

Nina Rosoff. *The Power of Paradox: The Protean Leader and Leading in Uncertain Times The Thank You Economy*. New York: Routledge, 2011, 240 pages.

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Subject Area: Human Resource Management and Organizational Behavior

*The Power of Paradox* introduces a new type of leader—The Protean Leader—whose defining characteristics are flexibility, versatility, and adaptability. Much like the mythical Greek god Proteus, Protean leaders deal with change and uncertainty by consciously and purposefully re-birthing and re-shaping themselves into new, different leaders, ready to address unexpected challenges and lead organizations to success. Protean leaders are able to achieve this degree of adaptability mainly because they recognize the power of paradox, which helps them see opportunities where others do not. To take advantage of these opportunities, Protean leaders let some of their ego defenses down (which enables re-birth), and force themselves to think about issues not as one-dimensional but as multi-faceted (which breeds success). This new, Protean type of leader is a needed alternative to the more traditional, Heroic leader whose command-and-control style causes her to break down under fluidity and ambiguity. Thus, Protean leaders are best equipped to successfully face the unprecedentedly challenging and uncertain times of today.

Nina Rosoff's idea for the Protean leader was born through her deep experiences as a consultant to leaders from various different business sectors and cultural backgrounds. These experiences led Rosoff to identify seven paradoxes most leaders face but few deal with successfully. She realized that the successful ones were Protean—they demonstrated adaptability, courage and divergent thinking. She validated her new leadership model by conducting in-depth interviews with 19 established leaders, asking them questions about how they handle the seven paradoxes and what they have learned from them. Based on these interviews, Rosoff fleshed out her initial ideas, describing seven key leadership actions and seven key leadership capabilities—one per each of the seven most common paradoxes leaders face.

Rosoff's main assertion (and hope) is that every leader can become Protean by understanding the power of paradox, learning to engage in the seven Protean leadership actions, and ultimately acquiring the seven Protean capabilities. Rosoff describes each of the seven paradoxes in one chapter, and illustrates each paradox (and how to handle it) by sharing insights from the 19 Protean leaders she interviewed. The final two chapters bring all the various threads together, weaving Rosoff's Protean leadership model.

The first paradox (ch. 2) is the Connection paradox which says: The more technology connects, the less connected are our relationships. Brought about by the rapid adoption of information technology as a communication medium, this paradox highlights how truly unconnected we are despite our increased ability to communicate with many more individuals than ever before. What's lost is the depth of our relationships. Rosoff advises—and her 19 leaders confirm—a more purposeful use of information technology, and an increased emphasis on face-to-face communication. Hence, the Protean action leaders should take to address this paradox is to

deepen their relationship, and corresponding Protean capability leaders would acquire is integrity.

The second paradox (ch. 3) is the Decision paradox, which says: The more leaders disown the decision-making process, the more committees form; the more committees form, the less ownership for decisions. Brought about by the popularity of participative leadership approaches and the use of teams at the workplace, this paradox highlights how too much of a good thing can be a bad thing if individual accountability gets lost in the process. While Rosoff does not advise leaders to regress to the command-and-control style of leadership, she cautions them—and her 19 interviewees concur—to retain their ultimate decision-making authority. Hence, the Protean action leaders should take to handle this paradox is to own their decisions, and the Protean capability they would gain is accountability.

The third paradox (ch. 4) is the Growth paradox, which says: The more growth, the greater the complexity; the greater the complexity, the more difficult it is to sustain growth. This paradox is about the paralyzing effects of fear once leaders realize they may be in over their heads. Rosoff's and her interviewees' solution is that leaders must face their fears honestly, and admit any deficiencies and shortcomings; this simple action liberates leaders and allows them to move forward. Hence, the Protean action leaders should take to handle this paradox is to manage complexity, and the Protean capability they would gain is the ability to embrace ambiguity.

The fourth paradox (ch. 5) is the Static Organization paradox, which says: The more risk taking is suppressed, the greater the decline of the organization toward static equilibrium; The greater the decline of the organization toward static equilibrium, the more risk-taking there is. Rosoff explains how sticking to a vision can stifle an organization; instead, she recommends continuous learning and change enabled by asking questions from those at the core and at the margins, and carefully *hearing* what they have to say. Hence, the Protean action leaders should take to handle this paradox is to find the hidden leaders (and learn from them and/or use them as change agents), and the Protean capability leaders would gain is continuous learning.

The fifth paradox (ch. 6) is the More paradox, which says: The more we want happiness, the less we have; The less happiness we have, the more we want. This paradox is less well explained and Rosoff does not seem to take a clear position on whether “more” is morally justifiable or not. The 19 leaders she interviewed are similarly split in their take on the “more” paradox, some stating that money and greed are naturally what we all should strive for, while others discussing the moral and ethical implications of greed for society or the planet. Hence, taking a balanced approach, Rosoff contends that the Protean action to take in order to handle this paradox is to minimize greed, and the corresponding Protean capability leaders would gain is good judgment.

The sixth paradox (ch. 7) is the Meaning paradox, which says: The harder we look for meaning outside ourselves, the less we find it; The less we find meaning outside ourselves, the harder we look for it. Rosoff and her 19 leaders wisely tell us that true meaning comes when you work to fulfill your own yearnings, not others' expectations. Rosoff advises leaders to bring meaning to work, not to search for meaning at work. Hence, the Protean action leaders should take to handle this paradox is to become meaningful, and the Protean capability they would gain is humility.

The seventh and final paradox (ch. 8) is the Purpose paradox, which says: Without serving a larger purpose, financial success is the purpose; The more financial success is the purpose, the less a larger purpose is served. As with the More paradox, the Purpose paradox is not as well

developed. Here again Rosoff does not take a clear stand on whether or not financial success is a worthwhile purpose. While the wording of the paradox suggests that she thinks it is not, a fair number of her leaders stated they believe their true purpose is financial success. Towards the end of the chapter, Rosoff says that any purpose—large or small—is better than having no purpose at all. Hence, the Protean action leaders should take to handle this paradox is to serve a larger purpose, and the Protean capability they would gain is life balance.

The last two chapters summarize the main insights from the 19 leader interviews, along with these leaders' definitions of leadership and their lessons learned from their own leadership experiences. The concluding chapters also discuss how the power of paradox works, and culminate in Rosoff's Protean leadership model. In short, Protean leaders lead with integrity, demonstrate accountability, embrace ambiguity, learn continuously, practice good judgment, and become meaningful with humility and balance.

As a leadership scholar, my initial reaction to this book was: "Oh no, not another "new" type of leader, please!". In my experience, consultants often invent "new" leadership models by simply thinking up a cool new name, while in effect recycling well-explored concepts. I believe this practice only serves to muddle an already complex and even confusing concept. However, brushing aside the dramatic new name Rosoff had chosen to use for her new type of leader, a very important, yet still unexplored, leadership quality emerges – adaptability. Hence, I found myself rather in agreement with the author that we could all benefit from including adaptability in our discussion of leadership, and in fact making it center-piece.

Borrowing from Greek mythology myself, I have to say that The Achilles' heel of the book is that becoming adaptable is significantly harder than we are led to believe. Adaptability is not a simple skill that can be easily taught and learned; rather, it is a function of a complex mix of traits, predispositions, cognitive abilities and other skills that few individuals naturally excel at. Still, what this book does successfully—in the proud tradition of the old but still relevant Situational Leadership approach—is turn leaders' attention to the importance of stopping to examine situations from different angles and forcing themselves to learn something new in the process. This, in my opinion, is the true contribution of the book.

Though I appreciate the central point of Rosoff's book (i.e., the focus on adaptability), I am not satisfied with the book overall. The writing style often left me confused as ideas were not fully developed, or well explained or supported. The author also brings in current politics in the conversation unnecessarily, and uses politics to make points which, depending on one's views, may or may not be fair. Rosoff also uses doomsday language liberally, often referring to the "uncertain times", the "unknown" and "fear" that are supposedly the hallmarks of our current existence. This flies in the face of the positive organizational behavior movement that promotes faith in the goodness of human nature and looking at the glass as half full.

More importantly, too often the interview excerpts Rosoff shares to illustrate her seven paradoxes are only tangentially related to the paradoxes, and are sometimes even contradictory to the points she seems to want to make. Finally, the pieces of the Protean leadership model itself are not well connected; for example, it is not immediately clear how becoming meaningful would help one become humble, or how serving a larger purpose would help one find life balance (not to mention that it is not clear how any of those actions would help one become more adaptable, or Protean).

The book has its strengths and weaknesses, but it should generate interest based on the discussion of the various paradoxes and the insights identified from the in-depth interviews with 19 established leaders from various industries and cultures.