Paradox As the New Normal
Essays on framing, managing and sustaining organizational tensions

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Meta
defined, the idiom “you cannot have your cake and eat it too” describes fundamental tensions at
the heart of today’s organizations. Engaging tensions may seem implausible or even impossible.
However, there exists evidence, given the increasingly complex
environment, that both are vital to
organizational success. To succeed, therefore, requires that organizations be able to manage, embrace,
and transcend tensions. Consequently, the overall purpose of this thesis is to advance our understanding
of tensions in general, and in creativity-based contexts in particular.

The purpose is achieved through five self-contained yet complementary papers. The conceptual parts,
which resulted in three papers, include a literature review on tensions, from which inspirati
ons and ideas
from different disciplines have been drawn in order to add value to the literature specifically addressing
tensions. In parallel with this conceptual work, I explore tensions (a paradox, to be specific) in a specific
context (architecture), an effort that results in two papers. Consequently, in the conceptual work, I focus
on what “could be,” while in the empirical work I focus on “what is.”

The findings highlight that first, theorizing about tensions calls for conceptual clarity. This was
accomplished by identifying and then assembling core features that scholars use to conceptualize
tensions. In doing so, the thesis contributes to the ways in which tensions are “represented” by reducing
collision and by making the assumptions behind tensions clear. Second, the thesis establishes that
dealing with tensions productively requires a shift from thinking (and doing) based on a contingency
approach towards contemporary approaches. Given the nature of the empirical context and the
challenges therein, a true shift of this order necessitates framing tensions as paradoxes. In the same vein,
the thesis indicates the need to rethink the central question; currently, that question is predominantly
“how can we accommodate both A and B?” Given the nature of the empirical context, the question can
be shifted to “why not C?” Doing so breaks away from focusing on the existing competing options and
turns the focus towards something new. Moreover, dealing with tensions through this lens prevents
neutralizing them and settling for a bland halfway point between one extreme and the other. Third, the
thesis challenges the taken-for-granted assumption in the literature that dealing with tensions as
paradoxes necessitates temporal compromise, separation, or resolution. In the thesis, I argue that dealing
with paradoxes is possible without separating. This is so because simultaneously engaging paradoxes
allows organizations to tap their energy and opens up new possibilities. In this case, the thesis
contributes to the literature by empirically studying architectural firms. This empirical study shows that
dealing with paradoxes requires an intricate interplay between what I call paradoxical mindsets and
practices—which comprise organization members’ emotions, cognition, and behaviors—and
organizational conditions that embed such mindsets and practices into the organization’s system.
Fourth, the thesis makes a point that not all tensions require an action move. Accordingly, the thesis
establishes that dealing with paradoxes may not necessarily entail action moves but rather a space to
engage in dialogue so as to connect opposites, move outside of them, and situate them in a new
relationship. In doing so, the presence of tension is appreciated and complementarity is sought. That is,
the challenge is to be able to embrace paradoxes and not to resolve them.

The thesis concludes that although it is challenging to tap the power of paradoxes, it is not impossible.
This thesis shows that this goal can be accomplished by accepting that paradoxes are normal, and then
seeking to transcend them. In so doing, organizations can unleash the “slices of genius” in their
members.