Managing polarity, paradox, and dilemma during leader transition

Steven V. Manderscheid

*College of Business and Organizational Leadership, Concordia University,
St Paul, Minnesota, USA, and*

Peter D. Freeman

Full Circle Dynamics LLC, St Paul, Minnesota, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to review literature relevant to leader transition and the navigation of polarities, paradoxes, and dilemmas that exist in organizations. Furthermore, the researchers aim to critique the literature and provide suggestions for practitioners and researchers interested in leader transition through the lens of polarity, paradox, and dilemma.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors conducted an extensive review of the literature for this study. They searched the following databases: ABI/INFORM, Academic Search Premier, Business Source Premier, PsychInfo, and Dissertations Abstracts. To conduct their search, the researchers used the terms; leader, manager, and supervisor in conjunction with the terms transitions, adaptation, socialization, assimilation, polarity, paradox, dilemma, polarity thinking, polarity management, leadership, team, organization, conflict management, creativity, and combinations of the same.

Findings – There is very little research conducted on either topic independently and no research conducted on both collectively. The literature on leader transitions also states that transitions are times of uncertainty and stress. The findings suggest that some of this uncertainty and stress could result from the inability to recognize and manage polarity, paradox, and dilemma. Furthermore, the literature does not acknowledge this connection nor does it specify the polarities that exist for leaders in general or leaders in transition.

Originality/value – Based on personal experiences working with organizational leaders and training and organization development professionals, the authors believe that there is great potential to help train new leaders on polarity thinking. If training and development professionals see value in polarity thinking for transitioning leaders and can respond with timely training interventions, it could have a positive impact on new leader effectiveness and subsequent organization performance.

Keywords Transitions, Adaptation, Socialization, Assimilation, Polarity, Paradox, Dilemma, Polarity thinking, Polarity management, Conflict management, Leadership, Organizational processes

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

A rapidly changing environment and a fiercely competitive landscape force many organizations to frequently position and re-position leaders in new roles as their organizations adapt to stay competitive. In fact, according to Challenger, Gray, and Christmas (2009), more chief executive officers left their jobs in 2008 than in any other year. Moreover, Challenger, Gray, and Christmas and Liberum Research (2009) also found that CEO departures over the past two years have declined from the 2008 high by 10 percent to 20 percent. There is speculation that recessionary pressures have contributed to this decline. In addition, Watkins (2003) states that roughly 25 percent of the managers in a typical company take new jobs each year. Furthermore, Watkins (2003) estimates that more than one-half million managers enter new positions in

Fortune 500 companies alone. In addition, Neff and Citrin's (2005) work supports the work of Watkins (2003) by suggesting that "professionals with only ten years of work experience today have already worked for an average of four companies and are projected to etch another six on their resume throughout the remaining course of their lives" (p. 7). Challenger, Gray, and Christmas (2009) explain that there are several factors converging to explain relatively high leader turnover. These include a volatile economy, an aging CEO population, a brighter spotlight on the CEO position, and calls for more accountability on the part of corporate leadership. Neff and Citrin (2005) believe that this trend of frequent transition is likely to persist as companies continue their rigorous cost-management and efficiency drives. Moreover, these frequent transitions can be disruptive (at best) (Bear *et al.*, 2000) and very costly for the leader, the leader's direct reports, and other internal stakeholders as the leader works to adapt to the organization.

If leaders in transition have smooth transitions with minimal disruption, the continuity of the organization's mission is maintained, and the organization's performance is left intact (Van Maanen and Schein, 1977). If new leaders are unsuccessful in adapting to the team and the organization, the results of a transition can be costly. In fact, the failure rate for new leaders is high. Studies conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership and Manchester Partners International (as cited in Fisher, 1998; Bradt *et al.*, 2006), suggest that the failure rate for new leaders is 40 percent in their first 18 months.

When a leader exits the organization, it is estimated that the direct and indirect cost of turnover can be 24 times the leader's annual salary. For example, Smart (1999) estimated that the direct and indirect costs to a company of a failed executive-level hire can be as high as $2.7m. Mercer Human Resource Consulting (2010) found that turnover can cost 50-150 percent of an employee's salary. In addition to the direct and indirect costs associated with turnover, leaders in transition are part of a network of people and their success or failure has broad non-financial implications (Watkins, 2003). Watkins further cites the results of a survey of company presidents and CEOs conducted at Harvard Business School's 2003 Presidents' Seminar. The survey indicated that the number of people impacted by the arrival of a new mid-level manager was 12.4.

Despite the importance of understanding and correctly managing leader transitions, research into dynamics of such transitions and the developmental and training activities aimed at facilitating such transitions, is still scarce. Furthermore, even though many large organizations have established leadership development programs to ensure they are building the capacity of their leaders to help grow and sustain their organizations, they often neglect to develop their leaders' capacities to quickly adapt to new leader roles and the teams they are chartered to lead. Watkins (2003) further suggests that organizations spend little effort on helping leaders transition into new roles even though they are critical for leadership development and organization success. In support of Watkins (2003), Bear *et al.* (2000) state that "Leaders who are effective during transitions are more likely to be effective throughout their tenure" (p. 8).

What's to be done to help facilitate more successful transitions? Leaders spend millions of dollars each year on books, trainings, and consultants to help them discover the best ways to identify and solve the problems during their transition and beyond. It seems that there is always a theory or approach *du jour*, a "flavor of the month", that is touted as the final answer or all that a leader truly needs to know. Major efforts are taken to implement the new approaches, the old ways are discarded as obsolete, and

yet, the problems do not really go away. There is something not quite right in it all, it seems. When examined more closely, some of the problems transitioning leaders step into and need to address are unsolvable – unsolvable because they exist within a polarity. Other words associated with polarity are "paradox" and "dilemma". All three describe the repeating difficulties encountered by leaders generally and most pointedly by leaders transitioning in organizations. To that end, the purpose of this study is to review literature relevant to leader transition and the navigation of polarities, paradoxes, and dilemmas that exist in organizations. Furthermore, the researchers will critique the literature and provide suggestions for practitioners and researchers interested in leader transition through the lens of polarity, paradox, and dilemma. The questions that guided the review of the literature were:

- Is there literature that acknowledges a connection between leader transition and polarity, paradox, and dilemma?
- How can an understanding of and ability to work with polarity, paradox, and dilemma help leaders in transition?

Methodology

The authors conducted an extensive review of the literature for this study. The authors searched the following databases to complete their study:

- ABI/INFORM;
- Academic Search Premier;
- Business Source Premier;
- PsychInfo; and
- Dissertations Abstracts.

To conduct their search, the researchers used the terms "leader", "manager", and "supervisor" in conjunction with the terms "transitions", "adaptation", "socialization", "assimilation", "polarity", "paradox", "dilemma", "polarity thinking", "polarity management", "leadership", "team", "organization", "conflict management", "creativity", and combinations of the same. To that end, very few journal articles in the area of leadership and management addressed polarity, paradox, dilemma, polarity thinking, or polarity management. Information related to those subjects was found in published books by various authors in diverse fields (psychology, education, semantics, and management/organization sciences) dated between 1920 and 2011.

The criteria used to select or ignore literature were determined by selecting literature that gave the researchers insight on transitions and polarity, paradox, and dilemmas. From a polarity, paradox, and dilemma standpoint, the key determinant for inclusion was relevance to efforts to identify and manage recurrent, intractable problems and conflicts. From a transition perspective, it is important to note that the review of literature was focused on leader transitions as they relate to a leader's ability to adapt to their teams. The researcher did not select research that addressed new (first time) leader transition, nor did the researchers focus on transition experiences of those who are not in a management or leadership role. In addition, the researchers did not generalize literature on socialization to a leader's role unless the literature on socialization spoke directly to leaders in transition. None of the discovered research specifically addressed polarity, paradox, or dilemma, as addressed by the researchers, in transition processes for leaders.

Lastly, when reviewing the literature, the researchers did not differentiate between leaders and managers when reviewing both topics. The literature on leadership and management tends to differentiate leaders and managers, however, in the literature on transition and polarity there is scarcity of literature and no differentiation between the terms. Moreover, the majority of the literature used the term "leader" as the focus of discussions on transition and polarity thinking. In total, 53 sources were reviewed (27 and 26, respectively, for the two domains of interest). Tables I and II highlight the sources considered most relevant to this inquiry.

Review of the literature
Change and transition
Manderscheid (2006) states that change is inevitable, however, transition is optional. Moreover, Bridges (2003) suggests that changes are events (concrete and situational) and transitions are ongoing processes (psychological). Manderscheid (2006) and Watkins (2003) define leader transition as a period of transition from one leader role to another. This period of transition usually lasts from six to nine months. Moreover, Bridges (2003) suggests that transition is a three-phase process, which includes an ending, a neutral zone, and a new beginning. The ending is characterized as letting go of old assumptions and behaviors and readying oneself for a new situation. Many leaders struggle to put what was familiar into abeyance and effectively undermine the transition process. The neutral zone is the core of the transition and is characterized by

Author	Foundation	Resource title	Contribution
Cloke and Goldsmith (2000)	Theoretical	*Resolving Conflicts At Work: A Complete Guide for Everyone on the Job*	The necessity of a polarity perspective in conflict resolution
Burns (1999)	Theoretical	*Polarity Management: The Key Challenge for Integrated Health Systems*	Nine polarities to manage in healthcare management
Johnson (1996)	Theoretical	*Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems*	Polarity management model
Handy (1994)	Theoretical	*The Age of Paradox*	The reality of paradox in organizations
Hampden-Turner (1990)	Theoretical	*Charting the Corporate Mind: Graphic Solutions to Business Conflicts*	Creating value by embracing conflicting claims inherent in organizational dilemmas
Vaill (1990)	Theoretical	*Managing as a Performing Art: New ideas for a World of Chaotic Change*	Paradox inherent in the "permanent whitewater" of organizational leadership
Quinn (1988)	Theoretical	*Beyond Rational Management: Mastering the Paradoxes and Competing Demands of High Performance*	Linking paradox management and high performance
Jung (1973)	Theoretical	*On the Nature of the Psyche*	Psychological basis for resistance to polarities

Table I.
Highlighted literature sources on polarity, paradox and dilemma

Author	Foundation	Resource title	Contribution
Challenger, Gray, and Christmas (2009)	Theoretical	*Monthly CEO Report*	Develop a monthly and annual CEO turnover report. Leadership turnover has been increasing (with a few exceptions) over the past decade
Manderscheid and Ardichvili (2008)	Empirical	*New Leader Assimilation: Process and Outcomes*	Found that new leader success is dependent upon their ability to manage impressions, seek feedback from subordinates, and align expectations
Neff and Citrin (2005), Watkins (2003)	Theoretical	*You're in Charge: Now What?, The First 90 Days: Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders at All Levels*	Builds a case for focusing on leadership transition. Moreover, provides examples of new leader transition intervention
Bridges (2003), Lewin (1997)	Theoretical	*Managing Transitions, Resolving Social Conflict and Field Theory in Social Science*	Both authors identified stages of change/transition, for example Lewin: unfreeze (let go), transition; Bridges: ending, neutral zone, and new beginning
Ciampa and Watkins (1999), Louis (1980)	Theoretical	*Right from the Start; Surprise and Sense Making: What Newcomers Experience in Entering Unfamiliar Organizational Settings*	Acknowledge that new leader transitions last anywhere from one day to nine months
Gilmore (1988), Gabarro (1987)	Theoretical	*Making a leadership Change: How Organizations and Leaders can Handle Leadership Transition Successfully; The Dynamics of Taking Charge*	Both of these authors suggest that new leaders go through stages as they navigate through their transition

Table II.
Highlighted literature sources on leader transition

the replacement of old behaviors with new. Furthermore, Bridges (2003) suggests that the neutral zone is the most difficult part of a transition. Since the definitive outcomes of transitions are unknowable and charged with high expectations, individuals experience uncertainty, anxiety, and a feeling of isolation. The successful transition requires taking what was previously known and making a reasonable "leap of faith" into an period of flux and realignment. Effective transition takes courage, patience and fortitude. Bridges (2003) also states that organizations make mistakes by not paying sufficient attention to the neutral stage by helping individuals move through the stage effectively, rather than quickly. The new beginning is just that, with new skills and a new outlook on the way forward. Bridges states that individuals, and teams, need to go through all of the phases to make a successful transition. In addition, Bridges (2003) emphasizes that most organizations ignore the ending, pay little attention to the neutral zone and expect the new beginning to simply happen. This inattention is likely

a reason why many organization and individual change initiatives are prolonged, fraught with anxiety, or even stillborn.

Models of transition and change
Bridges' (2003) model of ending, neutral zone, and new beginning transition phases is similar to Lewin's (1997) model of organization change, which highlights three phases of change:

(1) unfreeze;

(2) transition; and

(3) refreeze.

Bridges' (2003) model of transition speaks to people working through transition; Lewin's (1997) model attempts to describe what happens when an organization as a whole works through transition (change). Lewin (1997) does not differentiate between change and transition like Bridges (2003), even though the models are similar and could be applied to both individuals and groups.

In yet another model of individual change, Kübler-Ross (1969) notes five distinct phases dying cancer patients go through when experiencing the transition from life to death. The five phases are:

(1) denial;

(2) anger;

(3) bargaining;

(4) depression; and

(5) acceptance.

In addition to Kübler-Ross's (1969) model, Fink *et al.* (1971) provided a framework similar to Kübler-Ross (1969) but from an organizational perspective. Their model acknowledges that people experience shock, defensive retreat, acknowledgement, adaptation, and change. All of the models seem to depict a letting go, a transition, and an acceptance of the new situation; moreover, all of the models of change assume that the person or system strives to seek equilibrium. This means that individuals are placed into a temporary transition by a change event; they will eventually seek a new state of equilibrium or they will seek an alternative transition.

There is also a stream of literature available on transitions from a management or leadership perspective (Ciampa and Watkins, 1999; Gabarro, 1987; Gilmore, 1988; Hill, 2003; Watkins, 2003). The literature on leader transition tended to subscribe to Bridges' (2003) definition of transition. The authors noted above viewed a leader's acceptance of a new role as a transition versus a change.

Discussing phases of transition, Ciampa and Watkins (1999) suggested that there are three phases new leaders go through when they accept a new role. The first is called a transition period, which lasts approximately six months. The later two stages are called transformation and succession. Gabarro (1987) proposed, as a result of his research, that the overall transition model for leaders is depicted in five stages:

(1) taking hold;

(2) immersion;

(3) reshaping;

(4) consolidation; and

(5) refinement.

Gabarro's (1987) "taking hold" stage was similar to Ciampa and Watkins' (1999) transition phase. To that end, Gabarro (1987) suggested that the "taking hold" stage is a period of orientation and evaluative learning and corrective action. In addition to Ciampa and Watkins' (1999) and Gabarro's (1987) views of transition, Gilmore (1988) suggested that leader transition involves eight stages, with the first seven stages articulating the recruiting and selection process, and the last stage involving a transition period. This last stage fits with Ciampa and Watkins' (1999) transition phase and Gabarro's (1987) taking hold phase. In summary, the four authors noted above all suggested that there is a notable stage early in a leader's transition, which lasts anywhere from one day to nine months.

In support of the literature on stages of leader transition, the literature on socialization suggested that newcomers experience stages during their transition into a new role (Buchanan, 1974; Feldman, 1976; Porter *et al.*, 1975; Wanous, 1980). Much of the literature on socialization and leader transitions supported the concept of newcomers working through stages, but the authors of both streams of literature did little to acknowledge the work of the other. The stages that seemed most relevant to the research topic were either the first or second stage in the newcomer's (leader's) transition, which is often characterized as an information-seeking and learning period.

Ciampa and Watkins (1999) suggested that upon entry into the organization, leaders find themselves in a transition period that lasts six months. In the literature on socialization, Louis (1980) called the aforementioned transition period the encounter stage, which begins on the first day of work and can last anywhere from six to nine months.

Manderscheid and Ardichvili (2008) conducted research on leader transition and found that a leader's ability to manage impressions, seek feedback from subordinates, and align expectations early will help transitioning leaders develop a relationship with their team. In addition, they found that the alignment of expectations early in a transition will help reduce stress and increase the likelihood of a successful transition. Moreover, Manderscheid and Ardichvili (2008) anticipated that the development of relationships will further influence stress, which will help increase the likelihood of a successful transition.

Polarity, paradox, and dilemma

Polarities (paradoxes and dilemmas) have been the grist of human awareness and study for more than 4,000 years. Despite efforts to reduce problems and solutions to simple either/or configurations, the authors assert that the need for both/and, *polarity thinking* is necessary to maximize successful transitions. Freeman (2004) states that learning and actively using both/and, polarity thinking approaches, that intentionally identify polarities in play and use that awareness to understand and plan, alongside either/or thinking approaches would have a significant, positive impact on leaders as individuals and their team as a collective, in general, and especially during high stress transitional processes.

Webster's *Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* defines "polarity" as "the quality or condition inherent in a body that exhibits opposite properties or powers in opposite parts or directions or that exhibits contrasted properties or powers in contrasted parts

or directions" (p. 909). It defines "paradox" as "something (as a person, condition or act) with seemingly contradictory qualities or phases" (p. 853). Finally, the dictionary defines "dilemma" as "an argument presenting two or more equally conclusive alternatives" (p. 355). This article will focus on what Barry Johnson (1996), author of the Polarity Management™ model, refers to as "managing unsolvable problems", which inherently embody what is variously referred to as polarity, paradox, or dilemma. For simplicity, the authors will use the word "polarity".

To make polarities in organizations (and in life generally) more understandable, Johnson (1996) distinguishes between what he calls problems to solve and polarities to manage. Problems to solve, according to Johnson (1996), are those that present clear-cut, either/or choices within a known, limited time horizon. The choices are mutually exclusive and do not interpenetrate in any way. Polarities to manage are found in those circumstances where both options, although opposite in character, contribute to an inseparable whole. Polarities, by their nature, present problems that are not resolvable simply by researching and analyzing the two presented options and taking the "correct" action.

Freeman (2004) suggests that an example of a problem to solve is in hiring: whether to hire John Smith or Sarah West. Although a manager might wrestle with the seemingly equal credentials of the two candidates, neither is in any way dependent on the other choice for his or her future effectiveness. Moreover, Freeman (2004) suggests that polarities to manage are far from being as neat. He notes that polarities are found endlessly in those on-going circumstances where two interdependent opposites are often at play, neither of which is independently sufficient. Freeman (2004) explains that despite the best efforts to select the "better" of the two choices or paths, eventually, the benefits of the choice not selected become a pressing need for the individual or organization that made the choice. The underlying polarity simply will not go away, the solutions simply reflect either/or attempts at resolution. It might even be said that all either/or decisions exist within both/and polarity contexts. Terry (2001) makes the case clearly:

> Because polarities cannot be resolved, because we cannot dismiss one side or meld the two sides into something new and comprehensive, they can only be managed. The contrary pulls and pressures never cease. Leadership lodges in finding ways to affirm and live both poles fully and simultaneously. This is no small feat because it means accepting the paradox that results from the polarity (p. 350).

Some common examples of polarities faced by all leaders and organizations are stability/change, uniqueness/uniformity, quality/cost, part/whole, candor/diplomacy, centralized/decentralized, privacy/openness, individual/team, employee needs/organization needs, compassion/accountability, relationships/productivity, and planned/emergent (Freeman, 2004). The potential list is extensive and people are never free of the need to wrestle with one polarity or another. And yet, it is a natural, human tendency to act as if that is not so (Freeman, 2004).

Psychology: archetypes, consciousness and the tension of opposites. Carl Jung (1875-1961), a seminal thinker in the field of psychoanalysis and a protégé of Freud, was interested in the dynamic relationship between the conscious and the unconscious. Throughout his work is the awareness of polarity, which he typically referred to as opposites, and the dynamic interactions between the two poles of a pair of opposites. This is reflected, for example, in his basic theories about the dynamics of energy within

the psyche (Jung, 1973), the compensatory interactions between the conscious and unconscious (Jung, 1977), and his personality typology (Jung, 1976).

There is this natural human tendency of ego consciousness to "lean" in one direction over the other to minimize the tension between the poles. As the people repeatedly lean toward a particular pole, they tend to develop and strengthen their appreciation for its benefits and the skills connected to that pole's most effective use (Jung, 1976, 1977; Myers, 1993; Shapiro and Alexander, 1975; Stein, 1998). We develop a set of values connected to a particular pole within that pair of opposites. At the same time, again quite naturally, we develop a sense of the downsides and "dangers" of the opposite pole, the Shadow, because its oppositeness seems to pose a threat to our dominant view. The stronger our embedding in our preferred, dominant mode, the greater the potential for disturbance from the other side. Shapiro and Alexander (1975) describe this key dynamic as the Principle of Opposites where:

> [...] the relation between the two poles, it is postulated, in [*sic*] a function of the degree of "dominance" of the conscious pole. Dominance means a one-sided employment of the conscious attitude, which *prevents* the expression of the opposite unconscious attitude in consciousness [italics added]. With minimal dominance, when the unconscious attitude occasionally expresses itself, it does so in a compensatory or complementary way. It adds to or rounds out the conscious attitude in the latter's service. With increasing one-sidedness of the conscious attitude, however, the suppressed unconscious pole has a more opposing and destructive relation to its conscious opposite (Shapiro and Alexander, 1975, p. 38).

The tendency toward one-sidedness is an inherent characteristic of ego consciousness (Jung, 1976, 1977, 1978) and is actually an important element in individual differentiation and ego development. However, given the reality of polarity the excesses of this one-sidedness lead to a disturbance from the neglected pole and eventual loss of the strengths of the preferred pole (Johnson, 1996).

Multi-disciplinary perspectives on polarities relevant to leaders. Vaill (1990) writes of the reality of organizational management. He stated that there has been more of this rationalistic analysis, design, and control of human systems in the last 50 years in America than possibly anywhere else in possibly all of the rest of human history. Vaill (1990) invites us to explore the following research question: "Why in the face of all this do those living in the midst of these systems, including managers, continue to find them mysterious, recalcitrant, intractable, unpredictable, paradoxical, absurd, and – unless it's your own ox getting gored – funny? This is the "grand paradox of management" (Vaill, 1990, p. 77). Vaill continues: "paradoxes are conflicts and collisions among apparent truths. Paradoxes refuse to dissolve or be reconciled by such normal methods as getting more facts or being more careful with logic" (Vaill, 1990, p. 80) To that end, Firth and Leigh (1998) point out:

> Perhaps if we felt we had the time to take a step back and reflect on a larger view that encompasses both sides of such paradoxes [polarities], we might see creative solutions that are invisible at the moment. As it is, the speed at which things are moving only adds to the pressure we are under to make quick decisions. The paradoxes become unbearable and we hasten to act decisively, choosing one side or the other. The problem is that consistently selecting one aspect over the other in the end creates more tension, not less. The impulse we have to deal with paradox by taking "easy," pressurized, either/or decisions is understandable. It appears to resolve dilemma. It keeps moving things along. It means that we appear unequivocal and in

control. The other option, embracing the paradox, would leave us open to complexity, ambiguity and not-knowing. We'd be mad to try it (Firth and Leigh, 1998, p. xv).

From the field of general semantics, Hayakawa (1949) maintains:

[. . .] in such an expression as "We must listen to *both* sides of every question," there is an assumption, frequently unexamined, that every question has, fundamentally, only two sides. We tend to think in opposites, to feel that what is not "good" must be "bad" and what is not "bad" must be "good" [. . .] This tendency to see things in terms of two values only, affirmative and negative, good and bad, hot and cold, love and hate, may be termed the *two-valued orientation* (Hayakawa, 1949, p. 222).

Conflict around polarities is ubiquitous and natural. People are not easily able to maintain their grip on the exclusive, positive valuation of one side of an issue because as Cloke and Goldsmith (2000), writers in the field of conflict resolution, point out, "paradoxes and polarities are part of nature and human thinking. They state that it is impossible to resolve the 'conflict' between up and down, light and dark, plus and minus, inner and outer, without at the same time abolishing both" (p. 207). Not an easy shift for most people socialized in a culture that emphasizes "right" answers based on scientific inquiry.

Charles Handy (1994) says of his own mind shift that he no longer believes in a "Theory of Everything". He points out that the more turbulent the work, the more paradoxes there are, for example, during stressful leader transitions. Handy (1994) emphasizes that we can understand the puzzles of paradoxes, but we cannot make them go away or disappear completely (p. 12). Hampden-Turner (1990), in writing about dilemmas states that, "just as 'choice' hides within it two contrasting ideas, that of separating and that of combining values, so all values are really contrasts among which there are necessary dilemmas" (p. 3). Moreover, Hampden-Turner (1990) suggests that creating value lies in recognizing and acknowledging these dilemmas and combining the elements of both sides.

From the field of creativity studies, Rothenberg (1979) adds that the reality of polarities and the conflicts generated is natural, albeit disconcerting. In addition, Rothenberg states that:

Conflict is so ubiquitous and, in some ways, such an appropriate response to the complexity and flux of human experience that it is objectively best described only as a state of being [. . .] it is experienced both consciously and unconsciously as a sense of particular inner forces in opposition with each other, an opposition that sometimes abates, or is shunted away, or is resolved, or is replaced, or continues throughout the course of life (Rothenberg, 1979, p. 261).

Parker Palmer (1998), a writer in the field of education, writes:

We will not be able to teach [lead] in the power of paradox until we are willing to suffer the tension of opposites, until we understand that such suffering is neither to be avoided nor merely to be survived but must be actively embraced for the way it expands our own hearts (p. 85).

Vaill (1990) points out that:

"Systems thinking" is about the nearest thing we have in the management field to a direct embrace of and confrontation with paradox. Systems thinking does not flinch from complexity and is willing to be surprised by the "counterintuitive" character of many organizational events and processes. [However,] systems models aren't much better defended than any other models against two kinds of chronic and intense potentiality for paradox [. . .] permanent whitewater [. . .] [and] the action taker's own presence in the model (pp. 78-9).

Quinn (1988) describes the challenges facing managers and the need to develop a new form of managerial mastery:

> One of the most difficult things for most of us to understand is that organizations are dynamic. Particularly as one moves up the organizational ladder, matters become less tangible and less predictable. A primary characteristic of managing, particularly at higher levels, is the confrontation of change, ambiguity, and contradiction. Managers spend much of their time living in fields of perceived tensions. They are constantly forced to make trade-offs, and they find that there are no right answers. The higher one goes in an organization, the more exaggerated this phenomenon becomes. One-dimensional bromides (care for people, work harder, get control, be innovative) are simply half-truths representing single domains of action. What exists in reality are contradictory pressures, emanating from a variety of domains. The fact is important because much of the time the choice is not between good and bad, but between one good and another or between two unpleasant alternatives. In such cases the need is for complex, intuitive decisions, and many people fail to cope successfully with the resulting tension, stress, and uncertainty (p. 3).

Burns (1999) identifies nine polarities in six integrated health systems in Illinois and comments that: "the essence of leadership – from the perspective of polarity management – thus becomes managing ambiguities and multiple directions. Confronting these seemingly contradictory ideas provides a fruitful method to sort out confusions regarding the organization's direction and create meaning for the organization's participants" (p. 27). Furthermore, Hirschhorn (2001) stated that "to succeed, the project manager [in high-tech companies] should be aware of these polarities, learn skills for creating 'win-win' solutions when faced with them, and learn to identify the moment when one or another polarity has created unexpected tension in the flow of the work" (p. 16). Collins and Porras (2002), in their study of enduring visionary companies, described companies that do not brutalize themselves with the "Tyranny of the OR" – the purely rational view that says you can have either A OR B, but not both. They also reject having to make a choice between stability OR progress. Instead, they embrace the "Genius of the AND" – the paradoxical view that allows them to pursue both A AND B at the same time. They go on to say that "one of the most important steps you can take in building a visionary company is not an action, but a shift in perspective" (Collins and Porras, 2002, p. 40). The shift in perspective is one of polarity thinking, what the authors referred to above as the "Genius of the AND".

Drawing on a perspective of Oscar Wilde that the "way of paradoxes is the way of truth", the Price Waterhouse Change Integration Team (Price Waterhouse, 1996) wrote of some key principles for managing paradox:

- Positive change requires significant stability.
- To build an enterprise, focus on the individual.
- Focus directly on culture, indirectly.
- True empowerment requires forceful leadership.
- In order to build, you must tear down (pp. 38-54).

Farson (1997) also wrote at length about inherent paradoxes in leadership and the necessity for the capacity for dealing with endless, seeming absurdities. Moreover, Covey (1996), in writing about emotional intelligence, states that, "understanding and managing paradox, the dynamic tension between opposites, is the key to business

management and personal leadership" (p. 3). In this article, Covey (1996) identifies three paradoxes managers must contend with in order to lead effectively, "Paradox 1: You must cooperate in order to compete. Paradox 2: You must be changeless at the core in order to change. Paradox 3: You must celebrate diversity to achieve unity" (p. 3).

Houston (2000) wrote of the need to develop the skills to find balance in the paradoxes. Included in his descriptions of paradoxes were inter-dependent autonomy, flexible integrity, confident humility, cautious risk-taking, bifocal vision, wobbly steadiness, skeptical benefits, thick-skinned empathy, lowly aloofness, and childlike maturity (pp. 62-6). To that end, Pascale (1990) has written extensively about paradox and polarity in organizations and the significant contribution of polarity/paradoxical thinking. With further application of paradoxical thinking, Pascale's Seven S Framework described the seven important categories of manager attention:

(1) strategy;

(2) structure;

(3) systems;

(4) staff;

(5) style;

(6) shared values; and

(7) skills.

Within those seven categories, Pascale identified "contending opposites" that come into play:

(1) strategy: planned and opportunistic;

(2) structure: elitist and pluralist;

(3) systems: mandatory and discretionary;

(4) style: managerial and transformational;

(5) staff: collegiality and individuality;

(6) shared values: hard minds and soft hearts; and

(7) skills: maximize and meta-mize (Pascale, 1990, p. 53).

Further, as to the issue of balancing the poles of a polarity, and similar to Collins and Porras (2002), Pascale (1990) stated that "the term balance creates a great deal of confusion. For Westerners, balance means equilibrium. Of course, from a purely rational standpoint, one can have dynamic forms of balance (such as unstable equilibrium), but our associations with the term balance evokes images of rest and stability, not tension and instability. The problem, from a managerial point of view, is that if you want to stay in balance, you need to live out of balance. McGregor's' Theory Z isn't a static compromise between Theory X and Y. Rather, it entails being both X and Y over time. (pp. 33-4)

Johnson (1996) developed a practical model for identifying and utilizing polarities. He suggests that as leaders and organizations are constantly making decisions to address problems, many of those problems reside within polarities. Johnson (1996), as part of his Polarity Management model, offered a mental tool to differentiate between problems to solve and polarities to manage. Johnson expresses that a problem to solve

is an either/or situation where the choice of one option does not impact the other. A polarity to manage is a situation where the two poles are inseparable and interdependent. Johnson (1996) identified two criteria questions to determine whether a situation represents a problem to solve or polarity to manage:

(1) Is the difficulty ongoing?

- Problems to solve have a solution, which can be considered an end-point in a process.
- Polarities to manage do not get "solved". They are ongoing.

(2) Are there two poles which are inter-dependent?

- The solution in a problem to solve can stand alone.
- Polarities to manage involve opposites that are inseparable over time (Johnson, 1996, p. 82).

Johnson (1996) observed that many decisions made in organizations are problems to solve: they have a bounded time-horizon that ends with the decision and the "rightness" of either option stands independent of the choice not taken. The either/or perspective is the primary, privileged approach taught throughout schooling and reinforced by organizations especially operating in a rapidly changing world context. However, many circumstances truly are polarities that require a different approach. Johnson's (1996) model focused on working with and managing polarities in general and in organizational settings in particular. It provides a tool for conceptualizing polarities and for creating action steps to facilitate the ability to operate with the fullness of a polarity in mind.

The authors, in our review of the literature on leader transition and polarity, conclude that failure to approach leader transition through a polarity thinking mindset unnecessarily hampers, delays, or undermines effective leader transitions.

Critique of the literature

There is virtually no research on leader transition and polarity. The literature on leader transitions states that transitions are times of uncertainty and stress. Some of the uncertainty and stress could result from the inability to recognize and manage polarity, paradox, and dilemma. The literature does not acknowledge this connection nor does it specify the polarities that exist for leaders in general or leaders in transition. The literature on transitions suggests that transitions are time-limited. Gabarro (1987), Gilmore (1988), and Watkins (2003) all state that leader transitions last anywhere from one day to nine months and that there are phases associated with transition. At the same time, our research acknowledges that polarities are not time-bound nor do they apply to specific phases of a leader's transition (Johnson, 1996). To that end, a review of the literature leads us to believe that polarities are an inevitable part of the whole leadership and, for that matter, management experience.

Leader failure and subsequent turnover is high according to Challenger, Gray, and Christmas (2009), Liberum Research (2009), and Bradt *et al.* (2006). Moreover, leader transitions can be disruptive (Bear *et al.*, 2000) and costly for teams and organizations (Watkins, 2003). The authors highlighted in the literature express the value in engaging in polarity thinking. They also suggest that polarity thinking enhances personal and organizational effectiveness. From reviewing the literature on both

transition and polarity, the researchers believe that there is a strong relationship between leader in transition and the increased need for polarity thinking. It is our impression from reviewing the literature that the awareness of polarities and the use of polarity tools can help leaders be more effective during their transitions and beyond. The need for specific further research in this area seems warranted.

In the literature there are interventions to help transitioning leaders (Manderscheid, 2006). To that end, there are many consulting firms that offer professional coaching services to leaders in transition. Moreover, human resource development, human resource management, and organization development consultants offer leader assimilations to help transitioning leaders and their teams. Regarding polarity thinking, Johnson (1996) has developed criteria for identifying relevant polarities and a model to help leaders work with those polarities. If polarity, paradox, and dilemma exist for leaders in transition, then a polarity model like Johnson's (1996) might be another tool for practitioners to use to help leaders in transition.

Although the literature addresses both of these topics separately within the context of leadership development, there is no literature that speaks directly to both. The literature does not highlight the most common polarities for new leaders in transition. While some interventions exist to help transitioning leaders, interventions like Johnson's (1996) polarity model are virtually unexplored within the context of leader transitions.

Conclusions and implications

This study provides only preliminary suggestions to help transitioning leaders recognize polarity, paradox, and dilemmas during transition. To make more definitive statements and validate our integrated literature review more research needs to be conducted on leaders using polarity thinking during transition. It would be valuable to study the polarities that leaders encounter during their transitions into new roles. It would be insightful to understand how leaders in transition manage polarities. Moreover, it would be valuable to study the outcomes experienced by transitioning leaders working with Johnson's (1996) Polarity Management model. It would be valuable to illuminate the contextual constraints within the organization or how to recognize the contextual constraints of leveraging polarity thinking during transition. Furthermore, it would be advantageous to learn more about how experience, occupation, and personality influence polarity thinking in transitioning leaders. Exploring how transitioning leaders can move beyond their own either/or thinking and help facilitate polarity thinking within their teams could be valuable. Lastly, there may be value in differentiating between leaders and managers and studying if polarity, paradox, and dilemma are the different for each.

Based on personal experiences working with organizational leaders and training and organization development professionals, the authors believe that there is great potential for organizations that choose to train new leaders to develop skills in polarity thinking. If training and development professionals see value in polarity thinking for transitioning leaders and can respond with timely training interventions, it could have a positive impact on new leader effectiveness and subsequent organization performance.

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About the authors

Steven V. Manderscheid is a faculty member at Concordia University in the College of Business and Organizational Leadership. Dr Manderscheid holds a BS in Science and Technology with a minor in Business and Marketing, and a certification in Microcomputer Science from St Cloud State University, Minnesota. He also has a Master's degree in Human Resource Development (HRD) from the University of Minnesota and has completed his doctorate in Organization Development at the University of St Thomas in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Dr Manderscheid's publishing interests are in leadership development and strategic planning. Moreover, he has had the opportunity to present his research on leadership development in China, England, France, and Malaysia. Steven Manderscheid is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: manderscheid@csp.edu

Peter D. Freeman has over 20 years' experience as a psychotherapist, coach, and mediator; educator and trainer; and consultant to leaders and teams. Dr Freeman has helped individuals, couples and teams identify, develop, and integrate the various aspects of themselves, their interpersonal relationships, and their team processes. Dr Freeman holds Masters' degrees in social work (MSW) and business administration (MBA), and a doctorate in organization learning and development (EdD). He received his Licensed Independent Clinical Social Work (LICSW) licensure in 1992. Dr Freeman was full-time a faculty member and administrator for the University of St Thomas and Saint Catherine University School of Social Work, Master of Social Work Program for 11 years.