

THEMATIC ARTICLE

Under pressure: how leaders react to identity threats related to their paradoxical leadership

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to understand how individuals with a paradoxical leadership identity respond to threats to that identity. To this end, we conducted a qualitative study, through interviews with 44 leaders of a Brazilian credit cooperative. After performing a content analysis, we identified five coping responses, which we coded as “Abandoning the identity”, “Defending the identity”, “Discrediting threatenings”, “Changing the meaning of the identity” and “Relativizing the relevance of the threat”. The study concludes that the choice of the type of coping strategy is crucial for the preservation or reformulation of the individual’s paradoxical leadership identity.

Keywords: Paradoxical leadership. Identity threat. Coping responses.

Sob pressão: como líderes reagem a ameaças à identidade relacionada a sua liderança paradoxal

Resumo

O objetivo deste estudo foi compreender como indivíduos com uma identidade de liderança paradoxal respondem a ameaças a essa identidade. Para isso, foi realizado um estudo de natureza qualitativa, por meio de entrevistas com 44 líderes de uma cooperativa de crédito brasileira. Após a realização de uma análise de conteúdo, identificamos cinco respostas de enfrentamento, que codificamos como “abandonando a identidade”, “defendendo a identidade”, “desacreditando ameaçadores”, “alterando o significado da identidade” e “relativizando a relevância da ameaça”. O estudo conclui que a escolha do tipo de estratégia de enfrentamento é crucial para a preservação ou reformulação da identidade de liderança paradoxal de um indivíduo.

Palavras-chave: Liderança paradoxal. Ameaça à identidade. Respostas de enfrentamento.

Bajo presión: cómo reaccionan los líderes a las amenazas de identidad relacionadas con su liderazgo paradójico

Resumen

El objetivo de este estudio fue comprender cómo los individuos con una identidad de liderazgo paradójico responden a las amenazas a esa identidad. Para ello, se realizó un estudio cualitativo, a través de entrevistas con 44 líderes de una cooperativa de crédito brasileña. Después de realizar un análisis de contenido, identificamos cinco respuestas de afrontamiento, que codificamos como “Abandono de la identidad”, “Defensa de la identidad”, “Desacreditación de las amenazas”, “Cambio del significado de la identidad” y “Relativización de la relevancia de la amenaza”. El estudio concluye que la elección del tipo de estrategia de afrontamiento es crucial para preservar o reformular la identidad de liderazgo paradójico de un individuo.

Palabras clave: Liderazgo paradójico. Amenaza de identidad. Respuestas de afrontamiento.

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INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly competitive job market, organizations have sought to hire and train leaders capable of managing contradictory demands (Smith & Lewis, 2011) and their resulting tensions (Cavalcanti, Felix, & Mainardes, 2022). It is expected, for example, that leaders are able to emphasize social organizational values, while encouraging the achievement of financial goals (Smith, Besharov, Wessels, & Chertok, 2012), promoting the implementation of standards simultaneously with the adoption of innovation practices (Shao, Nijstad, & Täuber, 2019) and leading based on collective rules, without forgetting individual needs (Volk, Waldman, & Barnes, 2022). Thus, managing these paradoxical demands has become increasingly relevant for individuals in leadership positions (Sousa et al., 2022).

However, this has not always been a popular view in leadership studies. Traditionally, situational or contingency leadership theories (e.g., Howell, Dorfman, & Kerr, 1986) have adopted a dilemma perspective to address the aforementioned tensions. In this approach, A and B are seen as independent and contradictory polarities, which must be adopted under specific conditions (Luthans & Stewart, 1977). Thus, choosing between mutually exclusive tensions (A or B) was seen as a necessary evil (Zhang, Waldman, Han, & Li, 2015). In this research, however, an emerging and contrasting view of how leaders should deal with contradictory demands is explored. We explore the concept of paradoxical leadership, which is the “[...] integration between leadership behaviors that are apparently contradictory, but also interdependent” (Volk et al., 2022, p. 1). In this case, a choice is not made between A or B, but rather A and B are chosen simultaneously.

While theoretical developments on paradoxical leadership are relatively recent (Pearce, Wassenaar, Berson, & Tuval-Mashiach, 2019; Smith et al., 2012; Volk et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2015), at the organizational level the idea of paradoxes has been discussed for the longest time (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004; O’Reilly & Tushman, 2008; Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008; Smith et al., 2012). Therefore, advances already identified in the literature on organizational paradoxes also need to be deepened at the individual level of analysis. This is relevant because the idea of paradoxes not only permeates the construction of meso structures and corporate strategies (Smith et al., 2012), but also individual-level actions (Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith, & Lewis, 2018), as is the case with leaders (Sulphey & Jasim, 2022). One of these advances obtained at the organizational level and which needs to be deepened is the implications that paradoxes bring to the idea of identity.

Albert and Whetten’s (1985) seminal work proposed that an organization’s identity should emphasize a dominant trait (centrality). However, this monolithic view of organizational identities has been challenged. Some scholars have suggested that, because they are open systems, several organizations have faced paradoxical pressures and responded to them with more hybrid and pluralistic organizational identities, which challenges the traditional idea of a single dominant trait for an organization’s identity (Ashforth & Reingen, 2014; Fiol, 2002; Jäger & Schröer, 2014; Kozica, Gebhardt, Müller-Seitz, & Kaiser, 2015; Kreiner, Hollensbe, Sheep, Smith, & Kataria, 2015). Thus, the perception has grown, for some organizations, of the formation of a paradoxical organizational identity, in which, instead of a single central trait, there is a central polarity that constitutes the “who we are” of an institution. Felix (2020a, 2021), for example, points out the formation of paradoxical organizational identities in credit cooperatives, in which the central polarity trait identified was the dynamic between idealism (cooperativism) and pragmatism (financial results). Both studies indicated that, for several members of the organizations studied, the process of social construction of a paradoxical organizational identity proved to be complex, since many tended to interpret the organization based on dilemmas and not paradoxes. In other words, they tended to interpret the organizations studied as either idealistic or pragmatic.

At the individual level of analysis, the literature on leadership identity suggests that it is not just the result of cognitions that reside in the leader’s self-concept (Day & Harrison, 2007; DeRue, Ashford, & Cotton, 2009). It is also built based on social interactions and, after the initial period of acquiring a new identity (Ashforth, 2000), it depends on validation from followers (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Thus, we understand, in this work, that an individual who presents paradoxical leadership behaviors builds a self-concept based on a central polarity (e.g., simultaneous emphasis on collective rules and individual needs of his followers) and has this self-concept validated by his followers. It can be said that he presents a paradoxical leadership identity. Given recent evidence of the positive consequences of paradoxical leadership (e.g., Sparr, Knippenberg, & Kearney, 2022; Sulphey & Jasim, 2022; Zhang, Zhang, Law, & Zhou, 2022) and the fact that the identity of an individual fulfills the function of providing self-esteem and social efficacy (Felix, 2020b; Leavitt & Sluss, 2015), the relevance of better understanding the social dynamics through which individuals experience their paradoxical leadership identity is noted.

Among these, an interactional dynamic, in particular, interests us in this work: since individuals often interpret reality based on dilemmas (A or B) and not on paradoxes (A and B), it is likely that the paradoxical self-concept of some leaders is put in check in some social interactions with their followers (Felix, 2020a). For example, some followers who expect the leader to be “pragmatist” or “idealist” may have difficulty following and socially validating their “pragmatist and idealist” identity (Felix, 2021). Depending on the leader’s susceptibility to the lack of validation from his followers, he may experience what the literature calls identity threat (Petriglieri, 2011), which is defined as a situation in which an individual perceives that his social context prevents him from affirming an aspect of his identity (Elsbach, 2003). Studies show that threats to identity can lead to a drop in performance and self-esteem (Steele, 1997), an increase in the chances of resignations (Trevor & Nyberg, 2008) and a lower tendency to accept leadership positions (Davies, Spencer, & Steele, 2005). Despite the topic’s relevance, it is still necessary to better understand the phenomenon of threat to the identity of paradoxical leaders, their responses to these threats and the implications of both for organizations.

To make this advancement in the literature, we aimed with this study to understand how individuals with a paradoxical leadership identity respond to threats to that identity. To this end, qualitative research was developed based on interviews with employees of a Brazilian credit cooperative. This research contributes to the theory and practice of paradoxical leadership by using an identity lens that allows understanding how individuals sustain and/or modify aspects of their self-concepts, which involve paradoxical leadership. Although previous literature has discussed issues of paradoxical organizational identity (Felix, 2020a), this work expands this discussion to the individual level of analysis, more specifically to the idea of leadership identity. Thus, we contribute to the literature by theorizing about relevant concepts (threats to paradoxical leadership identity and responses to them), explaining how such concepts are related (how individuals offer different responses depending on the experience of the threat) and addressing the importance of the phenomenon (why it matters).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Paradoxical Leadership

A paradox refers to the existence of two polarities that are desirable and have a relationship of tension and conflict between them, even though they are interdependent (Smith & Lewis, 2011). This concept, traditional in the fields of Philosophy and Psychology (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018), has been explored more recently in the context of work organizations (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Smith et al., 2012). Several scholars, from Laozi to Kierkegaard and Jung, have theorized about the double-edged sword contained in contradictory elements of human life (Lewis, 2000). On the one hand, traditional studies have shown that tensions between contradictory demands, if treated as interdependent, can lead to positive results. An example is the study by Eisenhardt and Westcott (1988), which showed how Toyota leaders adopted a perspective of paradoxes when viewing conflicting demands, such as deadlines and quality, not as exclusive, but as synergistic. Rothenberg (1979) highlighted how exponents of art and science, such as Mozart, Einstein and Picasso, used the strategy of reconciling the pressure by producing with reflective leisure to create their works. On the other hand, there are also those who show that tensions between these polarities and contradictory demands can threaten our need for cognitive and emotional stability, challenge our egos and provoke defensive responses that lead to paralysis in the face of conflicts seen as irreconcilable (Smith & Berg, 1987; Vince & Broussine, 1996).

More specifically, the emergence of the concept of organizational paradoxes has led to a growing search to understand how leaders deal with contradictory and interdependent pressures, tensions and demands (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Smith & Lewis, 2011) and what leads some managers to achieve success in this task, while others are not successful (Fürstenberg, Alfes, & Kearney, 2021; Pan, 2021; She, Li, Yang, & Yang, 2020; Smith et al., 2012; Waldman & Bowen, 2016). In this context, the concept of paradoxical leadership emerges as a leadership approach that would be more suitable to produce satisfactory results in dynamic and complex environmental contexts (Yi, Mao, & Wang, 2019; Zhang et al., 2015). The term refers to “[...] integration between leadership behaviors that are apparently contradictory, but also interdependent” (Volk et al., 2022, p. 1). According to the paradoxical leadership perspective, the leader must be able to adopt, in response to complex contingency pressures, behaviors that present a certain contradiction between them, even though they are interdependent (Backhaus, Reuber, Vogel, & Vogel, 2021).

We have an example of this when leaders are faced with the need to boost their team's performance and, at the same time, promote their followers' sense of belonging (Smith & Lewis, 2011). A leader without a paradox mindset would tend to think that in order to achieve performance, he should probably sacrifice the level of his followers' sense of belonging to the group. Another recurring behavior of a leader who does not adopt the paradoxical approach would be to cultivate his followers' sense of belonging and connection at the expense of performance, failing to correct or challenge team members for fear of losing a sense of group. In both cases, the leader would be adopting a dilemma mentality (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2012), according to which it is understood that one polarity can be achieved despite the other. In the case of paradoxical leadership, the mentality is that followers' sense of belonging must be stimulated via improved performance and vice versa. In this case, the idea is that the sense of "us" should be built based on unity to achieve goals or celebrating achievements. Thus, the polarities of the paradox (in this example, performing and belonging) are seen as interdependent (Zhang et al., 2015), and not as a choice to be made between mutually exclusive demands (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018).

Leaders are subjected to paradoxical demands, but they are not the only ones. Such pressures also affect their followers, which is why it is expected that they will also present paradoxical behaviors so that a better result is obtained (Li, Xue, Liang, & Yan, 2020; Sparr et al., 2022). In some cases, followers join their leaders in adopting paradoxical behaviors (Felix, 2021; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). However, in other cases, the way followers perceive and interpret the paradoxical demands coming from their leaders can lead them to experience a certain degree of uncertainty, conflicts and perception of incoherence (Bashir, 2021) and, consequently, to resist and react defensively (Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016).

Given this, an essential element of the paradoxical leadership literature consists of examining the interactional dynamics relating to the relationship between leaders and followers, in terms of how both respond to paradoxical demands (Sparr et al., 2022; Xue, Li, Liang, & Li, 2020). There is a consensual view that the leader has a central role in the task of building an interaction with his followers, in which both can contribute to a satisfactory collective response to paradoxical demands (Sparr, 2018; Zhang et al., 2015). This justifies the fact that the core of the literature on paradoxical leadership is to basically examine the leader's behaviors, placing in the background his interaction with his followers (Park, Shim, Hai, Kwon, & Kim, 2021). However, there is a need to better understand the interactional dynamics between leaders and followers when the former define themselves as paradoxical in their leadership style (Felix, 2020a; Fiol, 2002). In this work, we use the concept of identities to explore these dynamics.

Identity

According to the Social Identity Theory, by Tajfel and Turner (1979), an identity is a self-definition made by an individual, constructed based on his social interactions, in the search to answer the questions "who am I?" or "who are we?" (Ashforth, Schinoff, & Rogers, 2016). Thus, a paradoxical leadership identity occurs when a leader sees himself as someone who reconciles the achievement of contradictory and interdependent demands at the same time. Based on this approach, we adopt the term "identity" here interchangeably with "self", a practice that is recurrent in the literature (e.g., Gomes & Felix, 2019; Leavitt & Sluss, 2015). According to Petriglieri (2011), identities: are multiple (an individual does not define himself in a single way, but in several); dynamic (can change over time); and lead to the creation of self-value (produce self-esteem).

In this way, identities are multiple, as individuals construct different selves and activate them considering characteristics of their interlocutors (Felix, Júlio, & Rigel, 2023), as well as other issues, constituents of social interactions, related to the context (Felix & Cavazotte, 2019; Felix, Galon, & Amaro, 2023; Obodaru, 2017). Based on this idea, we understand that the fact that someone adopts a paradoxical leadership identity does not mean that other conflicting identities related to leadership cannot coexist.

Identities can change over time, despite providing cognitive and emotional stability to the self-concept (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014). The self reflects the social context (Mead, 1934) and, as this context tends to change throughout an individual's life, changes in identity are not rare. Consequently, it is possible to suggest that, when a leader constructs a paradoxical leadership identity, it does not mean that his self will necessarily remain stable, and his leadership style and self-concept cannot return to a non-paradoxical self in the future.

Ultimately, identities reflect how people interpret themselves. This interpretation tends to be done in a way that leads individuals to have a positive view of themselves (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010). Thus, one of the functions of an identity is to provide individuals with a satisfactory level of emotional and cognitive stability, a characteristic that is seen as fundamental for individuals to be productive and find satisfaction at work (Felix, Fernandes & Mansur, 2023). Cooper & Thatcher, 2010). Therefore, the paradoxical leadership identity will only be constructed if the individuals in question admire the notion of paradox management, to the point of having a positive view of themselves when seeing themselves as bearers of a paradox mentality.

Identity threat

Differently from what happens with most concepts within the theme of identities (Felix, Dourado & Nossa, 2023), identity threat does not have a definition that is dominantly accepted in the literature (Petriglieri, 2011). It is possible to find broad definitions (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Kreiner & Sheep, 2009), associated with specific environments (Elsbach, 2003; Major & O'Brien, 2005) and even studies that do not define the concept, despite using it (Anteby, 2008; Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007). In the literature, there are some definitions for the term in studies in the fields of organizations, social psychology and stress.

In this article, we opted for a comprehensive definition that summarizes the main elements covered in other definitions found in the literature. Thus, we understand threats to identity as “[...] experiences evaluated as indicative of potential damage to the value, meanings and representation of an identity” (Petriglieri, 2011, p. 644). Considering the idea that promoting self-esteem is one of the functions of an identity (Dutton et al., 2010; Conde, Felix, & Moreira, 2023), it is possible to say that, when an individual has a self-concept that includes being a paradoxical leader, he does so because he believes that this form of leadership is positive. However, when other people contest or criticize the value of paradoxical leadership (Felix, 2021), depending on how the leader assimilates and interprets the fact, this could be characterized as an identity threat.

Although threats to identity are often seen as originating in the figure of a threat, the locus of the threat is always the individual whose identity is threatened and not the person who caused it (Petriglieri, 2011). An identity threat occurs when the subject receiving the action attributes to the interaction with another significant person the interpretation that something affected their self-concept (Smith, 1991). For this reason, it is common to understand that the same situation can be seen as positive or neutral by one person, while another can see it as an identity threat (Leavitt & Sluss, 2015).

Because they affect individuals' sense of self-worth, threats to identity are not often ignored. Not infrequently, when faced with situations perceived as threats to their identity, many people tend to employ coping responses to minimize the negative effects on their identity (Smith, 1991). These coping responses are mainly discussed in the literature on discrimination and stigmatization (Berjot & Gillet, 2011; Wehrle, Klehe, Kira, & Zikic, 2018).

Interpreting events as threats to identity leads individuals to adopt anticipatory coping responses, which aim to minimize negative effects (Van Laar et al., 2019). In this process, individuals commonly tend to use cognitive and emotional resources to mitigate the damage caused by the threat. This means that they tend to reflect and reach new conclusions about the perceived event or seek to manage the boundaries of their emotions so that their self-esteem is not affected by a threat to their identity (Major & O'Brien, 2005). These cognitive and emotional processes are usually directed both at the source of the threat (the individual or situation that led to the threat interpretation) and at the threatened identity itself (Petriglieri, 2011). An example of a cognitive process in a coping response to an identity threat would be an individual's reflection on how much the context may have influenced him to adopt a certain action that led another person to contest a certain aspect of his identity. Emotional processes can be exemplified by a situation in which individuals, upon interpreting that their identity has been threatened, feels angry at the interactant from whom the original threat came and starts to discredit it because they understand that the individual responsible for originating it is not in a position that allows him to judge them.

After reviewing the literature relating to the concepts and theories that underlie this study, we present in the following section the methodological aspects used.

CASE CHARACTERIZATION

CoopFin (fictitious name), the institution where the leaders interviewed in this study work, is one of the main financial institutions in Brazil. It is made up of a group of credit cooperatives that offer the market services generally provided by banks, such as loans, bank accounts, credit cards, consortiums and investments. Despite its similarity to banks, CoopFin is a cooperative, which means that its customers are considered owners of the organization and that the profits (called “leftovers”) obtained at the end of a year are distributed to its members. This cooperative was founded in 1997, with the purpose of providing rural credit in less favored regions of Brazil. This reveals its social and/or idealistic vocation. Thus, with the tax advantages of being a credit cooperative, and not a bank, CoopFin is characterized by providing society with banking services with conditions that are more favorable to the consumer than those offered by banks. At the time this study was carried out, the company had 898 employees in leadership positions.

However, his path was not without difficulties. In 2006, a year that revealed a crisis in the Brazilian cooperative system, when several cooperatives went bankrupt, CoopFin was strongly pressured by the Central Bank of Brazil to demonstrate solid consistency and financial stability so that it could continue with its operations. In response to such pressures, the cooperative began to implement management more based on the search for financial performance. Several new managers who had worked in the traditional banking system were hired to facilitate this change in strategic direction. The result was the growth of the cooperative in urban areas of the country, as well as a substantial growth in the institution’s social capital.

This movement, however, generated a side effect: several banks spoke to the Central Bank, complaining that CoopFin enjoyed the tax benefits of being a cooperative, but was, in fact, operating with market practices typical of a bank. Under pressure, in 2011 the organization underwent a movement to rescue the cooperative culture, by reducing its margins and conducting intensive training for its leaders so that they could incorporate cooperative values into their management practices.

In 2018, after a new financial crisis caused by a certain complacency generated by the previous movement in favor of cooperative values, the cooperative’s presidency began a training program in paradoxical leadership. The idea was that CoopFin’s new strategic orientation would be supported by a change in its leaders’ behavior: instead of emphasizing the values of cooperativism (idealism) or the search for financial results (pragmatism), leaders should emphasize both simultaneously. In this way, such leaders would be adopting a paradox mentality, in which both polarities would be seen as interdependent, despite the tension they maintain between them. In this program, leaders were encouraged to seek ways to achieve financial results through cooperative values, not despite them. This same understanding that the duality of “cooperative values” and “financial goals” could be interpreted as a paradox is found in previous studies on microcredit institutions (Battilana & Dorado, 2010) and, more specifically, on credit cooperatives (Felix, 2021, 2020b; Nelson et al., 2016). The aforementioned studies do not show that the relationship between “cooperative values” and “financial goals” should be treated as a paradox, but rather that the adoption of this mentality can be applied to the case. Until the date of this study, CoopFin continued to conduct training with its leaders on how to exercise paradoxical leadership.

The training content involved an explanation of the paradoxes’ concept with recurring examples in the literature (performance x belonging; organization x learning, for example), based on practical cases. Next, training participants were encouraged to describe CoopFin’s central paradoxes and how they thought polarities should be managed: as a choice or as interdependent. At this stage, the paradox between idealism (cooperative values) and pragmatism (financial goals) was highlighted as the main one. Finally, analyzes were made of the organizational narratives that promoted each of this paradox’s polarities and their implications for leadership were discussed.

METHOD

Interviewees' profile and participant selection technique

The present study was carried out based on a case study methodology (Yin, 2015). Data was collected through interviews with CoopFin leaders. Its leaders received, between December 2018 and May 2019, a 6-month training on paradoxical leadership, as part of a strategic redirection program that seeks to direct the organization towards the simultaneous achievement of financial goals (pragmatism) and the promotion of values cooperatives (idealism). Participants were selected for the training because they had little or no contact with the topic previously. This shows that the concept of paradoxical leadership presented was partially or totally new to them. CoopFin has a prominent position among Brazilian financial institutions and was chosen as the case object of this study because it was involved in a series of changes due to paradoxical pressures and explicitly adopted a paradoxical leadership development program.

To select study participants, we sent an email to CoopFin's Human Resources Department asking that it be forwarded to all employees in leadership positions who had participated in leadership training that began in 2018. In this message, we presented a definition of paradoxical leadership identity and invited them to participate in a survey through an interview:

Dear CoopFin leader,

You recently participated in a 6-month training on Paradoxical Leadership. In this training, there was a lot of discussion about what a paradox is, what paradoxical leadership is, and you identified the central paradox of CoopFin: the search to reconcile idealism (cooperative values) with pragmatism (financial results).

At this moment, together with a partner researcher who is undertaking a master's degree in Administration, we are carrying out research on the topic of paradoxical leadership identity. An Identity is a way in which an individual defines himself through their social interactions. Through our identities, we seek to answer the questions "who am I?" or "who are we?" Thus, a paradoxical leadership identity occurs when a leader sees himself as someone who reconciles the scope of demands that are contradictory and interdependent. In the case of CoopFin, according to your own interpretations in the training, these demands would be between idealism (cooperative values) and pragmatism (financial results).

Now, we would like to ask you something. Based on everything you learned and what we wrote in this email, do you see yourself or have you seen yourself as a person who has a paradoxical leadership identity?

If not, don't worry, you can ignore this message. But if so, we would like to invite you to participate in an interview on the topic. Its time tends to vary, but it is expected to last around an hour. The interviews will take place at your place of work, preferably in a room where we can have privacy. If you are interested in participating, please send an email to [email of one of the authors] within 5 days.

Thank you very much and success to all!

After this process, we received a positive response from 89 leaders from different areas of activity (agency managers, commercial managers, members of the presidency, human resources director, technology manager, new product manager and expansion manager). Through an interspersed process of conducting interviews and rounds of data analysis, we adopted the principle of theoretical sampling (von Borell de Araujo & Álvaro-Estramiana, 2011) to select participants. This means that, in different stages of data collection, we sought to change the participants' profile in terms of age, gender, length of experience and, as a leader at CoopFin, position, so that the participants' profile allowed for a wide range of perspectives. Thus, the criterion for variation in the interviewees' profile at each stage of data collection always met the criterion of answering theoretical questions that came to mind. More specifically, at the end of the first stage, which included 10 interviews, we sought interviewees with greater career experience. At the end of the second, in which we carried out 8 interviews, we looked for participants with less experience at CoopFin. After the third round of data collection, which included 8 interviews, we sought to interview individuals at more strategic levels in the company hierarchy. Finally, after the fourth stage of data construction, in which we interviewed 9 individuals, we sought to interview more men. In the last stage, 9 new interviews were carried out. We base all these searches on our own theoretical inquiries and assumptions about the possibility of such profiles bringing new categories.

The interviews were carried out until new stages of data collection no longer represented the emergence of new categories – theoretical sufficiency – (Charmaz, 2014). After the 29th interview, no new categories were identified, according to both authors. Thus, between August 2019 and June 2020, a total of 44 interviews were carried out. As previously mentioned, we understand that the fact that the individuals interviewed identified themselves as paradoxical leaders would be sufficient to consider that they had a paradoxical identity. If the interval between training and data collection had been considerably longer, the theory, which maintains that identities need to be socially validated to be retained in the self-concept (DeRue & Ashford, 2010), would require that such validation be added as a criterion for participants' selection. However, as the interval between the end of the training and the beginning of the interviews was only 3 months, we considered that this validation would not yet be possible in this context of identity transition. Thus, we based ourselves on the understanding that newly acquired identities are considered as such considering the definition that individuals make about them and, not yet, on social validation (Ashforth, 2000). We therefore consider the criteria adopted for selecting participants to be consistent with the theory.

Interview script

The semi-structured interviews were carried out based on a script composed of central topics that should be approached informally, so that the interview seemed less like an argument and more like a dialogue, consequently the resulting naturalness could lead to the construction of more enlightening data (Charmaz, 2014). The topics were aimed at: a) understanding the individual's professional and leadership history inside and outside CoopFin; b) understanding paradoxical leadership; c) explore whether the individual really defined himself as a paradoxical leader; d) identify situations in which the interviewee felt his identity as a paradoxical leader was threatened; and e) understand how the interviewees reacted to each of the situations reported. The interviews were carried out by one of the authors in person in the agency rooms and at the regional headquarters of the organization in question and lasted, on average, 49 minutes. In all interviews, only the interviewee and interviewer were present. The organization involved authorized these interviews to be carried out in these spaces and during business hours.

Interviewees' profile

Of the 44 individuals interviewed, half (22) were men, and the other half (22) were women. Seven (15.9%) of the participants are under 30 years old, 14 (31.8%) are between 30 and 39 years old, 12 (27.3%) are between 40 and 49 years old and 11 (25%) have reached 50 years or more. For 4 years or less, 24 (54.5%) interviewees have held the leadership role, that is, the majority; only 4 (9.1%) have been in this role for a period of 5 to 9 years; and another 16, (36.4%) for 10 years or more. Finally, in relation to the time they have worked as leaders, regardless of the organization, 13 (29.6%) became leaders 4 years ago or less, 10 (22.7%), between 5 and 9 years and 21 (47.7%) for ten years or more.

Data analysis procedures

Among those interviewed, 12 authorized the recording and transcription of the interviews, while 32 only authorized the interviewer to take notes, which was respected. The analyzes were carried out immediately after the end of each data collection stage, when new interviews were carried out to test the categorical system. In each round, the recorded interviews were transcribed and then analyzed together with the notes, by one of the authors, of those that were not recorded. In each of these analysis stages, the other author received the list of codes and categorized the evidence into them or created codes if he understood that the meaning of a particular piece of evidence was not consistent with the category's name. In cases in which there was a divergence of classification between the authors, a doctoral researcher who studies the topic of identities was consulted and expressed her opinion to both authors, who, ultimately, reached a consensus regarding 96% of the categorization carried out. This procedure was inspired by Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep (2009). The categorized data is archived and in the authors' possession.

More specifically, data analysis occurred through a process inspired by grounded theory procedures (Charmaz, 2014). Thus, all coding was carried out using an open coding grid. Initially, a round of analysis was conducted in which first-order codes were generated, always starting with verbs in the gerund, with a merely descriptive function of the data. Then, these terms were classified into second-order codes, more abstract and theoretical than the initial ones, which are the five coping responses presented in the study results topic. Finally, these second-order codes were grouped into two aggregate dimensions (restructuring and paradoxical leadership identity maintenance responses). It is worth noting that the same interviewee presented evidence that was classified into more than one category, since there were different reactions from interviewees to different situations considered as threats to identity. Below, we present in detail the results found in the study.

RESULTS

Coping responses to paradoxical leadership identity threats

In this section, we present the interviewees' coping responses. Such responses were arranged into five central categories: "abandoning identity", "Changing the meaning of the identity", "Relativizing the relevance of the threat", "defending identity" and "discrediting threateners". While the first two represent ways in which individuals restructured their paradoxical identity, the last three represent ways in which they preserved them. Below, we describe each of the tactics that emerged from the data and present an example of empirical evidence that supported them.

Abandoning identity

The category "abandoning identity" was identified in the statements of 11 participants. It grouped together the reports in which the interviewees claimed that, in response to threats to their paradoxical leadership, they decided to engage in a process of identity departure. In such cases, interviewees reported not having sustainability in the identity transition for paradoxical leadership. Reports were common to this category that paradoxical leadership ended up generating a high level of ambiguity and uncertainty in those led. Consequently, the identity was either not understood or was not well regarded by a relevant part of the team. Given this, maintaining the self-concept of paradoxical leadership is no longer a source of self-esteem for the leader and, therefore, no longer makes sense. The following report illustrates this answer.

For me, it was very complicated having to deal with my subordinates. They were confused, I feel that. They were used to me always talking about cooperativism, the social side, rural credit, that sort of thing. Then I assimilated the idea of paradox, I saw that it made sense, I started to feel good being like this, managing like this. It's just strange, because when they saw me being both cooperative and resultant, it seems like they erased my cooperative side. It seems that I have become the capitalist's capitalist. I saw that it wouldn't work, people really polarize. I gave up on this thing, I thought it ended up generating more confusion than anything. My team started working better again when I stopped being this paradox thing. (E30, agency commercial manager, 58 years old, male, in a leadership position for 27 years).

This report, as well as other similar ones, indicates that some followers had difficulty interpreting the leader as someone who demonstrated a conciliatory leadership of aspects that have a high tension and contradiction between them. Some interviewees claimed that, when exerting influence guided by one of the polarities of the paradox between cooperative values (idealism) and financial results (pragmatism), they were interpreted as "incoherent", "indecisive", "confused" and "inconstant". Faced with this rejection, some preferred "[...] to leave the theory behind and not be like that anymore, because in practice the theory is different" (E20, agency commercial manager, 32 years old, male, in a leadership position for 4 years). Thus, abandoning the paradoxical leadership identity was one of the answers found.

Changing the meaning of the identity

We noticed, in some cases, a perception that abandoning the leadership identity would be costly for individuals who felt threatened, since there had been an investment by the cooperative in the training carried out and a broad strategic movement to search for paradox management. In order not to openly oppose the idea of paradoxical leadership, some participants presented a response that we coded as “changing the meaning of the identity”. In this case, an explicit departure from the paradoxical leadership identity was not adopted, but a search to construct a new meaning for what paradoxical leadership is, distinct from that learned in the training provided by the bank. Among the 44 interviewees, 9 presented evidence that was included in this categorization. One interviewee’s report exemplifies this category:

The board trained us on the paradoxical leadership course, but my team did not. So, when I came back from training, I trained my team, told them how it was and started to be like that, more cooperative and performance oriented. For a while, I tried to sell myself that way. But people started to see me as a bank manager, and this is something very negative here, we always criticize banks, it’s cultural. I felt that I was destroying an image of a good manager that I had been creating for 15 years here, of a manager who is proud of cooperatives. Then I started to change, saying that paradoxical leadership was having people on the team who were more cooperative and others who were more profit-oriented and that I could also choose which of the two would suit me best. Then I said that I had chosen cooperativism, but that didn’t stop me from being a manager of the paradox. [...] But I know that’s not it. (E44, agency general manager, 41 years old, female, in a leadership position for 9 years).

This excerpt from the interview shows that the interviewee, having her paradoxical leadership identity associated with a betrayal of the idealistic values of cooperativism, re-signified paradoxical leadership for her team. This was not the only interviewee who did so: other participants also reported that they took advantage of the fact that their subordinates had not attended the training offered by the company in 2018 and carried out identity work when seeking to give new meaning to paradoxical leadership. One of the interviewees, for example, stated that he began to associate himself with the idea of being a leader who listens to both pragmatists and idealists at CoopFin – an identity that is much closer to the notion of democratic leadership. However, not all tactics led to a restructuring of the paradoxical leadership identity. The following three categories reveal responses that enabled participants to maintain their paradoxical leadership identity.

Relativizing the relevance of the threat

The third category was titled “relativizing the relevance of the threat”. It covers situations in which the leader maintained his identity and, after an initial moment in which he experienced a threat to his paradoxical leadership, chose to reduce his sensitivity to the threat because he considered it less harmful to his sense of self. In this way, the 13 interviewees who had reports included in this category showed that sensitivity to threat can be adjustable, since they can develop a cognitive link with their paradoxical leadership identity. The following report exemplifies this finding.

I heard that I was sounding like bank HR, that I had become too soft, that I was going to make the cooperative lose its performance culture. It had everything. It seems that some people on the team didn’t see the problem, they understood, but others didn’t understand, thinking that I couldn’t decide whether it was one thing or another. I made it clear to the cooperative’s president that this was really going to happen, and that we can’t care so much about it. We must be firm if we want to create a culture of paradox. It takes time for people to understand and assimilate this way of leading. So that’s it, I’m a leader who not only sells, but I also sell correctly, in the cooperativism’s spirit [...]. I’m going to continue like this, of course I got upset, I was shaken, I doubted whether I was right [...]. But that’s it. I will continue to be like this. (E27, Human Resources manager, 46 years old, female, in a leadership position for 13 years).

As can be seen in the report presented, in several cases this strategy was accompanied by a considerable cognitive component, which means that the paradoxical leadership identity was strongly supported by a belief that this leadership approach would be appropriate and/or satisfactory. When the participant mentions: “I doubted if I was right”, she demonstrates that the

contestation regarding the effectiveness of paradoxical leadership led her to feel a threat to her identity. By relativizing the threat's importance, the interviewees preserved their paradoxical leadership identity and eliminated the threat, even with criticism and challenges remaining.

Defending identity

Another response presented by 8 of the interviewees was based on a process of convincing the interactant that the threatened identity would, in fact, be so positive for the individual and the organization that it should be maintained. In addition to being preserved, this tactic also reveals an understanding that one should seek to convince the leader to also adopt the perspective of paradox in their work. Some interviewees mentioned that, when they felt their paradoxical leadership identity was threatened, they sought to “double down” or “be even more paradoxical” by starting a process of persuasion with their interactant.

I'll be honest: I really enjoyed the training, and it really changed the way I lead. I only focused on financial performance, I confess, and I learned in the training that you can get results through cooperativism, that this is our strategic differentiator. I really became convinced of this. So, when there was someone at my agency who thought I was becoming soft, instead of giving in to the self-questioning that comes at first, I went there and taught, trying to convince the person, transform their mentality. I need the leader thinking about paradox too. (E42, agency general manager, 34 years old, male, in a leadership position for 6 years).

This report illustrates the “defending identity” coping response, since the interviewee in question not only did not give in to the self-questioning that occurred at first, but also sought to convince his interlocutor. Thus, the process of convincing the person who caused the identity threat proved to be an effective mechanism for several leaders to intensify the search for reaffirmation of their self-concept of paradoxical leadership.

Discrediting threateners

The last tactic, observed in the testimony of 14 interviewees, also allowed interviewed leaders to reaffirm their paradoxical leadership identity. This tactic was coded as “discrediting threateners” and refers to a search for ad hominem arguments that weaken the potential power of a threat, aiming to affect the image of the individual who is the source of the challenge. The logic of this tactic is that, by discrediting the person who made a criticism that came to be experienced as a threat to the paradoxical identity, his reputation is affected and, consequently, his argument loses strength.

The manager of my agency, my superior, didn't really like this idea of paradox and has sometimes criticized me, saying that I don't produce many results, that I've been talking a lot about cooperativism. The problem is that I'm focusing on results and cooperativism, both, but he doesn't see it. He thinks I became a church. When he wants to undermine my morale in front of my team, I jokingly say: 'so, he'll be a knife in the skull too' [...]. Knife in the skull is the battle cry at Bank A [fictitious name for the bank where this employee worked before being hired by the cooperative]. People laugh, and with that I feel like I can defend myself and continue to be able to truly be a leader of paradox. (E20, commercial manager, 32 years old, male, in a leadership position for 4 years).

As in the report presented, several interviewees stated that they had discredited the attackers, often through ironic, humorous and derogatory insinuations. One of the interviewees even said that “[...] jokingly we can say anything, we can even cramp the style of someone who came from [name of a private bank] without getting too bad”. As you can see, this tactic has a relevant social component, given that the process of discrediting the violator often aims to “convince the rest of the team” that the paradoxical leadership identity of the threatened individual is positive and worthy of admiration.

Having presented the coping responses identified in the interviews carried out, in the next section, we proceed to discuss the results.

DISCUSSION

The present study was carried out with the aim of understanding how individuals with a paradoxical leadership identity respond to threats to that identity. Five coping responses were identified: two of them lead to an abandonment of the paradoxical leadership identity, and another three allow the leader to preserve their identity. This result makes it possible to advance the literature on paradoxical leadership, as it is a theoretical effort aimed at explaining how individuals react to resistance to this form of leadership. In the literature on organizational paradoxes, studies that analyze how institutions seek to overcome resistance to paradoxical management are not uncommon (Felix, 2021, 2020a; Smith & Lewis, 2011). However, at an individual level of analysis, although there are studies on how leaders make decisions based on paradoxes (Smith, 2014) and the effects of paradoxical leadership (Li et al., 2020; Pan, 2021), it is clear that there is a need to better understand how leaders respond to resistance and threats to paradoxical leadership.

Based on previous studies on threats to identities (Leavitt & Sluss, 2015) and the findings of this study, we emphasize that the responses to coping with threats to paradoxical leadership presented here are not fully rational and planned, as some might suggest. This makes the mapping carried out especially relevant, since the findings allow us to understand how a paradoxical leadership identity tends to be maintained or abandoned when faced with a threat. This finding provides insight into the phenomenon of identity transition, which occurs when leaders start to see themselves or stop seeing themselves as paradoxical leaders.

This study also advances the paradoxical leadership literature by adopting an identity-based perspective on this phenomenon. Until now, previous studies have explored the concept of paradoxical leadership behaviors (Zhang et al., 2015) and paradoxical leadership as a style of influence on followers, based on an idea of managing contradictory but interdependent polarities (Volk et al., 2015). al., 2022). Previous studies have already explored the phenomenon of individuals incorporating the management of paradoxes into their collective (organizational) identities (Felix, 2020a; Fiol, 2002). However, this study advances by discussing the phenomenon of insertion of paradoxical management into the self-concept at an individual level. Like previous studies (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; DeRue et al., 2009), we suggest that individuals can internalize an identity as a leader or follower, but we add that this internalization can go further, by encompassing a substantive content (paradoxical management) in the leader self-concept.

It is also important to discuss the implications of the results in relation to the tension between preserving paradoxical leadership and abandoning it. As reported in the methods topic, some interviewees expressed both identity preservation and identity restructuring responses. Therefore, the categories presented are not seen as exclusive. According to this result and the notion that identities are multiple and not unique, within the circumscription of different social subsystems, the same individual can adopt a strategy of nurturing their paradoxical identity in the face of higher-ranking leaders and abandoning it when faced with of his followers. On the one hand, this result challenges the stagnant and polarized view of part of the literature on identities, which defends transitions as being a more linear process (e.g., Petriglieri, 2011). On the other hand, it aligns with other emerging results in this literature, which propose that identity construction may involve pendulum movements of experimentation and harmonious coexistence of apparently conflicting identities (e.g., Hennekam & Ladge, 2022).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study made it possible to map some coping responses that individuals adopt when they feel that their identity as a paradoxical leader is threatened. This phenomenon is relatively common, since many people have a dilemma mindset and, therefore, tend to see the paradoxical mindset as confusing or as thinking that reveals indecision (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). The responses found in the data are classified into two groups: those in which the paradoxical leadership identity is preserved and those in which it is abandoned. Given that the process of responding to threats to identity tends to present limited degrees of planning and intentionality (Petriglieri & Stein, 2012), our findings demonstrate relevance in enabling leaders to be more aware of how they react to resistance to their paradoxical leadership.

This study was not without limitations, but it allows us to make suggestions for future research. First, although we have discussed how leaders respond to threats to their paradoxical leadership identity, we have not explored the process by which a given event, real or imagined, is characterized as a threat to the studied identity. Future studies can explore this phenomenon, for example, analyzing the influence of the leader's threat sensitivity on the act of interpreting interactions as possibly harmful to their self-concept. Second, this study was also limited to a description of coping responses and did not explore the conditions that make the occurrence of each of these strategies more likely. Third, the study was carried out in an organization in which there was a paradox between idealism (cooperative values) and pragmatism (financial performance). Cases involving other paradoxes could be explored and lead to other coping strategies. Fourth, our micro approach, despite providing a relevant understanding of individual behavior, may run the risk of being decontextualized. Since individual behavior does not occur in a vacuum (Felix, Mello, & von Borell, 2018), it would be interesting to analyze how the phenomenon of responses to threats to paradoxical leadership identity connects with collective spheres of organizational behavior, such as culture or organizational identity. Fifth, we only interviewed the leaders, we did not collect data regarding the reverberations of these coping responses by their followers. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the experience of those led in this process of restructuring or preserving paradoxical identity.

The results of the present study also make it possible to propose suggestions for practice. The occurrence of threats to the paradoxical leadership identity, in the case studied, was related to the fact that training on this type of leadership was given only to leaders. However, to be successful, leadership needs the behavioral adherence of followers, and interaction with those led is exclusively the responsibility of leaders. Therefore, we suggest that similar training be carried out not only with leaders, but also with their followers, in order to reduce the cognitive distance in relation to the idea of paradoxes and facilitate the creation of a paradoxical culture or identity (Felix, 2021, 2020a). Even when carried out only with leaders, it would be interesting to include in such training a topic showing the difficulties of socially validating paradoxical leadership, given that such an approach can lead people to cognitive and emotional conflicts when faced with an unfamiliar way of dealing with contradictory demands (Smith & Berg, 1987; Vince & Broussine, 1996). It is also possible to develop experiential learning strategies, in which training leaders are subjected to criticism for their paradoxical approach, react to the group and receive feedback regarding how much their coping response reflects an intentional and strategic vision or just an intuitive and reactive one. Furthermore, the description of the responses we present here may help leaders who are facing resistance to their paradoxical leadership to decide more consciously whether to adopt responses that maintain or eliminate their paradoxical leadership identity.

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