The Paradoxical Leader

Idea In Short

Leaders who treat conflicting demands as either/or choices lose ground the moment conditions turn uncertain. The executives who hold up best combine traits that look mismatched on paper:

> decisiveness with humility, a command of strategy with a feel for execution, technological fluency with genuine regard for people, global scale with local judgment and political skill with unbending integrity

None of these pairings cancel each other out. Each strengthens the other. The immediate takeaway for any executive team is straightforward:

> stop screening leadership candidates and successors for a single dominant trait and start testing for the ability to hold two at once without losing function

Adam Silver, Jacinda Ardern, Satya Nadella, Jack Ma and Larry Fink each demonstrated one of these five contrasts under real pressure and their choices offer a working model for what to look for and how to develop it.

An American screenwriter once wrote that the test of a first-rate mind is holding two opposing ideas at once while still functioning. The same test applies to leadership and it separates executives who merely cope with disruption from those who use it to build lasting advantage. The best leaders do not choose between conflicting demands. They meet both

at once and the tension between them becomes a source of judgment rather than a source of paralysis.

This is a harder standard than it sounds. Most leadership development still trains people to pick a lane:

> be decisive or be consultative, think big picture or manage details, champion technology or champion people.1

The researchers who coined the "both/and" framing argue that leaders who force a choice between competing demands end up managing neither well, while those who hold both reach what they call dynamic equilibrium, a state where contradiction fuels progress instead of blocking it. Five contrasts show up again and again among leaders who get this right and each is worth examining on its own terms.

The humble hero

Some leaders carry the confidence to make hard calls under pressure and the humility to admit when a call needs correcting. These are not sequential behaviors, confidence first and humility later if things go wrong. They operate together, in the same decision, at the same time. A leader with only confidence pushes forward regardless of new information. A leader with only humility never commits to a position firmly enough to be useful.

The tension resolves through self-belief paired with a genuine acceptance of being wrong. Acting under real uncertainty requires enough conviction to move before all the facts are in and enough humility to say so out loud rather than pretending otherwise. Leaders who lack this balance tend to freeze under ambiguity, wait for certainty that never arrives, or charge ahead with a false confidence that later collapses under its own weight.

Adam Silver, commissioner of the National Basketball Association [NBA], offers a clear example. When the league faced its first confirmed coronavirus case among players in March 2020, Silver moved fast, consulting owners, players and health officials in the same stretch of hours that he was also deciding to suspend the season.2 He was explicit that he

could not guarantee the decision was correct and he made it anyway, then kept communicating as new information came in. That combination, not the decision alone, is what set the tone for the rest of the sports industry.

The strategic executor

Some leaders are equally comfortable surveying an organization from the highest vantage point and working through the granular mechanics on the ground. They master the big picture without losing the details that determine whether the big picture actually happens. This is different from delegation. A leader who only sets direction and hands off implementation is not executing a strategy, just hoping someone else will.

> Leaders who dynamically reallocate resources to higher-potential opportunities and keep doing it under pressure, consistently outperform peers who wait for certainty before acting

That framing comes from research on how leaders navigate volatile periods and it captures why macro thinking without micro follow-through tends to stall.3 Leaders who focus purely on preserving what already exists and leaders who spend all their time theorizing about long-term outcomes, both miss the window to reposition while conditions are still moving.

Jacinda Ardern, prime minister of New Zealand, illustrates the pairing at a national scale. After her country reported its first coronavirus case in February 2020, she set out a four-level alert system, a macro framework simple enough for five million citizens to understand and then executed it with granular consistency at the community level.4 New Zealand declared itself free of community transmission within months of the framework's rollout, a result that depended as much on the disciplined execution as on the strategy itself.

The humanist technologist

Some leaders are as fluent with technology as they are attentive to what the people using it actually need. This pairing matters more than it might appear, because most technology-led change efforts fail not on the technical merits but on how people experience the disruption.

A leader who only champions the technology misses the resistance building quietly beneath the surface. A leader who only tends to people's comfort risks falling behind on capability.

Satya Nadella, chief executive of Microsoft, has built a reputation on treating employee experience as a determinant of whether technological change actually lands, not as a separate concern from the technology itself. During periods of significant workplace disruption, he has communicated directly and repeatedly with employees, framing leadership responsibility in terms of listening first rather than announcing decisions from a distance. The company has appeared consistently among rankings of the strongest employers even through years of major technology-driven restructuring.5 That outcome does not happen by accident when a company is simultaneously pushing hard on technical transformation.

The global localist

Some leaders think at a global scale while acting with local specificity and this pairing has become more valuable, not less, as supply chains and customer expectations have grown more fragmented. A leader who understands only international best practice misses the ground realities that make execution work in a given market. A leader who understands only the local market misses the coordination and scale that larger, more distributed competitors bring to bear.

Jack Ma, founder of Alibaba, showed this balance clearly during the early coronavirus period, when he became a driving force behind medical equipment shipments to dozens of countries even as supply chains were breaking down elsewhere. He worked within China's own domestic priorities first, a locally grounded constraint, then extended donations of masks and test kits to nations across Asia and Latin America.6 Running both scopes, local obligation and global reach, in the same stretch of weeks required judgment that a purely global or purely local approach would not have produced.

The virtuous politician

Some leaders negotiate diverging viewpoints toward consensus while keeping their own principles intact. Politician here is not a pejorative, it describes the skill of influencing a broad set of stakeholders with competing interests without trading away the integrity that makes the influence durable in the first place. A leader who only holds firm principles

without the negotiating skill to bring others along accomplishes little. A leader who only negotiates without firm principles ends up trusted by no one.

Larry Fink, chief executive of BlackRock, has pushed the asset management industry toward sustained positions on long-term issues such as retirement security and climate risk through his annual letters to chief executives and investors, while continuing to negotiate directly with the corporate leaders whose businesses those positions affect.7 He has held that combination steady across market cycles, which is a harder test of integrity than holding it during a single favorable moment.

Building the capacity deliberately

None of these five contrasts are fixed personality traits that a person either has or lacks from birth. Each is a discipline:

> the ability to switch between two modes as circumstances demand, rather than defaulting permanently to one

Organizations that name these pairings explicitly, humility with resolve, strategy with execution, technology with humanity, global with local, negotiation with integrity, can screen for them in succession planning and coach for them in leadership development.

The alternative is what most organizations already do by default, which is optimize hiring and promotion for a single dominant trait and hope the rest follows. That approach produces leaders who function well in stable conditions and struggle the moment two demands pull in different directions at once, which is precisely the condition most executives now operate under continuously rather than occasionally. The five leaders profiled here did not eliminate contradiction from their roles. They used it.

- 1Both/And Leadership
- 2Adam Silver Says NBA Hiatus Likely To Last 'At Least' 30 Days
- 3How Ambidextrous Leaders Manage Through Volatile Times
- 4How Jacinda Ardern Tackled Public Health Crises In New Zealand

- 5Glassdoor's Best Places To Work
- 6Jack Ma Sending Masks And Other Aid To Asia, Latin America
- 7Larry Fink's Annual Chairman's Letter To Investors

Summary

Five contrasts separate leaders who merely survive disruption from those who use it to build advantage:

> humility paired with resolve, strategic vision paired with operational grip, technological fluency paired with regard for people, global reach paired with local judgment and negotiating skill paired with integrity. None of these pairings resolve into a single safer trait

Adam Silver, Jacinda Ardern, Satya Nadella, Jack Ma and Larry Fink each show what it looks like to hold two demands at once rather than pick one and hope. Organizations that promote and coach for this capacity build leadership benches that hold up when conditions turn uncertain again and they will. Boards evaluating succession plans should ask which of these five contrasts a candidate has actually been tested on, not merely which single strength appears on a resume.