing expert?

Yet for more intricate and persistent tensions, such as those noted in the opening, a traditional either/or approach can prove counterproductive. We might make a decision today but the underlying tension will fester and resurface, often more aggressively. Moreover, favouring one side over another can spur defensive reactions that impede creativity, polarise groups and paralyse decision making.

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***Those leaders who have sustained thriving schools value paradoxes as opportunities for learning, finding comfort in their discomfort. The confidence and humility of such paradoxical leaders are reminiscent of a Confucian insight: real knowledge is to know the extent of one's own ignorance***

In contrast, I find that successful leaders embrace perplexing tensions as paradoxes. A paradox denotes contradictory demands that are interwoven and persistent. Such expectations, roles or identities pull us in opposing directions but are inextricably linked, defining and enabling each other. The Taoist symbol of yin-yang serves as illustration. Dark and light are two sides of a holistic coin. Dark defines light, the darker our setting the more powerful a speck of light and vice versa.

The opening examples illustrate business school tensions that mirror the types I have found repeatedly across industries; paradoxes of performing, organising and learning.

- Paradoxes of performing arise as varied stakeholder groups voice competing yet interwoven demands such as those between academic and financial responsibilities
- Paradoxes of organising result from efforts to enable focus and delegation as well as co-ordination and efficiency, creating disparate and often competing faculty roles related to research, teaching and community
- Paradoxes of learning denote tensions between order/change, innovation/regulation, old/new, arising in our tradition laden yet increasingly turbulent business school context

A paradox approach can help leaders and their organisations cope and even thrive with such tensions. I find that adept leaders consistently apply three steps:

First, they re-frame the issue. Rather than assume a dilemma that requires either/or thinking, they consider how opposing elements may be interwoven via more creative, both/and thinking.

Second, they seek responses that separate and connect competing demands. Separation entails building respect, appreciation and capabilities in opposing areas while connection aids understanding of their mutual benefits and leverages their interdependence.

Third, effective leaders practise balancing. Continuously adjusting their efforts, they build their and their colleagues' confidence and capacity to work with, learn from and lead through tensions.



We can now briefly address each type of business school tension to illustrate a paradox approach.

### **Paradoxes of performing**

Paradoxes of performing are inherent (and intensifying) in the competing performance demands on business schools. Most broadly and notably, we experience tensions between our academic and financial responsibilities. Taken separately, each demand is logical and manageable. Yet when juxtaposed their distinct needs can feel contradictory, requiring divergent practices and mindsets and spurring competition for scarce resources.

While the missions of schools may vary in detail, our remits are fairly consistent: to create knowledge that inspires learning, informs practice and improves society. Further contextual factors – such as rising income inequality, macroeconomic and geopolitical instability, and technological change – magnify the potential impact of our social responsibilities.

Financial demands, however, are also growing as public funding declines and costs rise. Approached as trade-offs, the result is contentious debates over which priorities win or lose – enrolment growth v quality and research support v university contributions.





A paradox approach can help accentuate interdependence, opening possibilities for more creative synergies and continuous development.

A paradox approach begins with re-framing the tension. Sustainability is paradoxical. Academic excellence motivates faculty, accelerates student learning, and attracts gifts, grants and enrolment while financial performance ensures reinvestment and funds innovation that enhances academic excellence.

Separating and connecting efforts target corresponding actions. For example, engaging faculty in defining academic excellence helps clarify and support adherence to a school's topmost priorities. Likewise, continuously enhancing financial capabilities, understandings and discipline aids greater impact and transparency in resource allocation.

Communications should then reiterate and illustrate interdependence between the school's academic and financial responsibilities. Finally, balancing enables ongoing learning. Shocks and shortfalls will arise, requiring shifts among lower-priority elements. A culture of feedback and continuous improvement, as well as celebration of success, nurtures collective ambition, humility and resilience.

### **Paradoxes of organising**

Paradoxes of organising arise as structures and systems focus and delegate roles while enabling co-ordination and efficiencies. At the organisational level, deans face such tensions between centralisation/decentralisation and standardisation/flexibility. Within a business school such tensions are particularly experienced by faculty, challenged to excel in their research, teaching and community roles.

Ideally, these roles are synergistic, building and leveraging one's thought leadership. We research to create knowledge that we then share across varied student, executive and public forums, building feedback and recognition. Together they comprise the "three-legged stool" that sustains business schools but also fosters meaningful and vibrant faculty careers.

Yet such synergies are challenging and rare in reality. Research, especially during data analysis and writing stages, requires considerable, often isolated, time while teaching and community efforts increasingly span the year. Tensions are further exacerbated by mixed messages.

Deans know too well public criticisms of academic publications lacking relevance while regulatory and institutional demands for faculty teaching and impact rise. Yet the external faculty market – and hence salaries – remains driven by their publications as also, ironically, do research assessments by the same national and institutional regulators.

Moreover, a myopic view of research as publications can impede individual well-being, departmental collegiality and school sustainability. Academic cultures and identities, fed through doctoral programmes, job searches and historical salary adjustments, can widen disparity. As a result, non-research faculty members can feel marginalised and incremental publications that enable quantity can supersede riskier efforts that may provoke more radical change.

Separating faculty roles can accentuate their distinct value and target related support while connecting roles foster development and recognition of one's accumulating thought leadership. As an example, the Cass Faculty Excellence strategy seeks to clarify expectations and support within each area as well as alternative pathways to excel and progress.

Similarly, it helps identify means to support faculty compartmentalise their work life, such as via workload and scheduling. Yet we also seek means to connect roles. Revising our mission, we stress that Cass is "thought leader driven", honing efforts that demonstrate to students and our wider community the value of rigorous research and intellectual curiosity.

Linking teaching and executive education to research also enables feedback that can enhance research relevance and impact. Such efforts are





necessarily dynamic. Balancing entails embracing the interplay between individuals' research, teaching and community selves to fuel individual and collective learning.

Not surprisingly, paradoxes of learning are pervasive in higher education. Philosophers have long explored these paradoxes, as learning entails both creation and destruction. More directly, in business schools we often experience tensions between valuing tradition and enabling change, building upon and challenging expertise, and meeting today's regulations and fuelling tomorrow's innovation.

Such learning paradoxes are intertwined with paradoxes of performing and organising. How we meet our demands and fulfil our roles depends in part on our ability to learn.

Yet efforts to ensure discipline and consistency often counter those aimed at fostering empowerment and agility. In the risk-averse, regulated world of higher education, national requirements and centralised university processes grow over time, stressing the former over the latter. The effect can be missed opportunities to engage staff or, worse, a downward spiral.

Growing controls foster stagnation and distrust that inhibit innovation, reduce productivity and frustrate (if not infuriate) high-performing staff – all factors that counter needs of today's highly uncertain, competitive and changing educational context.

In exceptional businesses and business schools, related separating and connecting efforts rely on the paradoxical concepts of improvisation and servant leadership. Improvisation denotes ensuring that rules enable creativity. When used effectively, processes, targets and budgets offer boundaries within which talented staff can experiment, innovate and thrive.

In contrast to micro-managing bureaucracies that over-complicate rules and specify how to achieve targets, improvisation entails simple and clear boundaries aligned to an overarching vision. Likewise, servant leaders are far from bureaucrats or micro-managers. Such paradoxical leaders continuously simplify and strategically align the boundaries to support, guide and recognise talented staff.

In summary, as tensions increasingly pervade business schools, learning to work through and thrive with paradoxes becomes vital. A paradox approach re-frames tensions to enable both/and thinking, explores means to separate and connect opposing demands and values balancing to continuously adapt and learn.

As I assumed my first deans position, I proactively sought out my peers, asking fellow deans to share their challenges and tips. What I heard aligned with my research. Paradoxes of performing, organising and learning are interwoven and persistent. Indeed, deans repeatedly explained that such tensions make the deanship "an impossible job".

Yet, as in my studies of paradox, I also found that those leaders who have sustained thriving schools value paradoxes as opportunities for learning, finding comfort in their discomfort. The confidence and humility of such paradoxical leaders are reminiscent of a Confucian insight: real knowledge is to know the extent of one's own ignorance.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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