



**EFFECTIVELY LEADING  
THROUGH PARADOX:  
A PIVOTAL ROLE  
FOR WELLBEING**

# EFFECTIVELY LEADING THROUGH PARADOX IS A MUST IN OUR CONTRADICTIONARY & COMPLEX WORLD

## WHAT DOES WELLBEING HAVE TO DO WITH IT?

Leaders today guide their organizations through an unprecedented degree of uncertainty, complexity, and change in our globally connected world. They must welcome rapid technological advances, respond to increased polarization and upheaval in politics and societies, and evolve their workforces and operations to be innovative, fast, agile, and relevant. This inevitably means leading in environments full of contradictory demands, or paradoxes, where solutions are never clear or simple.

At Wisdom Works, we believe leaders are better able to navigate the nuances of contradictory circumstances when they abandon either/or thinking in favor of a *both/and* mindset, the heart of effectively leading paradoxes. This orientation recognizes that conflicting perspectives can coexist and, indeed, may be an impetus for innovation, learning, and growth. We believe this *both/and* mindset, and the leadership behaviors that result from it, is more likely to come online when leaders are thriving mentally and emotionally.

In this Be Well Lead Well® Research Insights report, we explore the relationship between these two psychological resources—*both/and* mindset and *wellbeing*—which we consider essential to leadership effectiveness.

## A FEW LEADERSHIP PARADOXES YOUR LEADERS FACE TODAY

<i>Be strong</i>	and	<i>Be vulnerable &amp; humble</i>
<i>Take control</i>	and	<i>Allow others to lead</i>
<i>Set plans &amp; stick to them</i>	and	<i>Experiment &amp; adapt</i>
<i>Focus on tasks</i>	and	<i>Focus on relationships</i>
<i>Innovate, innovate, innovate</i>	and	<i>Trust tried-and-true approaches</i>
<i>Go fast</i>	and	<i>Go slow</i>
<i>Treat everyone the same</i>	and	<i>Treat each person as unique</i>
<i>Accumulate wealth</i>	and	<i>Spread wealth &amp; wellbeing</i>

# ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Data collection was conducted\* in 2020 with 425+ leaders in top leadership, middle-management, and first line leader roles from countries in Western Europe and North America. (See page 4 for demographic information.) Leaders rated themselves using two self-report instruments:

- 1) *Paradoxical Leader Behavior*, a scale asking leaders to assess the extent to which they lead from *both/and* thinking by addressing “seemingly competing, yet interrelated, behaviors to meet structural and follower demands simultaneously and over time” (Zhang, et al. 2015). Five leadership paradoxes outlined in this scale include:
  - Combining **self-centeredness** with **other-centeredness**, meaning, retaining a core influence while simultaneously sharing concerns and regards for the people they lead
  - Maintaining both **distance** and **closeness**, meaning, holding appropriate vertical structural relationships with the people they lead while simultaneously forming interpersonal, human-to-human bonds
  - Treating people **uniformly** while allowing **individualization**, meaning, assigning work to the people they lead without favoritism while also taking into account their strengths, aspirations, and other unique considerations
  - Setting and reinforcing **work standards** while allowing the people they lead to act with **discretion and flexibility**
  - **Maintaining authority** in decision making while also **encouraging autonomy** in people they lead
- 2) *Be Well Lead Well Pulse*<sup>®</sup>, an assessment produced by Wisdom Works to blend the latest research about human thriving with three decades of developing leaders worldwide. In one setting, this tool combines 19 psychometrics linked to overall psychological wellbeing and reported in six dimensions—Thriving, Fuel, Flow, Wonder, Wisdom, and Thriving Amplified. The assessment generates insights leaders can act on to activate and amplify thriving in their teams and organizations, starting with themselves. (See page 7 to learn more about Be Well Lead Well Pulse<sup>®</sup>.)

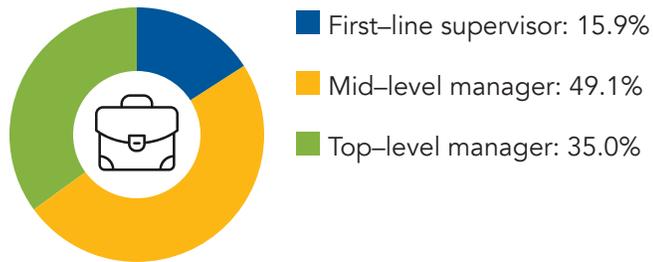
*“A paradox mindset is not about harmonising conflict or finding a middle ground. It is also not about doing more, as this can lead to burnout. It is about being more mindful about how we use resources. By juxtaposing opposing alternatives and learning to inhabit the discomfort that often arises from tensions, leaders with such a mindset foster optimism and resilience. They enable us to dream (and realise) big while the day-to-day ordinary work continues.”*

—ELLA MIRO-SPEKTOR,  
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF  
ORGANISATIONAL BEHAVIOR, INSEAD

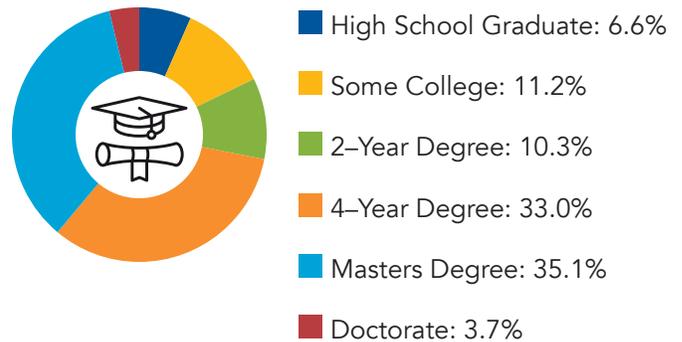
\*Data collection was completed by the global research firm, Qualtrics. Research support was provided by Wisdom Works’ science partners, Dr. Don Gardner, Professor of Management & Organization, and Dr. Elena Svetieva, Assistant Professor of Communication, at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, USA.

# ABOUT THE LEADERS

## LEVEL OF LEADER



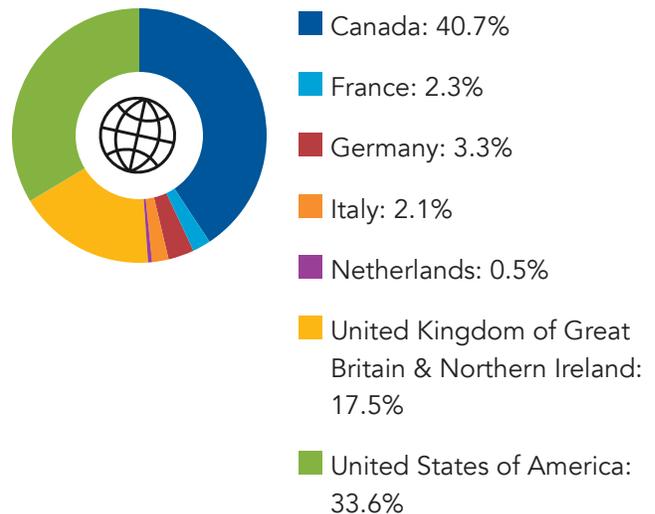
## EDUCATION



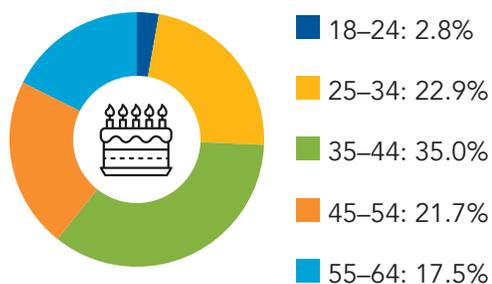
## GENDER



## COUNTRY



## AGE



## DESCRIPTIVE STATS

**Number of Subordinates** mean: 48.3028

**Organization Tenure (years)** mean: 10.7477

# RESEARCH INSIGHTS

This table shows the rates at which leaders scoring low, average, or high levels of psychological wellbeing endorsed utilizing each paradoxical leadership behavior. Overall, leaders who show high wellbeing\* are 38% more likely to report engaging in paradoxical leadership behavior than leaders who score low in wellbeing. Statistical regression modelling also confirmed that the Be Well Lead Well Pulse® dimensions significantly and positively predicted engaging in higher levels of paradoxical leadership behavior.

*Leaders who show high wellbeing are 38% more likely to report engaging in paradoxical leadership behavior than leaders who score low in wellbeing.*

\*The "High" group includes individuals scoring at least half a standard deviation above the mean of the aggregated six Be Well Lead Well Pulse® dimensions of Thriving, Fuel, Flow, Wisdom, Wonder, and Thriving Amplified. The "Low" group includes individuals scoring at least half a standard deviation below the mean. Percentages indicate individuals who reported that the statement is to "a large extent or extremely like me."

## Leader Overall Wellbeing as measured by Be Well Lead Well Pulse®

	Low (n = 126)	Average (n = 152)	High (n = 139)
<b>Paradoxical Leader Behaviors</b>			
I manage employees uniformly, but I also consider their individual needs.	49.2%	73.7%	92.8%
I have a strong desire to lead, but I allow others to share the leadership role.	42.9%	61.2%	89.9%
I control important work issues, but I allow employees to handle details.	51.6%	65.1%	89.2%
I stress uniformity in job performance, but I also allow for some exceptions.	43.7%	53.9%	77.7%
I maintain my position as leader, but I also uphold employees' dignity.	57.9%	72.4%	92.8%
I assign equal workloads, but I also consider individual strengths and capabilities to handle different tasks.	54.8%	78.9%	91.4%
I am confident about my personal ideas and beliefs, but I acknowledge that I can learn from others.	52.4%	71.7%	93.5%
I make decisions about big issues, but delegate lesser issues to employees.	48.4%	66.4%	85.6%
I clarify work requirements, but do not micromanage work.	52.4%	70.4%	92.1%
I maintain my distance from employees at work, but I am also friendly to them.	49.2%	65.1%	78.4%
I maintain overall control, but I give employees appropriate levels of autonomy.	50.8%	77.6%	88.5%
I have high work standards, but I also allow employees to make mistakes.	52.4%	79.6%	90.6%
<b>OVERALL</b>	<b>50.5%</b>	<b>69.7%</b>	<b>88.5%</b>

# WHY THIS RESEARCH MATTERS TO YOU & YOUR ORGANIZATION

Contemporary organizations require leaders who can facilitate wise decisions with positive impact amid uncertainties and conflicts affecting every level of human activity: societies, industries, the business ecosystem, departments and teams, communities, families, and individual lives.

As an example, to run an organization today, leaders must address the rise in polarization occurring in countries across the globe, and with it, the entrenched beliefs and “us versus them” identities that prevent people from cooperating towards a common good.

Operating in perpetual instability as most leaders do can create tremendous mental and emotional strain. When stressed, a leader’s kneejerk response to conflicting demands is frequently to fall back on seemingly safe tried-and-true approaches, use willpower to control that which is by nature uncontrollable, become overwhelmed or resigned, or attempt to deny the challenge altogether. Let’s face it: It’s human to desire a sense of security and stability—to want a predictable future instead of lean into the unknown—so these coping strategies aren’t surprising. Yet, they are reactive approaches to dealing with paradox which can ultimately block learning, risk-taking and innovation, and potential growth for leaders and the people, teams, and organizations they lead.

**How can you build a leadership capability to embrace a *both/and* mindset when faced with paradoxes?** Among other things, empower leaders to intentionally examine their current capacity to thrive in work and life overall, as well as make thriving a priority in how they lead. Environments of uncertainty and paradox can be anxiety-ridden and debilitating; the cultivation of whole health and wellbeing offers leaders the inner resourcefulness from which to meet challenging circumstances plus help other people and teams do the same.

Insights from this research suggest that leaders who experience high levels of wellbeing are better equipped to draw on both/and thinking to handle the paradoxes inherent in organizational life, as examples:

- Providing structure and clear direction for teams to get work done, plus encouraging personal autonomy of team members.
- Expecting exemplary performance, plus inviting people to learn from mistakes rather than seek perfection.
- Counting on full engagement at work, plus recognizing people are whole human beings with aspirations and demands outside of work.
- Operating as strong leaders, plus sharing the role of leadership with others.
- Navigating the seemingly competing demands between pursuing purpose or profit, with a recognition that both are necessary for the organization to thrive.

Beyond the insights from this research, we at Wisdom Works believe that leaders who engage in paradoxical leader behavior activate a life-enhancing cycle where they can *gain* a sense of wellbeing, self-esteem, and energy from adopting a *both/and* mindset. We believe these leaders are also more apt to view paradoxes as part of a larger unfolding context that offers potential for human and organizational innovation and growth, seek diverse perspectives to catalyze creativity and better, more inclusive decisions, and use their leadership to amplify positive connections and thriving for the people and teams they lead—indispensable behaviors for building a culture of optimism, adaptability, positive impact, and wisdom.

## REFERENCE

Zhang, Y., Waldman, D. A., Han, Y-L., & LI, X-B. (2015). Paradoxical leader behaviors in people management: Antecedents and consequences. *Academy of Management Journal*, 58, 538-566.

*“Adaptability frees us to be agile in the face of shifting forces that shape the wellbeing of individuals and populations.”*  
—THE LANCET

# LEARN MORE ABOUT BE WELL LEAD WELL PULSE®



The Wisdom Works team believes creating a culture where wellbeing is valued is a mark of effective leadership. Be Well Lead Well Pulse® is the only instrument that provides you, as leader, the opportunity to explore 19 psychometrics of wellbeing in one setting and reported as 6 dimensions.

**THRIVING:** Evaluate your overall wellbeing today and in the future, as well as your ability to restore your wellbeing when you face difficulties or get off track.

**FUEL:** Proactively use your diet, physical movement, breath, and rest as tools for a sustained, balanced source of physical, emotional, and mental energy.

**FLOW:** Be in the zone—those times when you bring mindfulness and your full presence to the activities of life and work. You are intrinsically rewarded with energy, enjoyment, and a richer sense of how life unfolds with effortlessness and ease.

**WONDER:** Evolve worldviews through engaging in new experiences and challenges, embracing differences, and perceiving the beauty around you.

**WISDOM:** Tap into your inner greatness—the worthwhile purpose, higher vision, and innate genius you can use to guide yourself and others toward inspired impact.

**THRIVING AMPLIFIED™:** Bring forth more of your leadership potential to energize people, maximize their growth and capabilities, and cultivate a work environment of care.

## FEATURES OF BE WELL LEAD WELL PULSE®

- Designed for all levels of formal and informal leadership. It may also be used with teams, professional networks, plus organization-wide.
- Innovated to augment your strategy to build a culture of thriving, as well as approaches, such as development and onboarding, to elevate your organization's leadership capability.
- Backed by a growing database of leaders worldwide.
- Part of a global movement for conscious leadership.

## READY TO THRIVE?

For more information or to find a Be Well Lead Well Pulse® Certified Guide in your region, contact us at [info@wisdom-works.com](mailto:info@wisdom-works.com).

## FOLLOW US

@BeWellLeadWell



BY WISDOM WORKS GROUP INC.



JULY 2021

*“At Wisdom Works, we believe developing leaders who thrive in mind, body, and spirit equips them to approach paradoxes with resourcefulness and wisdom. When we learn to interact with our world using both/and thinking, we are better able to cope with stress, flourish in the face of complexities and constant change, and evolve our individual and collective wellbeing.”*

—RENEE MOOREFIELD, CEO, WISDOM WORKS GROUP