

## ALLEVIATING THE SUFFERING OF PARADOX BY MAPPING POLARITIES

Brian Emerson, PhD

In 1989, Poole and Van De Ven predicted future significant advances in organizational theory would “require ways to address the paradoxes inherent in human beings and their social organizations” (p. 562). It seems they were right. In the past several decades, there has been an increasing focus on paradox in both leadership and organizations. The discussion about paradox — the need to effectively attend to opposing, yet interrelated, tensions over time, and the research suggesting the benefits of dealing with it effectively have become robust (W.K. Smith & Lewis, 2011). However, while many talk about the importance of navigating paradox, few are offering pragmatic methods how to do so.

One exception is Barry Johnson’s work with polarity maps. The process of mapping provides a practical way for groups to deal with polarities and avoid the negative repercussions so often associated with paradox (Quinn & Cameron, 1988; Tracy, 2004). Or does it?

While it is relatively easy to find anecdotal evidence from consultants who have used various forms of polarity maps over the past two decades, there is little empirical evidence as to how, or if, mapping polarities is effective in helping address competing needs. That lack of evidence sparked the desire for this research. What happens when a group uses a polarity map to make sense of paradox? Does using a map make a difference, and if so how? What follows is a short description of the research and the theories it produced.

### THE STUDY

Because the desire was to find out “what’s really going on” for groups that use polarity maps, this study used a Grounded Theory research methodology. Grounded Theory is a good choice for research not trying to prove or predict anything. Instead, the methodology allows one to examine something in depth so that a theory can be created to describe what is happening with the topic being studied.

To conduct this type of study, a researcher interviews people to explore their experience of the phenomenon. Interviews are conducted in a non-leading fashion, so instead of a prescribed list of questions, the interviewer simply digs more deeply into the participant’s experience. Interviews are conducted until the researcher begins to hear the same things time and time again and thinks there is enough data to move to analysis. Typically, Grounded Theory researchers interview 12-20 people before final data analysis.

During analysis, information from all of the interviews is sorted, putting common ideas together into groups. These themes are then fit together to explain the experience. This creates a theory that can then be used to understand the phenomenon more deeply.

For this particular study, 25 participants from the United States and Canada were recruited from past clients of Polarity Mastery alumni. The initial interview prompt was, “Tell me about your experience using a polarity map.” From there, participants described their experience and follow-up questions were asked to dig deeper into their responses. There was not a prescribed set of questions that led participants in any particular direction or that searched for specific data. After talking to 14 people, the data began to repeat itself, so final analysis began using the method describe above. The transcripts of each interview were coded, and these codes were grouped into themes. As the themes began to connect, two different yet related theories emerged outlined in Figures 1 and 2 and discussed below.

As part of a Grounded Theory study, after theories are created to describe what is going on, the researcher investigates literature from various fields as a way to explore and explain why it might be going on. The sections below discuss the possible “why” for each stage of the theories of Suffering Paradox and Navigating Paradox. For a more detailed description of Grounded Theory, this study’s methodology, or the two theories it produced, please reach out to the author directly at [brian@andiron.com](mailto:brian@andiron.com).

## SUFFERING PARADOX

The first theory that emerged from the research is an explanation of what happens when groups are Suffering Paradox. Not surprisingly, when describing their experience with polarity maps, participants often juxtaposed their stories against what happened in groups that did not use polarity maps. From the descriptions of the latter, a theory emerged about what happens when groups encounter a paradoxical situation but do not have a productive way to make sense of it.

The process of Suffering Paradox (see Figure 1 below) begins when a group experiences a paradoxical situation and moves forward without some sort of sensemaking tool to map the polarity. That is, they approach the polarity as any other problematic situation. In these instances, it seems people in the group can begin Preferring one pole over the other and then Attaching themselves to it. In order to make themselves right, they begin looking for ways to make the Other pole, and the people who prefer it, wrong. This leads to an Either/Or-ing mindset that creates a Destructive Tension impacting results, communication, morale, and relationships. Although they are not necessarily linear in nature, the phases are presented sequentially here for ease of discussion.

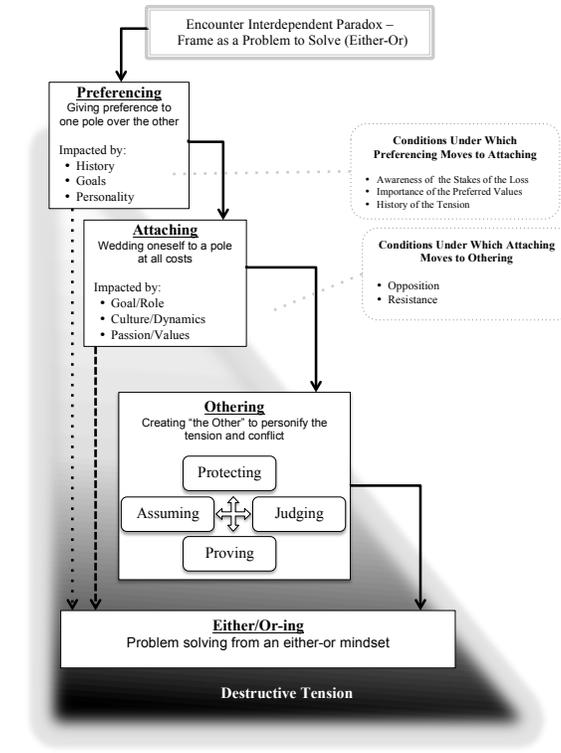


Figure 1. The process of Suffering Paradox to experience Destructive Tension.



**PREFERENCING.** When encountering paradox, it seems that individuals quickly begin Preferencing one pole over the other. There are several explanations as to why this might be. First, at least for groups from Western cultures, are the traditions of either/or logic (Hampden-Turner, 1981), the belief that the world requires tradeoffs—you “can’t have your cake and eat it too” (Eisenhardt & Westcott, 1988), and the need to maintain an orderly society that has right or wrong alternatives (Johnson, personal communication, 2012).

Another possible explanation can be found in personal construct theory, which suggests we often make sense of the world by using bipolar constructs such as safe-unsafe, smart-stupid, etc. (Procter, 2009). These quick, and often unconscious, decisions create the platform from which we solve problems and take action (Horley, 2012). While breaking the world into discrete opposites can be beneficial, it can also lead to bias and entrenchment (Bartunek, 1988; Lewis, 2000), which is what happens as individuals begin Attaching.

**ATTACHING.** Attaching occurs when individuals begin to associate part of “who they are” with the pole they prefer. This is not surprising given individuals often define part of themselves based on bipolar values (Quinn & Cameron, 1988). For example, an individual who values speed over deliberateness might pride themselves on being someone who “gets the job done quickly,” thereby Attaching part of their identity to that pole. This finding about how polarities play a part in our identity and ego formation is explored more deeply in the book, *Navigating Polarities* (Emerson & Lewis, 2019).

Attaching creates what Ford and Ford (1994) refer to as the logic individuals use to determine who they are and who they are not. These logics are typically unconscious until they are brought to light by an event, which, in the case of paradox, happens when people coming into contact with individuals attached to the other pole. This leads to Othering.

**OTHERING.** A likely explanation for Othering is disidentification—defining who one is by what one is not (Fiol, Pratt, & O’Connor, 2009). For example, part of how one understands being Brazilian is that they are not Japanese. With paradox, when individuals Attach to a pole, part of how they make sense of themselves is because they are not the Other pole. This can create an “us vs. them” mentality that leads to Protecting, Proving, Assuming, and Judging.

When an individual or group’s identity or point of view is threatened, they quickly move to defend the values that make up their logic and delegitimize the Other as a way to maintain one’s own legitimacy (Fiol et al., 2009). This seems to hold true when Suffering Paradox, as people begin Protecting the pole they have Attached to and work at Judging and Proving the Other wrong. In these situations, groups seem to focus more on the negation of the Other than on working to find a solution to the problem at hand.

Another key aspect of Othering involves individuals Assuming they fully understand the point of view of those Attached to the opposite pole, which Quinn and Cameron (1988) have suggested is a main source of the problems that stem from paradox. These assumptions are used as further ammunition in Proving and Judging which virtually guarantees the Other will be vilified (Johnson, personal communication, 2012). This us-against-them mentality serves to entrench groups in their positions (K. K. Smith & Berg, 1987) and leads the group to approach problem solving through Either/Or-ing.

**EITHER/OR-ING.** The Either/Or-ing mindset is based in hierarchical logic, which assumes one pole is good and the other pole is bad (Van de Ven & Poole, 1988), one is right and the other is wrong. It can begin at any point when Suffering Paradox, and does not require Preferencing, Attaching, or Othering. Instead of an integrative solution, individuals who are Either/Or-ing see the paradox as a win-lose situation in which the most powerful group will prevail. The adverse emotions inherent in such a competition, especially if they are



compounded by Preferencing, Attaching, and Othering, lead to a negativity experienced as the Destructive Tension associated with Suffering Paradox.

**DESTRUCTIVE TENSION.** It appears that when a group is Suffering Paradox, the inherent tension in the polarity turns Destructive. It is easy to find examples in the literature that support this notion (Quinn & Cameron, 1988; Tracy, 2004). It seems Destructive Tension can be experienced at any point during the process of Suffering Paradox, and impacts at least four different areas: Results, Morale, Communication and Relationships. This is supported by other studies that suggest ineffectively dealing with paradox can lead to a decline in performance (Quinn & Cameron, 1988), impaired decision-making quality (Lindsley, Brass, and Thomas, 1995), and the overall state of being stuck (W. K. Smith & Tushman, 2005). In short, when Suffering Paradox, not only does the issue at hand not get resolved, negative repercussions ripple through the group that go well beyond the ‘problem’ being solved and impact other areas of effectiveness.

Based on the description of Suffering Paradox, it would be easy to assume that the dimensions of Destructive Tension are synonymous with paradox. However, little could be farther from the truth. In fact (and paradoxically), when groups use a sensemaking tool such as polarity maps to address paradox, what arises is not a Destructive Tension, but a condition that appears to be its exact opposite—Creative Tension, a byproduct of Navigating Paradox.

## NAVIGATING PARADOX

The theory of Navigating Paradox explains what happens when a group maps the polarity to make sense of organizational paradox. Johnson’s (1992) simple and complex sensemaking tool helps people navigate paradox through the process of Seeing It, Discussing It, and Embodying It (see Figure 2 below). This gives way to Divining and Synthesizing which creates a Both/And-ing approach and allows a Creative Tension to manifest in the system.

**POLARITY MAPS AND SENSEMAKING.** This study supports the notion that the polarity map is a tool that helps groups make sense of, and reframe, paradox—which, according to multiple scholars, is key to effectively dealing with the phenomenon (Smith & Tushman, 2005; W. K. Smith & Lewis, 2011). Though it sounds simple, reframing paradox is a tall task given that it relies on an individual’s or group’s cognitive capacity to hold multiple, complex, and oppositional pieces of information in the brain at one time (Bartunek, 1988). According to Kegan (1994), this is a difficult, if not nearly impossible, endeavor for most adults to do on their own without a sensemaking tool.

According to Stigliani and Ravasi (2012), when dealing with particularly complex circumstances, effective individuals and groups often rely on sensemaking tools, things such as visual maps, to make sense and take action. Having a way to capture and discuss a process that is difficult to observe is crucial to acting in the midst of complexity (Huff & Jenkins, 2002). This is consistent with the experience of people who used polarity maps to Navigate Paradox. What follows is a description of how the literature supports what is going on for people during each stage of the process.

**MAPPING.** The process of Mapping allows groups to See, Discuss, and Embody paradox. It appears that Seeing It is vital to dealing with the complexity as it allows the group to make “what was subject into object so that [they] can ‘have it’ rather than ‘be had’ by it” (Kegan, 1994, p.34). This helps reduce some of the potential emotionally charged dynamic as groups enter into Discussing It and allows for a more robust reframing process, which “depends on



the extent to which the different perspectives feel heard and accepted by others” (Bartunek, 1988, p. 153).

The majority of participants in the study mentioned the importance of “moving around the room” as they were mapping. This supports Stigliani and Ravasi’s (2012) notion that the ability to physically move and interact with parts of a sensemaking tool creates deeper understanding among group members. Likewise, it is easier to understand and consider multiple unique perspectives when one can move to different points on the map (Huff & Jenkins, 2002). Combined with Seeing It and Discussing It, Embodying It creates the platform for individuals to enter two of the most powerful stages of Navigating Paradox — Divining and Synthesizing.

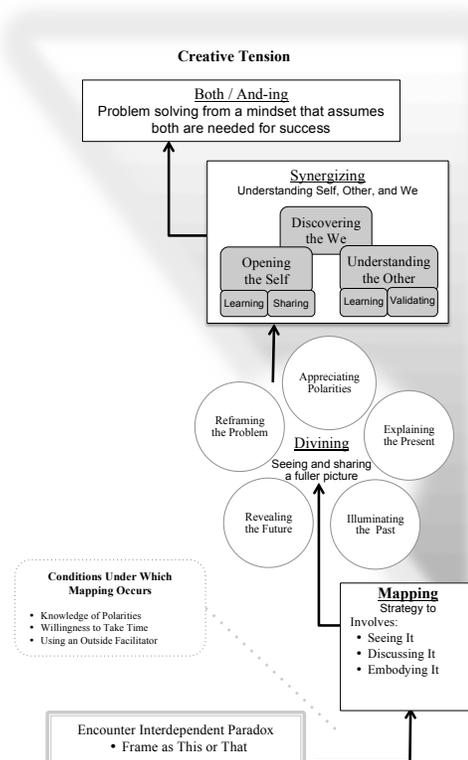


Figure 2. The process of Navigating Paradox to experience Creative Tension.

**DIVINING.** During Divining, a group experiences one or more stages that help them see and share a fuller picture of the issue at hand. This is consistent with the work of Lewis and Dehler (2000) who suggest polarity maps afford people a more robust view of their situation. In this case, that involves Appreciating Polarities, Explaining the Present, Illuminating the Past, Revealing the Future, and Reframing the Problem.

**APPRECIATING POLARITIES.** The findings of this study are different than Bartunek’s (1988) report that the process of reframing paradox can leave people paralyzed, defensive, and damaged. This study’s data suggest that those affective aspects are more consistent with groups Suffering Paradox and almost completely opposite of those Navigating Paradox. This is likely due to the dimension of Appreciating Polarities.



Polarity maps allow groups to see paradox in a positive light, which is likely due to W. K. Smith et al.'s (2012) suggestion that accepting paradox is aided by having a way to differentiate the "unique contribution of each alternative" and then integrating "both alternatives and seeking synergies between them" (p. 466). Mapping creates a situation in which the perspective of those who hold each of the poles is valued, it is made obvious both poles are needed for success, and it is clear that each pole has downsides — all of which help individuals accept and Appreciate Polarities.

**EXPLAINING THE PRESENT, ILLUMINATING THE PAST, REVEALING THE FUTURE.** Because of the cyclical and ongoing nature of paradox (Johnson, 1992), groups can use the map to understand what is happening for them in the present moment, trace backwards the events of the past, and look into the future of the moving energy loop in order to create a more robust and unequivocal view of their reality. The ability for members of a group to take action based on the discovery of a shared understanding of their situation is a key component of any sensemaking process (Weick et al., 2005), and in this case is likely a key contributor to the Creative Tension that is part of Navigating Paradox.

**REFRAMING THE PROBLEM.** The concept of Reframing the Problem is an important element of Divining, for it appears to ease a significant degree of harmful tension and stress in the group. The realization that the situation is not actually a problem to solve, but an ongoing and unsolvable paradox to manage likely helps avoid the condition alluded to by Weick (1995) who says, "those who get demobilized, defensive, and angry in organizations are those who see the world as a place filled with problems that could be solved once and for all" (p.187). While not specifically talking about paradox, Weick's point applies here. Reframing the polarities for what they are—never-ending energy systems to manage, and not solvable problems, leads to less stress and frustration and makes Synergizing and Creative Tension possible.

**SYNERGIZING.** Finding the synergy between two poles of a paradox is key to developing a paradox frame (W.K. Smith, et al., 2012). The power of paradox lies not in compromise between the two poles, but in the ability to synthesize both of the opposites in their full strength (Clegg et al., 2002). The concept of Synergizing supports these thoughts and takes them one step further.

When Navigating Paradox, Synergizing means not just bringing together the poles but also, and perhaps more importantly, bringing together the individuals who have been Attached to them. Several dimensions play into this process. The first seems to be an Opening of Self, which is the increased self-awareness that happens when people are introduced to new frames from which to view themselves and their preferences (Ford and Ford, 1994). The second, Understanding the Other, occurs as people listen and understand why others hold different viewpoints. According to Proctor (2009), this is a way to create higher levels of intergroup connection, which is consistent with the experience of participants in this study.

The final component of Synergizing, Discovering the We, is perhaps the most critical. Smith and Berg (1987) suggest that groups will stay stuck in paradox until they stop the process of disidentification: "By defining 'others' as the opposite of 'self,' individuals and groups...constrain their ability to move in the service of reducing anxiety" (p.222). It seems that polarity maps help individuals Discover the We by illuminating that both points of view are not opposites but actually interrelated, which can spur the group to Both/And-ing.



**BOTH/AND-ING.** Both/And-ing refers to taking action that combines or synergizes the two poles, which is one way to effectively deal with paradox (W. K. Smith & Lewis, 2011). This synergized action is similar to Emerson and Lewis' Transformational Third Way, which is a space that integrates both poles and denies neither (2019), and Rothenberg's (1979) concept of Janusian thinking, which involves holding and acting with two oppositional concepts in mind at once. It appears that polarity maps might achieve this by helping groups take "a leap that transcends ordinary logic" (p.55) through Both/And-ing, which contributes to a Creative Tension.

**CREATIVE TENSION.** The dimensions of Creative Tension can be experienced at any point during the Navigating Paradox process. The group's experience of collaborative mindset, positive energy, connection to others, and dynamic synergy can be likened to Csikszentmihalyi's flow state (1976) and appears to be virtually opposite of the Destructive Tension experienced when Suffering Paradox. Not surprisingly, the four areas negatively impacted by the Destructive Tension—Results, Morale, Communication, and Relationships, are positively impacted by the Creative Tension of Navigating Paradox.

The notion that Results are positively impacted when Navigating Paradox is consistent with the wide range of documentation in the literature (Quinn & Cameron, 1988; Eisenhardt & Westcott, 1988; Smith & Lewis, 2011). The explanation for positive impacts on Morale could lie in the linkage between Smith and Berg's (1987) proposal that the perceived oscillation between two poles of a paradox produces hope, which Lindsley et al. (1995) suggest impacts morale and increased performance. It is not ironic that this state is exactly opposite the inflexibility and lack of creativity experienced in organizations (Fiol et al., 2009) mired in the Destructive Tension of Suffering Paradox.

The rationale for positive impacts on Communication and Relationships is multifold. Highlighted here is the possibility that by using polarity maps to make the situation object (Kegan, 1994), groups are able to shift from what Amason (1996) calls affective conflict to cognitive conflict. Because individuals are then making sense of the paradoxical tension from a different frame, they are able to listen better to the Other's meanings and rationales, which can increase the level of interpersonal and intergroup understanding and connection (Procter, 2009).

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to discover "what's going on" when groups map polarities and what difference does using a sensemaking tool make? The theories of Suffering Paradox and Navigating Paradox shed light on both questions and provide empirical evidence that mapping polarities is an effective and practical way to help groups deal with paradox.

This study did not examine the effectiveness of the actions created by using a polarity map, which is a possibility for future study. However, this does not diminish the power of the polarity map, for in the end, the most important byproduct of Navigating Paradox might not be the actual actions taken to manage the polarity. Instead, the power might be in how the map helps groups think about polarities and "dancing with the opposites" (Holt & Seki, 2012, p. 204). As Luscher et al. (2006) contend, we cannot get rid of paradox, we can only live it and appreciate how paradoxical tension "creates circles of reflection...and sparks circles of even greater complexity" (pp.499-500) that can propel us into a shared and creative future. Knowing how to Navigate Paradox to harness that complexity is a great step in that direction.



## REFERENCES

- Amason, A. C. (1996). Distinguishing the effects of functional and dysfunctional conflict on strategic decision making: Resolving a paradox for top management teams. *Academy of Management Journal*, 39(1), 123-123.
- Bartunek, J. M. (1988). The dynamics of personal and organizational reframing. In R. E. Quinn & K. S. Cameron (Eds.), *Paradox and transformation: Toward a theory of change in organization and management* (pp. 1137-1162). Cambridge, MA: Ballinger.
- Cameron, K. S., & Quinn, R. E. (2011). *Diagnosing and changing organizational culture: Based on the competing values framework (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Clegg, S. R., Cunha, J. Vieira da, & Cunha, M. Pina e. (2002). Management paradoxes: A relational view. *Human Relations*, 55(5), 483 - 503.
- Collins, J. C. (2001). *Good to great : Why some companies make the leap--and others don't* (1st ed.). New York, NY: HarperBusiness.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1976). *Beyond boredom and anxiety*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Eisenhardt, K. M., & Westcott, B. J. (1988). Paradoxical demands and the creation of excellence: The case of just-in-time manufacturing. In R. E. Quinn & K. S. Cameron (Eds.), *Paradox and transformation: Toward a theory of change in organization and management* (pp. 169-194). Cambridge, MA: Ballinger.
- Emerson, B., & Lewis, K. (2019). *Navigating Polarities: Using both/and thinking to lead transformation*. Washington, DC: Paradoxical Press.
- Emerson, B. (2013). *Navigating organizational paradox with polarity mapping: A classic grounded theory study*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1357148735?accountid=10868>. (1357148735).
- Fiol, C. M., Pratt, Michael G., & O'Connor, E. J. (2009). Managing intractable identity conflicts. *Academy of Management Review*, 34(1), 32-55.
- Ford, J. D., & Ford, L. W. (1994). Logics of identity, contradiction, and attraction in change. *The Academy of Management Review*, 19(4), 756-756.
- Graetz, F., & Smith, A. C. T. (2008). The role of dualities in arbitrating continuity and change in forms of organizing. *International Journal of Management Review*, 10(3), 265-280.
- Hampden-Turner, C. (1981). *Maps of the mind: Charts and concepts of the mind and its labyrinths*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Handy, C. (1994). *The age of paradox*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Hatch, M. J. (2006). *Organization theory: Modern, symbolic, and postmodern perspectives* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Holt, K., & Seki, K. (2012). Global leadership: A developmental shift for everyone. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 5(2), 196-215.



- Horley, J. (2012). Personal construct theory and human values. *Journal of Human Values*, 18(2), 161-171.
- Huff, A. S., & Jenkins, M. (2002). Introduction. In A. S. Huff & M. Jenkins (Eds.), *Mapping strategic knowledge* (pp. 17-32). London, UK: SAGE Publications.
- Johnson, B. (1992). *Polarity management: Identifying and managing unsolvable problems*. Amherst, MA: Human Resource Development Press.
- Kegan, Robert. (1994). *In over our heads : The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Lawrence, P. R., & Lorsch, J. W. (1967). Differentiation and integration in complex organizations. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 12(1), 1-47.
- Lewis, M. W. (2000). Exploring paradox: Toward a more comprehensive guide. *Academy of Management Review*, 25(4), 760-776.
- Lewis, M. W., & Dehler, G. E. (2000). Learning through paradox: A pedagogical strategy for exploring contradictions and complexity. *Journal of Management Education*, 24(6), 708-725.
- Lindsley, D. H., Brass, D. J., & Thomas, J. B. (1995). Efficacy-performance spirals: A multilevel perspective. *The Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), 645-645.
- Luscher, L. S., Lewis, M., & Ingram, A. (2006). The social construction of organizational change paradoxes. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 19(4), 491-502.
- Luscher, L. S., & Lewis, M. W. (2008). Organizational change and managerial sensemaking: Working through paradox. *Academy of Management Journal*, 51(2), 221-240.
- Pepper, G. L., & Larson, G. S. (2006). Cultural identity tensions in a post-acquisition organization. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 34(1), 49-71.
- Procter, H. (2009). The construct. In R. Butler (Ed.), *Reflections in personal construct theory* (pp. 49-68). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Quinn, R. E., & Cameron, K. S. (1988). Paradox and transformation: A dynamic theory of organization and management. In R. E. Quinn & K. S. Cameron (Eds.), *Paradox and transformation: Toward a theory of change in organization and management* (pp. 289-308). Cambridge, MA: Ballinger.
- Rothenberg, A. (1979). *The emerging goddess*. Chicago, IL: Univ of Chicago Press.
- Sarkees, M., & Hulland, J. (2009). Innovation and efficiency: It is possible to have it all. *Business Horizons*, 52(1), 45-55.
- Smith, K. K., & Berg, D. N. (1987). *Paradoxes of group life: Understanding conflict, paralysis, and movement in group dynamics* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Smith, W. K., Besharov, M. L., Wessels, A. K., & Chertok, M. (2012). A paradoxical leadership model for social entrepreneurs. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 11(3), 463-478.



- Smith, W. K., & Lewis, M. W. (2011). Toward a theory of paradox: A dynamic equilibrium model of organizing. *Academy of Management Review*, 36(2), 381-403.
- Smith, W. K., & Lewis, M. W. (2012). Leadership skills for managing paradoxes. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 5(2), 227-231.
- Smith, W. K., & Tushman, M. (2005). Managing strategic contradictions: A top management model for managing innovation streams. *Organization Science*, 16(5), 522-536.
- Sokol, M. B. (2012). Developing polarity thinking in global leaders: An illustration. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 5(2), 231-233.
- Stigliani, I., & Ravasi, D. (2012). Organizing thoughts and connecting brains: Material practices and the transition from individual to group-level prospective sensemaking. *Academy of Management Journal*, 55(5), 1232-1259.
- Tracy, S. J. (2004). Dialectic, contradiction, or double bind? Analyzing and theorizing employee reactions to organizational tension. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 32(2), 119-146.
- Van de Ven, A. H., & Poole, M. S. (1988). Paradoxical requirements for a theory of change. In R. E. Quinn & K. S. Cameron (Eds.), *Paradox and transformation: Toward a theory of change in organization and management* (pp. 19-64). Cambridge, MA: Ballinger.
- Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K., M., & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science*, 16(4), 409-421.

