

A Review of Paradoxical Leadership Behavior: Definition, Measurement, Antecedent and Effect

Qirui Huang

University of Newcastle (Singapore), Singapore, Singapore
hqr257014@gmail.com

Abstract. As the organizational environment becomes increasingly complex, leaders often need to deal with paradoxical demands in their management practices. Paradoxical leadership behavior (PLB) is a new type of leadership behavior that aims to enhance leadership effectiveness by simultaneously resolving and integrating the paradoxical demands of the organization and its employees. This study conducted a systematic review and synthesis of the relevant research on PLB. First, this study reviewed the definition and measurement scales of PLB. Second, this study has systematically reviewed the main theoretical perspectives of the PLB research. Furthermore, this study has reviewed the research results on the antecedents and the impacts of PLB. The research on the impacts of PLB covers the impacts at the individual, team and organizational levels. Finally, this study has proposed the future directions for the PLB research, such as further exploring its antecedent variables, investigating the impacts of PLB at the team and organizational levels, and exploring its influence on leaders themselves.

Keywords: Paradoxical leadership behavior, Paradox theory, Employee creativity, Performance

1. Introduction

In the dynamic and complex modern organizational context, leaders frequently confront paradoxical demands from both organizations and employees. For example, leaders must maintain authority to ensure organizational stability while demonstrating empathy to motivate employees' initiative; they must adhere to the organization's unified standards to guarantee fairness while accommodating employees' individual differences to enhance adaptability. Scholars have argued that such paradoxical demands are not accidental but rather a normal part of organizational operations [1,2]. Faced with such managerial practices, traditional "either-or" management logic and leadership behaviors are encountering significant challenges. Under such circumstances, paradoxical leadership behavior has emerged, offering insights for leaders to address and resolve the paradoxical demands encountered in managerial practices.

Paradoxical leadership behavior (PLB) refers to a leadership style in which leaders adopt behaviors that appear contradictory yet are actually interrelated to deal with the paradoxical work demands of organizations and employees [3]. PLB is rooted in the "Yin-Yang philosophy" of traditional Chinese culture, advocating that when confronted with paradoxical demands within an

organization, leaders should abandon the “either-or” mindset and instead adopt a “both-and” mindset [3]. Currently, scholars have primarily examined PLB from two perspectives: its antecedents and its effects. Regarding antecedents, one study found that extraversion and openness to experience were positively related to PLB, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism were negatively related to it [4]. Regarding effects, scholars have demonstrated that PLB can foster employees’ creative deviance [5], proactive work behavior [6], and innovative behavior [2]. Other studies have further shown that PLB enhances team-level innovation [7].

The existing research has provided a solid foundation for scholars to understand PLB, which is deeply rooted in Eastern cultural philosophy. However, some limitations still exist. For instance, up to now, no study has systematically and comprehensively reviewed the existing research on PLB. On the one hand, such a systematic review enables scholars to have a comprehensive understanding of the research on PLB. This can lay a solid foundation for the subsequent theoretical development and empirical research of PLB. On the other hand, a comprehensive review can enable scholars to identify the limitations in the PLB research. This can provide new directions for future research. Therefore, this study conducted a literature review, systematically reviewing the PLB research over the past decade.

This study mainly includes these aspects: First, we introduced the definition and dimensions of PLB as well as the classic measurement scales. Second, we have summarized the main theoretical perspectives in the existing PLB research, and these theories provide support for our understanding of the impacts of PLB. Third, we have compiled the research results of the antecedent variables and the outcome variables in the PLB study. Finally, based on the existing research, we proposed the future research directions for PLB.

2. Definition and measurement scales of PLB

2.1. Definition

Zhang et al. drew on traditional Chinese Yin-Yang philosophy and proposed the concept of PLB [3]. They define PLB as a seemingly contradictory but essentially interrelated leadership behavior of leaders. Through these behaviors, leaders simultaneously meet the paradoxical demands of the organization and its employees. For instance, organizations often advocate for standardized management to ensure fairness and consistency, but employees typically seek personalized treatment and flexibility. Leaders who demonstrate PLB not only clearly communicate the organization’s rules and expectations, but also respect the individuality of employees and their unique working methods. PLB including five core dimensions [3]:

Treating subordinates uniformly while permitting individualization: The leader manages and leads subordinates according to unified rules, but allows them to handle and complete tasks in their own personalized ways.

Combining self-centeredness with other-centeredness: The leader positions himself at the center of the team or organization, but also allows subordinates to share the central role.

Maintaining decision control while enabling autonomy: The leader maintains control over the decisions but allows subordinates to fully express their own viewpoints, while respecting the autonomy of the subordinates.

Enforcing work requirements while permitting flexibility: The leader sets clear work requirements for the subordinates but does not interfere with the methods and approaches they use to complete the tasks.

Maintaining both distance and closeness: The leader maintains a hierarchical distance from the subordinates but is not overly superior.

It can be seen that these five dimensions collectively embody the underlying logic of PLB, which is to integrate the conflicting elements in management practices and achieve synergy. Essentially, PLB transcends the “either-or” management logic and adopts a “both-and” thinking approach, enabling leaders to effectively manage the tensions within the organization. Therefore, PLB has become a new topic in organizational behavior studies.

2.2. Measurement scales

At present, two primary measurement scales are commonly used to assess PLB. First, when proposing the PLB concept, Zhang et al. developed a 22-item measurement scale that encompasses the five dimensions [3]. Specifically:

- The “treating subordinates uniformly while permitting individualization” dimension includes five items, such as “I treat subordinates equally while taking into account each person’s individual characteristics.”

- The “combining self-centeredness with other-centeredness” dimension also includes five items, such as “I am confident in my own ideas and beliefs but also recognize that I can learn from others.”

- The “enforcing work requirements while permitting flexibility” dimension comprises four items, such as “I set high standards for work performance but allow subordinates to make mistakes.”

- The “maintaining decision control while enabling autonomy” dimension comprises four items, such as “I make decisions on major issues but delegate minor ones to subordinates.”

- The “maintaining both distance and closeness” dimension includes four items, such as “I maintain a distance from subordinates but am not overbearing.”

This classic scale has been widely recognized and adopted by scholars in subsequent studies [8,5].

Second, building on Zhang et al. [3], Fürstenberg et al. developed a concise five-item version of the PLB scale [9]. Each item represents one of the five dimensions of the original construct, offering a more parsimonious tool suitable for large-scale empirical research. Empirical evidence has shown that this scale displays satisfactory reliability and validity.

3. Theoretical perspectives of PLB research

3.1. Paradox theory

The paradox theory is one of the main theoretical perspectives in the PLB research. The paradox theory proposes that an organization is a collection of paradoxical demands. For instance, in management practices, there are numerous contradictory situations such as control and authorization, stability and change, standardization and innovation. Although these opposing factors seem incompatible, they are actually interdependent and are crucial for the effectiveness and long-term development of the organization [1]. From this perspective, an effective leader should not make a choice between the opposing extremes. Instead, they should integrate these paradoxical elements into a framework to achieve synergy. Therefore, based on the paradox theory, Zhang et al. proposed PLB, and suggested that leaders should accept the paradoxes in management practices instead of adopting an either-or approach [3]. As scholars have found that PLB enhances employees’ work engagement by simultaneously increasing goal clarity and work autonomy [9]. This dual influence

mechanism reflects the core idea of the paradox theory: organizations and leaders can achieve growth by balancing and integrating paradoxes, rather than by making trade-offs.

3.2. Social learning theory

The social learning theory provides another important theoretical perspective for scholars to understand the impact of PLB on employees [4,5]. The social learning theory was proposed by Bandura [10]. According to this theory, individuals will observe, learn and imitate the behaviors of others (such as leaders), and eventually these behaviors will be manifested through their own actions. In the context of PLB, employees can observe how leaders address the paradoxical demands they encounter at work through paradoxical leadership behaviors. This process may influence and shape their “paradox mindset”, a cognitive and thinking approach that accepts paradoxes and attempts to find opportunities within them. Yang et al. found that the PLB of leaders can prompt employees to develop paradox mindset, which in turn positively influences employees’ creative deviance. That is, when their suggestions and ideas are rejected by the leaders, they will still invest time and energy in continuously improving and developing, rather than giving up [5]. From the perspective of social learning theory, PLB is not only a management approach for leaders, but also a social learning mechanism within the organization. The PLB of leaders will influence employees’ cognitive frameworks and behavioral responses towards paradoxes or tensions through this mechanism.

3.3. Self-regulation theory

The self-regulation theory has also been employed by scholars to explain the mechanism and outcomes of PLB. The self-regulation theory proposes that individuals constantly monitor, evaluate, and adjust their behaviors in order to align with their personal goals or the requirements of the environment [11]. From this theoretical framework, PLB may play the role of initiating the self-regulation process for both leaders and followers. In the studies on leaders, Chen et al. found that PLB can stimulate leaders’ job crafting behaviors, which in turn enhances their task performance [12]. This indirect effect is stronger when leaders with high career resilience. In the studies on employees, Fürstenberg et al. found that PLB may have negative effects on employees. For instance, PLB can make subordinates perceive that the leader is unpredictable. This perception will increase the pressure on employees to self-regulate, which manifests as emotional exhaustion, psychological withdrawal, and even insomnia [13]. When employees with high cognitive flexibility or self-regulatory capacity, these effects will be weakened. In summary, the self-regulation theory provides an important theoretical framework for explaining how individuals, including leaders and followers, adapt and respond in a PLB leadership environment.

4. The antecedents and impacts of PLB

4.1. The antecedents of PLB

There are relatively few studies on the antecedents of PLB. Zhang et al. found that holistic thinking and integrative complexity are positively related to PLB [3]. This indicates that leaders with the cognitive ability to recognize and reconcile opposing viewpoints are more likely to engage in PLB. Furthermore, from the perspective of personality traits, Ishaq et al. investigated the relationship between the Big Five personality traits and PLB, and found that extraversion and openness to experience are positively related to PLB, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism are

negatively related to PLB [4]. In conclusion, there are relatively few research results on the antecedents of PLB at present. Scholars mainly focused on the influence of leaders' cognition and personality traits on PLB. Environmental factors, such as organizational culture and environmental uncertainty, have not been given attention.

4.2. The impacts of PLB

Research on the impacts of PLB forms the core of existing studies. The impacts of PLB have been examined at three levels: the individual, team, and organizational levels.

4.2.1. Individual level

At the individual level, PLB has been shown to exert significant influence on both leaders and employees. For leaders, Chen et al. found that PLB enhances leaders' task performance by fostering proactive job crafting behaviors. However, this remains the only study to date that focuses on the effects of PLB on leaders themselves [12]. At the employee level, existing research has found that PLB has a positive impact on various work attitudes and behaviors of employees. For instance, PLB can enhance employees' creative deviations [5], innovative behavior, proactive behavior [3,14], job performance [14], adaptive behavior, and job proficiency [3]. Moreover, PLB can increase employees' work engagement [9], job satisfaction [13], and reduce employees' emotional exhaustion, psychological withdrawal, and insomnia [13]. In conclusion, research at the individual level indicates that PLB can bring numerous positive impacts to employees. However, when employees perceive that leaders who exhibit PLB are unpredictable or inconsistent, PLB may also cause psychological stress for the employees [13].

4.2.2. Team level

At the team level, empirical evidence remains scarce. One study by Zhang et al. found that PLB enhances team-level innovation by fostering team ambidexterity [15], that is, the simultaneous pursuit of exploration and exploitation. This positive effect is further enhanced when leaders clearly articulate a compelling team vision. These findings indicate that PLB may help teams effectively manage internal tensions and integrate diverse perspectives to achieve collective innovation. Nonetheless, additional research is needed to understand how PLB influences team processes under complex and dynamic conditions, such as communication, cohesion, and decision-making.

4.2.3. Organizational level

At the organizational level, only a handful of studies have examined the broader implications of PLB. Zhang and Han extended the PLB concept to propose Paradoxical Leadership Behavior in Long-term Corporate Development (PLB-CD)—a construct that reflects leadership behaviors balancing short-term efficiency with long-term sustainability [16]. PLB-CD comprises five dimensions: balancing efficiency and development, maintaining organizational stability and flexibility, attending to both shareholder and stakeholder interests, and adapting to as well as shaping collective forces in the external environment. Their research demonstrated that PLB-CD positively influences firms' R&D investment, market share, and corporate reputation. These findings suggest that paradoxical leadership principles can be effectively applied beyond individual and team dynamics, offering strategic value at the organizational level. However, systematic empirical evidence in this domain remains scarce and necessitates further exploration.

5. Discussion

5.1. Conclusions

This study systematically reviewed the existing research on PLB. First, this study clarified the classic connotation of PLB and pointed out that PLB is a leadership behavior and theory rooted in traditional Chinese Yin-Yang philosophy. Second, this study reviewed the two currently authoritative measurement scales of PLB. Including the classic 22-item scale developed by Zhang et al. [3] and the five-item version proposed by Fürstenberg et al. [9]. Third, in terms of theoretical perspectives, this study found that the theories of paradox theory, social learning theory, and self-regulation theory have been utilized by scholars to explain the theoretical basis of PLB and its impacts on individuals. In addition, Furthermore, this study systematically reviewed the empirical research on PLB from both the perspective of antecedent variables and outcome variables. Among them, the outcome variables cover three perspectives: the individual level, the team level, and the organizational level. Finally, this study has proposed promising directions for future research on PLB, including conducting further research on antecedent variables, exploring the impact of PLB on leaders themselves, and expanding the research on the influence of PLB at the team and organizational levels. In conclusion, this study provides support for scholars to further understand and comprehend the PLB, which is highly characterized by Eastern culture. At the same time, it offers insights for scholars to conduct further research in this area.

5.2. Future research directions

Despite the expanding body of PLB research, several critical gaps remain to be addressed in future studies.

First, research on the antecedents of PLB remains inadequate. Existing studies have primarily focused on leaders' cognitive styles and personality traits, such as holistic thinking, integrative complexity, and the Big Five personality traits [3,4]. These studies provide initial insights into the individual-level determinants of PLB. However, PLB is likely shaped by multiple factors beyond individual dispositions. Future research should explore the role of contextual and situational factors in shaping PLB, including organizational culture, structural characteristics, and institutional environments. For instance, do collectivistic cultures amplify leaders' paradoxical tendencies? Do uncertain or highly dynamic environments facilitate the adoption of PLB? Expanding the scope of antecedent research will help establish a more comprehensive explanatory framework and offer practical implications for leadership selection and development.

Second, research on the effects of PLB at the team and organizational levels remains inadequate. Most empirical studies have focused on micro-level outcomes (e.g., employee creativity and engagement), whereas macro-level effects remain largely unexplored. A handful of studies have demonstrated that PLB can foster team ambidexterity and organizational innovation [2,16], yet these findings remain fragmented. Given that paradoxical thinking may play a critical role in reconciling tensions between short-term performance and long-term sustainability, future research should investigate how PLB influences team dynamics, organizational strategy, and cross-level processes. Multilevel and longitudinal research designs, along with cross-cultural comparisons, could further clarify the boundary conditions under which PLB enhances collective effectiveness.

Third, the potential costs of PLB for leaders themselves merit greater attention. Because PLB requires leaders to continuously balance and integrate opposing demands, it may deplete their cognitive, emotional, and temporal resources. Although prior research has demonstrated that PLB

can enhance leaders' task performance [13], it may also lead to heightened psychological strain or resource depletion. Zhang et al. noted this possibility, yet empirical evidence remains scarce [3]. Future research should therefore investigate how PLB influences leaders' well-being, emotional exhaustion, and career satisfaction, as well as the conditions that alleviate these effects—including psychological capital, resilience, and organizational support. Exploring these “double-edged” effects will enrich our understanding of PLB and offer organizations actionable guidance for fostering sustainable leadership.

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