Navigating paradox with agility

During the COVID-19 crisis, leaders are having to make decisions that involve paradoxes: choosing between seemingly self-contradictory goals. Those who reframe their thinking about such decisions will make better ones.

At this moment, world, local, and business leaders, plus all of us in our homes, are wrestling with the dilemma of staying home to stay healthy and going out to reinvigorate our economies. This paradox is just one of many the COVID-19 crisis has created. How do we have transparency of data so we know who is sick, and whether we have been in contact with someone potentially contagious, while maintaining individual privacy? How do we balance a globally interdependent economy with meeting local needs?

Polarities like these are not problems to be solved, but tensions to be managed. To complicate the matter, the two poles are interdependent: economic health impacts population health, and vice versa. There is no single answer, and those who seek one are deluding themselves. Such polarities are, however, manageable. To thrive in an era when so many decisions present paradoxes, we need to reframe what it means to "solve" them.

How can leaders navigate uncertainty, ambiguity, and competing pressures when there is no right or wrong? In a word: agility. Leaders must continually strike the right balance between the two poles of, for example, human and economic health. Just like physical balance on a seesaw, tightrope, or dance floor, leadership agility depends on intricate balance. We define agility as demonstrating adaptability, learning, resilience, and foresight.[1] (See sidebar, "Defining agility.")

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1 For more on the research underlying our view of agility, see Heidrick & Struggles, "Developing leaders for the 21st century: How leaders can mobilize, execute, and transform with agility," February 8, 2018, heidrick.com.

Defining agility

Adaptability involves shifting priorities quickly to create new ways of working and business models. The inescapable example of this crisis is the sudden shift to support millions of people working from home and entirely new safety conditions for those who cannot. More broadly, adaptability requires leaders to be comfortable with pivoting fast and not getting stuck in place or mired in old assumptions. Leaders who employ a devil's advocate approach—ensuring assumptions and plans are questioned before implementation—will be best able to make plans that maintain balance.

Learning when trying to lead through paradox requires continuous testing, experimentation, and iteration in real time. When dealing with novel situations and scarce data, leaders need an excellent feedback loop. Those who make small bets and hold frequent, rigorous debriefs to understand what's working and what's not will be best able to decide what to scale up and what to scale down as the balance point shifts. Those who can ensure they learn quickly will have more opportunities to correct course, increasing the likelihood that they'll scale the right moves.

Resilience requires leading with purpose to address fear, dislocation, and tough choices. Mistakes are inevitable as leaders manage through paradoxes, especially given the speed at which many decisions have to be made and implemented. Leaders who are fully and visibly connected to their personal and organizational purpose, while maintaining transparency, are better able to persevere and recover when things go off-kilter. Resilience also relies on leaders' focusing on what they can control, while staying mindful of the energy of the workforce, customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders and the toll the current environment is taking on them.

Foresight involves anticipating and being prepared to pivot with rapidly changing dynamics. To stay balanced, leaders need to be hypersensitive to external and internal forces and monitor the changing equilibrium. They need to ensure they are well-informed and hear dissenting voices. Scenario planning will help leaders stay open, flexible, and attuned to changing data. By projecting possible futures rather than relying on a single-point forecast or assumption, such leaders can adjust their moves in real time before falling in one direction or the other.[1]

1 For more on scenario planning during the COVID-19 crisis, see Yulia Barnakova, Eric Skoritowski, and Scott Snyder, "COVID-19 and the future of work: Four scenarios," Heidrick & Struggles, April 14, 2020, heidrick.com.

Leaders wrestling with today's paradoxes will not win by trying to resolve the unresolvable. Instead, they can stay agile by reframing what may seem like unreconcilable goals, analyzing the underlying tensions, defining success in the context of the paradox, and then closely monitoring the plans they implement while remaining flexible. This means taking the following practical steps:

Step 1: Frame the paradox.
Clearly identify the polarities, validate the truth on both ends, and explicitly define the trade-offs and potential consequences. Don't default to one-dimensional or binary thinking. Carefully define the dimensions in which competing priorities exist.

Step 2: Bring it to life.
Understand and get information on the forces that would lead the organization to make a move, the uncertainties or unknowns that complicate the analysis, and the implications for the organization and all the people in it. Determine whether there are early signals the organization should be paying attention to.

Step 3: Define what success looks like.
Be clear about what the organization is trying to achieve in the short and long term by finding balance and understanding which effects the organization will benefit from maximizing or minimizing. Maintaining organizational resilience should be a key metric of success.

Step 4: Make the trade-off decision.
Though paradoxes require adaptability, and managing them through small experiments and continuous learning works best, leaders will need to take bold, decisive action once they've considered all the points above. Leaders can't allow the need to manage a paradox get in the way of the need to decide where on the continuum the organization ought to be.

Step 5: Align on metrics and actively monitor early signals.
Based on their definition of success, organizations should align on the metrics needed to monitor whether their decision is moving them toward the right place on the continuum, and, if it's not, which direction to move to correct course. Those that can determine where to find the earliest data on those metrics and watch those sources closely for signs of movement will be able to change course in real time, with adaptability and resilience, before going too far in the wrong direction.

Step 6: Rinse and repeat steps 3 through 5.
Thriving through an era defined by paradox requires leaders who are consistently agile.

In a world where there is more gray than black and white, more tension than absolutes, more movement than stillness, the ability to keep your balance becomes disproportionately and enduringly important. By taking the steps outlined in this article, leaders will be able to maintain their own and their organizations' agility when facing a paradox.

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