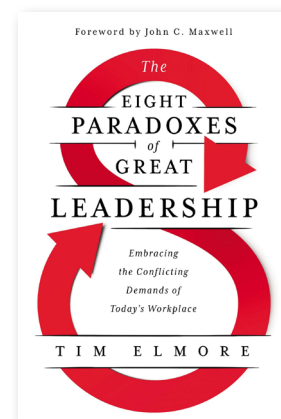


The Eight Paradoxes of Great Leadership

Embracing the Conflicting Demands of Today's Workplace

by **Tim Elmore**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

The Eight Paradoxes of Great Leadership unpacks the fresh strategies and new mindset required of a next-generation leader today. Author Dr. Tim Elmore helps leaders of all kinds navigate increasingly complex, rapidly changing environments, as well as manage teams that bring a range of new demands and expectations to the workplace that haven't been seen even one generation prior.

After working alongside John C. Maxwell for 20 years, Elmore offers counterintuitive paradoxes that, when practiced, enable today's leader to differentiate themselves and better connect with their team and customers. Having trained hundreds of thousands of young professionals to develop into leaders, Elmore shares the secrets of next generation leaders who have practiced the paradoxes.

The Eight Paradoxes of Great Leadership can equip leaders to inspire team members in a way a paycheck never could. Become a next-generation leader—rich in emotional and social intelligence and orchestrating outstanding collaborative results—by mastering the eight status quo-shattering paradoxes.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why today's team members require different qualities than they did even in the recent past.
- The eight key paradoxes and strategies for how to practice them.
- Inspiring stories of historic and modern-day leaders who lived the eight paradoxes.

Paradoxical Leadership in a Complex Age

At 22 years old, young Isaac Newton was sent home from Cambridge University during the Great Plague of London in 1665. It was their own version of social distancing.

And that's when the magic happened. Without his teachers to guide him, Newton flourished. The period he spent away was later referred to as his *annus mirabilis*, the "year of wonders."

First, he continued working on math problems that he'd begun at Cambridge University. Believe it or not, the papers he wrote became the genesis of calculus.

Second, he acquired some prisms and began experimenting with them in his room, even boring a hole in his shutters so only a small beam of light could shine through. From his explorations emerged his theories on optics.

Third, outside his window was an apple tree. Yes, the apple tree we've all heard about. While parts of the narrative are legend, his assistant confirmed much of it is true. While Newton sat under that tree, an apple fell, which launched his thinking. From this apple, Newton developed his theory of the law of gravity and the laws of motion.

Isn't it amazing that during a great interruption, Newton transformed it into a great introduction to an entirely new world of math and science? It was when life was on hold that he made his best progress. Our world was morphed by his time alone during a pandemic. What a paradox.

Another Pandemic

Today, we live in the shadow of another pandemic. Our world was already complicated before, but the aftershocks of COVID-19 have only increased the challenges. Over the first 20 years of this century, our world became on-demand and instant access, driven by a gig economy, with a 24/7 news cycle on broadcast and social media. The most accurate description for our times is the acronym VUCA: volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous.

More than 1,000 CEOs stepped down during the first three quarters of 2019. Furthermore, while Americans were distracted by the coronavirus pandemic, many CEOs stepped down in the first quarter of 2020, including the CEOs of Disney, Hulu, IBM, LinkedIn, Uber Eats, MGM, Lockheed Martin, and others.

Too often, organizations settle for leaders who do nothing,

ensuring that at least they do nothing wrong. We play defense too often. And for that matter, we fail to play offense often enough. We tell ourselves that ours is a complicated day to be living in and become satisfied with avoiding losses. Or we settle for some form of leadership style or protocol that worked in the past.

Leading in the 21st century is, indeed, more complex than it was in past centuries. Leadership is seldom easy, but today it affords us the challenge of collaborating with a more educated, more entitled, more savvy population that has greater expectations of satisfaction and rewards than in past generations.

Eight Paradoxes

To guide leaders in addressing these heightened expectations, let's explore eight surprising paradoxes that effective leaders must practice as they lead. Uncommon leaders stand out because they are able to juggle seemingly contradictory traits to lead such people. Most of these paradoxes are about our emotional intelligence, not our cognitive intelligence.

Isaac Newton didn't see the plague as an interruption. When nothing and no one consumed his time—he had time to reflect, imagine, and change the world. Neuroscientists tell us that it's during times of boredom that our brains develop empathy and creativity. Today, that's our best option in this complex world.

Paradox 1: Uncommon Leaders Balance Both Confidence and Humility

Uncommon leaders possess inspiring confidence yet express it with palpable humility. Leading today requires combining these two attributes. Reality changes so quickly; leaders cannot become arrogant but must remain in a learning posture. At the same time, team members long for their leader to inspire them with confidence.

In today's complex world, people look for anyone with a clear sense of confidence. Teams seldom move forward without seeing it in their leader. At the same time, people demand that a leader's confidence doesn't blind them to their own humanity. Leaders believe in themselves, but they don't believe they can do it alone.

Confidence plus humility furnishes the *energy of certainty* and the *flexibility of teachability* to create synergy in partnerships.

As our world experiences uncertainty, the human longing for confidence grows proportionately.

Because 21st century culture is increasingly uncertain and because our global economy is increasingly complicated and unpredictable, team members long for a sense of confidence. One of the leader's tasks is to instill this in their team.

This doesn't mean leaders have all the answers up front, nor does it mean they're absolutely certain everything will pan out according to plan. It simply means that, as our world experiences uncertainty, the human longing for confidence grows proportionately. Uncommon leaders understand this need and leverage it to increase their influence.

Humility makes your confidence believable. When team members only see confidence, they begin to suspect you're not being honest; some piece of the puzzle is missing. They know all leaders eventually make mistakes, and followers begin wondering, "When can I trust you?" Confidence alone feels disingenuous.

When you demonstrate humility, you communicate credibility. Humility signals self-awareness and authenticity. Humility also signals transparency and invites reciprocity. When you are humble, you display your humanity and acknowledge your imperfections. When team members see this, they're likely to volley it right back.

How to Be a Confident Yet Humble Leader

Here are some ideas on how you can begin practicing this paradox:

- When in decision-making meetings, argue as if you believe you're right, but listen as if you believe you're wrong.
- When in conflict with team members, be willing to lose a few battles to win the war.
- Remain teachable in new contexts, even from those under your care. Don't let your confidence prevent you from improving your own ideas.
- Don't let humility become sheepishness. When we're sheepish, we are self-conscious, preoccupied with our own weaknesses. This keeps us from progress.

Paradox 2: Uncommon Leaders Leverage Both Their Vision and Their Blind Spots

While vision and blind spots seem like an oxymoron, they are generally both at work when great leaders grow or start something.

Vision gives leaders (and teams) a direction, but blind spots are often the very motivator that enables them to approach an idea in an unconventional way—and believe they can pull it off. Most new ventures require a leader to possess a clear target they want to hit. At the same time, their inability to see all the obstacles or challenges ahead of time helps them to maintain their energy as they try to hit their target. In short, leaders usually have to see something and fail to see something to reach their goal.

Blind spots prevent us from letting obstacles stop us. Almost every entrepreneurial endeavor includes a story of how a founder or an original team had no idea what they were up against or had no clue what was ahead of them as they launched. Had they known what was coming, their ideas might never have gotten off the ground.

Blind spots also spare us from the curse of knowledge. Often, blind spots can speed up the project. Because the leader doesn't know everything about the endeavor, he or she can bypass hangups that slow others down.

Capitalizing on Rookie Smarts

Vision and blind spots combine to create "rookie smarts." "Rookie smarts" is a term tossed around in business circles today describing the effective ideas that new or young people come up with and attempt that seasoned veterans would never try. Why not? Because of their experience.

Vision enables rookies to see what others may not yet see. Blind Spots prevent rookies from seeing what the experienced do see.

So, what are the actionable steps old or young rookies can take to ensure they are smart?

- Look at industries that are stuck and need a revolution.
- Listen well to people who are or could be customers.
- Interact with people outside the industry for ideas.
- Combine various industry ideas to create a new one.
- Lead the way, by risking a prototype before it's perfect.

Balancing Your Vision and Blind Spots

Both are obviously important, but imagine an entrepreneur who dreams of inventing a product. He or she likely got the idea because they faced a dilemma or discomfort and knew there had to be a better way to address it.

There are two issues leaders must recognize when engaging in this process. First, the key to leveraging vision and blind spots is an often-neglected insight: We must not fall in love with an idea but fall in love with a problem. If we fall in love with an idea, we may be blinded to the better idea that comes along later.

A second issue leaders face evolves subtly over time. Their obsession shifts from solving problems to generating revenue. While problems frequently lead to people creating solutions, once the process has begun, leaders often shift their focus too much toward money.

Obviously, cash is needed to complete the new idea. When money is the chief focus, however, it's easy for leaders to wane in their passion for solving the original problem. Their passion drifts to an obsession to finding funding. The switch is natural but sometimes deadly.

Paradox 3: Uncommon Leaders Embrace Both Visibility and Invisibility

In the beginning of any mission, most people need a visible leader, demonstrating what to do and clarifying the goal. Over time, however, those people need the leader to step aside to let them realize their potential. Ownership must be transferred. Leaders must be necessary—yet eventually work themselves out of a job. In short, they embrace the paradox of being both visible and invisible, at the right moments.

The Need for Visible Leadership From You

In the early stages of your leadership, people need you to be visible. Most human beings are “settlers” who need “pioneers” to go first. They need someone who “knows the way, goes the way and shows the way for others,” to quote John C. Maxwell. This has little to do with IQ. Most followers

can figure out how to apply words of instruction. It's simply that human example is so much more powerful than human explanation in transforming behavior.

Uncommon leaders empower initially by modeling the way:

- They embody the vision that their team is attempting to achieve.
- They pick up trash in the parking lot to model servant leadership.
- They tend to the details, so people see that every little action matters.
- They demonstrate what they'll soon delegate to others to ensure quality control.
- They make the tough call (hard decisions) to show they're willing to pay the price.

The Need for Invisible Leadership

Over time, uncommon leaders recognize they must trust that their example has taken hold and step out of the way for others to step up. At this point, our leadership is a tender balance of support and letting go.

Teams will eventually require leaders to take a risk and let them do what only the leaders once did. Let's talk about some fundamental signals that the time is right.

When it's time to move from empower by example to empower by experience, people have watched you do it numerous times. They know the routine and can articulate it to others. They've had the chance to try it themselves. They display that they're convinced of the legitimacy of the mission. Finally, people have built muscle memory from the task.

Leaders practicing this paradox in a holistic way include four elements in the process: the Big IDEA.

I—Instruction. Leaders must provide verbal insights and explanations through discussion. People need conversations.

D—Demonstration. Leaders must find ways to model what the insight looks like in real life. People need observation.

E—Experience. Leaders must turn teams loose to practice the insight on their own to apply the knowledge. People need application.

A—Assessment. Leaders must take time to debrief and evaluate the learning outcomes with teams. People need evaluation.

Our wins can come at too great a cost. We can win a debate with a customer over why a shipment was late and end up losing that customer for life.

Paradox 4: Uncommon Leaders Are Both Stubborn and Open-Minded

This one may be the toughest paradox of all. Leaders will never reach a goal without being strong-willed. Without a stubborn will, obstacles will stop them. At the same time, they'd be naïve to think they have all the answers at the beginning of a venture. They must be open to voices of counsel; to flex and to adapt to changing realities.

Duke basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski said it best: “The most incredibly interesting thing about being a leader is what adjustments you make and how you make them while keeping your core principles alive and well.”

So, how do we embrace both a strong will and an open mind? The fact is—strong leaders earn their right to be followed by how responsive they are to the input of team members. It's not so much that they don't know what direction to take, but they believe the best idea should win, wherever it comes from. They know where they need to go, but also believe that by listening, people feel heard and take the journey together. The team owns the mission, along with the leader.

Strategies to Practice This Paradox

This balancing act is not easy. When leaders do practice it, however, they become uncommon and extremely attractive to other strong leaders. You will attract the best people when you master it. Here are five strategies:

The first strategy is to lead by principle. When leaders lead by principles, those principles guide big decisions; if there is no principle at stake or none violated, the leader can be open-minded to input on new ideas or changes. In the end, uncommon leaders decide what they'll be stubborn about, and they're flexible on almost everything else.

The second strategy is to make sure one of your principles is, always make it better. This is one of the core values at Growing Leaders. It has driven them to expand their *Habitudes*® from the printed page to e-books on Kindle, then to an online platform, and later to an app on a portable device.

The third strategy is to apply “the Bit Market” principle. We fall in love with our current product so much, we forget why people buy our product. The only reason people buy a metal piece called a drill bit is because they have a problem they need to solve: They need to make a hole in a piece of wood. If another company developed an affordable laser that made a hole in a piece of wood easier, wouldn't we stop buying drill bits? Uncommon leaders never confuse methods with mission. They separate programs and products from purpose.

The fourth strategy is to avoid winning Pyrrhic victories. Our wins can come at too great a cost. We can win a debate with a customer over why a shipment was late and end up losing that customer for life. Let's face it. One reason for our stubborn spirit is often ego. A strong will can work for us and against us. If our ego drives our will, trouble is sure to follow.

The fifth strategy is to remember the future belongs to the young. Because we're moving into a world where the young will be comfortable with new realities faster than the old are, listen to the natives and stay open-minded. Just remember, however, that if we're going to be open-minded leaders, we must possess both emotional security and a strong will. We must be emotionally secure enough to digest contrary ideas and strong willed enough to not merely swallow every novel idea just because it's new.

Paradox 5: Uncommon Leaders Are Both Deeply Personal and Inherently Collective

People need big-picture vision from their leader, someone who grasps the gravity of what's happened and the steps required to respond to it. At the same time, people need a leader who empathizes with their personal journey; someone who understands how the struggle feels to individuals, and who articulates the vision with a personal touch.

Uncommon leaders find a way to tailor roles and tasks for individuals, while at the same time keeping the larger

picture in mind and ensuring each person's talent is leveraged for the whole.

Here are some examples: This leader offers both professional training and personal development. Everyone wins. This leader stewards the mission of the organization (or team), and at the same time, stewards each individual team member's time and talent.

Paradoxical Leadership in a Pandemic

Dr Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has practiced this paradox in front of our entire country. In 1990, when AIDS activists flooded the NIH to protest apparent government indifference, Fauci brought them to the table and met with them personally.

During the 2014 Ebola outbreak, many Americans panicked when they heard a nurse was infected by a traveler from West Africa. Dr. Fauci responded to those fears by setting a personal example. After the hospital released that nurse, not only did he say she wasn't contagious, he gave her a hug on television to prove he wasn't concerned.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, he spoke to the American public as a whole, offering updates on the COVID infections, how to best respond to them, the research on vaccinations, and what to expect in the months ahead.

In the midst of that corporate communication, however, Dr. Fauci will often smile and speak to his listeners very personally, as if he's speaking to you as an individual. Collective then personal.

Practicing the Paradox of an Inherently Collective Yet Deeply Personal Leader

- **Do for one what you wish you could do for everyone.** Do this often enough, and you may just get around to everyone one day.
- **Practice active listening before you say anything.** Social intelligence is developed when we actively listen without interrupting.
- **Be intentional to pay close attention to what's around you.** Note the subtle social cues you receive from others and the cues people send to others.
- **Seek to add value to each person with whom you interact.** When we interact with this mindset, our curiosity enables us to find personal connections.
- **Pursue a new relationship connection every**

week. Cultivating new relationships is like a workout for your emotional intelligence.

- **For each collective message you must offer, add a personal one that's relevant.** Watch what it does to people, how it fills their cognitive and emotional tanks.

Paradox 6: Uncommon Leaders Are Both Teachers and Learners

When Angela Ahrendts accepted the offer to become the chief executive officer of Burberry in 2006, the luxury coat company's sales were in decline. They had been for years. Burberry had been around for 150 years, and while the British brand retained an elite reputation, it was a company known for its plaids, and for selling coats to rich, older women.

After meeting her direct reports, she scheduled a series of meetings with her youngest team members at Burberry. Beyond that, she began recruiting sharp, young professionals, even interns, that she could meet with and listen to for insights into reaching millennials (a population Burberry was failing to reach at the time).

Probably the wisest move Angela made was to establish an in-house digital team led by a young Christopher Bailey (now Burberry's CEO), who served as chief creative officer, and John Douglas, who served as the chief technology officer. One of the team's most successful moves was to launch "a new website and innovative social media campaigns, including the Art of the Trench, a photo platform that allows visitors to upload photos of themselves in iconic Burberry trench coats."

In the end, it paid off big-time. In her seven years at Burberry, Angela raised the company's value from 2 billion pounds annually to more than 7 billion.

Angela entered as both a teacher and a learner. She was an instructor to her executive team, insisting they make moves to go digital, update their marketing approach, and hire young team members. Yet, among her wisest decisions was to become a student as well. One of her ongoing steps during her years at Burberry was to listen to young staff who intuitively knew how to reach their peers.

Practicing the Paradox of Being a Teacher and a Learner

The fact is, innovative products and services are launched every year by people who see an opportunity that others miss. The better we can leverage this "rookie advantage," the more we'll succeed in today's competitive world, just

Because this uncommon leader is focused on a better future, they make a habit of getting beyond past failures by learning from them.

like Angela Ahrendts.

- **Practice reverse mentoring across your leadership team.** Why not match your seasoned veterans with your newest team members and have them swap stories? Then, allow them to spot where they could add value to the other and mutually coach each other.
- **Make it a weekly (or monthly) goal to learn something new.** What if you identified a team of specialist mentors who can coach you in your goals?
- **Establish regular times for personal and professional growth in your team's calendar.** The key is to be intentional.
- **Each time you gain an insight, find someone with whom you can share it.** Author T. D. Jakes put it this way: "The world is a university and everyone in it is a teacher. Make sure when you wake up in the morning you go to class."

Paradox 7: Uncommon Leaders Model Both High Standards and Gracious Forgiveness

Steve Jobs said, "Be a yardstick of quality. Some people aren't used to an environment where excellence is expected." One strength of this type of leader is that they care little about winning people over. They're in a productivity contest, not a popularity contest. Only their cause can hold them hostage. They're not swayed by money, bribes, blackmail, or public opinion.

This kind of leader is passionate because the stakes are high. Their high standards separate their organization from others who can only emulate their great products or services. They have over-the-top benchmarks that put them in a league of their own—like Apple, Amazon, Zappos, and Google.

The paradox of this uncommon leader is their propensity to forgive people. It's not that they lower their standards. It's simply that they're able to absolve a team member who acknowledges they failed to meet the standard and chooses

to improve. Forgiveness isn't approving what happened. It's choosing to rise above it. Forgiveness does not remove the past, but it does expand the future.

Because this uncommon leader is focused on a better future, they make a habit of getting beyond past failures by learning from them. These leaders know the most valuable team members will likely make mistakes en route to success. They know it's the cost of doing business.

When team members know their leader holds high standards yet is willing to forgive mistakes, it frees them to push themselves, take appropriate risks, and initiate when they might normally hold back and play it safe.

Steps to Take to Practice This Paradox

To create this kind of environment, try this leadership path:

Offer the gift of clarity. Make sure the people you lead understand what a "win" looks like.

Shoot for perfection and settle for excellence. Shoot for the sun, and you may hit the moon. Excellence is okay.

Communicate your high expectations but model your forgiveness. You cannot practice this paradox in word alone. Find occasions to communicate huge goals and model generous forgiveness.

Extend the safety net principle. Give people the freedom to try and make mistakes, while "owning" the project they are working on.

Practice "try it out and talk it over." Team members feel safer to make mistakes and even fail if they know they are free to try out something new, record the results, and then meet with a leader to discuss the outcomes.

Paradox 8: Uncommon Leaders Are Both Timely and Timeless

Uncommon leaders in the 21st century must embrace and advance timeless principles that make for lasting success; values that have stood the test of time and worked in all

generations and in every context.

At the same time, these leaders must leverage culturally relevant methods and futuristic resources. They use what is cultural to say what is evergreen. Their core identity is ageless, but their mode of operation is cutting edge and sets the pace for others. They're passionate to pursue future opportunity, but in their appetite for progress, they never leave behind core virtues, values, and disciplines.

Swing Sets

Think about a swing set. Did you or a neighbor have one growing up? A swing set is a helpful image of what we must do to lead well in our day. Just like a good swing, you must swing backward as far as possible, to swing forward as high as possible.

Wise leaders utilize vision that can see both *backward* and *forward*. They look back and learn from the past. They glean from past mistakes to avoid repeating them. They seek what was helpful and timeless so they can carry those elements forward. They do this so they can swing forward well. That's the engaging part of the ride, the swing forward.

To implement this kind of leadership, you must push "pause" and reflect on both the past and the future. Take time each year, if not each quarter, and use this exercise to stay on top of life and leadership. Grab a pen and respond to the following questions.

Swinging backward. Swinging back means we get in touch with our heritage—our roots, who we are and how we got here today. As we do, it is helpful to ask ourselves questions like,

- What is our foundation and heritage?

- Why did we decide to pursue our mission?
- What value did we seek to add to our community?
- What were the destructive elements we tried to discard?
- Were there principles we felt are essential to sustain us?

Swinging forward. Swinging forward means we haven't forgotten why we exist and won't lose our sense of mission as we progress. We identify our new realities and translate our mission for today's culture. Helpful questions might be

- Where do we want to go today?
- What are the greatest needs we see in front of us?
- How is the landscape different than it was in the past?
- What new methods or strategies do we need in the future?
- How do we stay relevant by renewing our pledge to our mission?

The eight leadership paradoxes that make leaders outstanding are essential today because leadership approaches have evolved over the last 70 years.

As we proceed into the third decade of the 21st century, a new kind of leader is on the horizon. This new generation of leaders doesn't enter their position assuming they have all the answers. They surround themselves with a leadership team. This inner circle is optimally diverse in their strengths and perspectives—but not in their values and vision.

The times have demanded this change, as people have recalibrated with the culture. Those who flourish today will embrace the eight paradoxes.



Dr. Tim Elmore is founder and CEO of Growing Leaders, an Atlanta-based nonprofit organization created to develop emerging leaders. His work grew out of 20 years serving alongside Dr. John C. Maxwell, where he focused on leadership for emerging generations. Elmore has appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and *Psychology Today*, and he's been featured on CNN's Headline News and Fox and Friends to talk about leading multiple generations in the marketplace. He has written more than 35 books.

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