

Paradoxical Leadership in a Polarized World

Interview with Ivo Brughmans by Maurik Dippel on March 23, 2026

How do you deal with tensions that, at first glance, seem impossible to reconcile? For Ivo Brughmans - author of *(De)polarisatie*, philosopher, and management consultant - that is exactly where leadership begins: not by choosing one side against the other, but by exploring how apparently opposing values can strengthen one another. Think of biodiversity and economic growth, solidarity and individual responsibility, innovation and stability. In his view of paradoxical leadership, the central question is always the same: how do you keep tension productive, without falling into an either-or mindset?

That question is more relevant than ever. In organizations, in society, and in boardroom settings, discussions quickly harden into extremes. Polarization makes it difficult to stay in real dialogue. That is why, according to Brughmans, depolarization is not a soft or optional skill, but an essential form of leadership.

Between Opposites

Brughmans describes himself as someone who naturally lives with contradictions. He calls himself introverted and extroverted, humane and sometimes misanthropic. He may once have seen that as a burden, but over time he came to understand that this inner duality can also be a source of strength. Opposites do not have to be eliminated; they can also widen and deepen the way we think, act, and connect.

That sensitivity to difference is also rooted in his personal background. With a Dutch mother and a Belgian father, he grew up between two cultures, two languages, and different ways of seeing the world. Later, during his 25 years as a consultant, he kept seeing similar tensions return in organizations: between outsourcing and insourcing, between centralization and decentralization, between keeping control and giving space.

For Brughmans, that is no coincidence. In his view, much of social and organizational life revolves around dealing with such tensions. That is precisely why he became interested in combining apparently conflicting values. Not as a compromise, but as a search for a new ways how both sides can reinforce each other.

Polarization as Loss of Contact

Brughmans makes an important distinction between paradox and polarization. Paradoxical thinking recognizes that two sides can be true at the same time and have a clear value.

Polarization does the opposite: it pushes the forces further and further apart until contact and communication disappear.

This also changes the nature of the conversation. A conflict may still be about a concrete issue, but polarization goes much deeper. The visible disagreement is often only a trigger for a struggle over recognition, identity, or legitimacy. It may look like a discussion about substance, but in reality it is often about a more fundamental question: am I seen, and do I have the right to be here?

That is what makes polarization so persistent. Discussions are no longer held to solve a problem, but to sustain a pattern. Two camps keep confirming each other in their own certainty, while the underlying tension only grows. The result, Brughmans says, is not dialogue but two monologues facing each other.

The Layer Beneath the Debate

One of the sharpest insights in the interview is that words often carry more weight than we realize. Brughmans points out that people frequently use broad container concepts, while the real meaning remains hidden underneath. For example, we can both talk about ‘justice’ or ‘democratic,’ yet understand completely different things by them. Discussions about all kinds of lofty principles often conceal the fact that they are actually about very basic underlying needs, such as recognition, control, status, or influence. The art, then, is not to linger on the surface but to penetrate to where the real pain lies.

Even a small shift in wording can make someone feel pushed aside or excluded. You can see that in the difference between “my position is not being seen” and “I am not being seen.” The first is an issue of disagreement; the second touches on identity and recognition. For leaders and facilitators, that distinction is crucial, because it shapes how a conversation unfolds.

Values can have the same double effect. Take inclusion: a value that connects people and gives direction, but one that can also become part of someone’s identity. Once a person identifies fully with such a value, criticism of that value is quickly experienced as criticism of the person. Then listening becomes difficult and conversation nearly impossible.

What Leaders Miss

These mechanisms show up constantly in organizations. Brughmans emphasizes that polarization does not only happen between individuals, but also within and between teams, departments, partners, and leaders. That means it requires a different way of looking. Not only at the facts or the reports, but at the signals in the undercurrent.

That is not easy for leaders under pressure. They have targets to hit, decisions to make, and momentum to maintain. Precisely for that reason, there is a risk of brushing aside tension too quickly. But what you suppress does not disappear; it starts simmering beneath the surface and can keep influencing the organization for years, especially after mergers or reorganizations.

Brughmans therefore argues for a different response to resistance or impatience in organizations. People who seem to be “complaining” may actually be revealing something important. Their behavior may point to an organization that has drifted out of balance, perhaps by becoming too business-driven, too people-focused, too rigid, or too loose.

Slowing Down to Understand

That does not mean leaders should become less decisive. On the contrary: Brughmans believes organizations also need decisiveness. But that decisiveness must be paired with a deeper understanding of complexity. Speed can be useful, but not when it comes at the expense of understanding what is really going on.

This brings the conversation to an important distinction between simple, complicated, and complex. Complicated issues are like a watch: they have parts you can analyze. Complex issues work differently. Everything is connected, and every intervention triggers a counter-reaction.

In such contexts, linear solutions do not work well. A choice that seems logical today may create new tension tomorrow. That is why paradoxical leadership requires the ability to make temporary decisions without pretending those decisions are final. Leadership becomes a continuous practice of balancing, adjusting, and re-evaluating.

The Power of Better Questions

A powerful theme in the interview is Brughmans’ belief that leadership is not mainly about giving answers, but about asking better questions. How can we achieve economies of scale and still stay close to the customer? How can we be substantively strong and still operate at volume? How can we provide certainty without losing sight of complexity?

That kind of thinking requires a non-linear narrative. It is not about quick fixes, but about developing the skill of navigating. That also means that we must learn to live with the discomfort of ‘not knowing exactly’ and the possibility of making mistakes.. Especially in a VUCA world - where volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity are the norm - that is essential. Brughmans sees that some leaders, faced with such uncertainty, look for simple answers and fast action, while reality demands more nuance.

That is why collective intelligence matters so much. No single person needs to have all the answers; the goal is to bring different perspectives together and let them strengthen one another. The challenge is not to erase differences, but to integrate them.

Listening Beyond the Survey

At the end of the conversation, the question arises how this relates to common HR practices, such as surveys. Brughmans does not reject them, but he sees them mainly as a starting point. They can provide signals, but they do not automatically explain what those signals mean.

The real question is: why are people saying what they are saying? What needs, concerns, or tensions lie beneath the surface? And which solutions are already being tentatively suggested, even if they are not yet fully seen? Brughmans argues that much of the value lies in the middle ground, not at the extremes.

By doing so listening shifts from measuring to understanding. From collecting to interpreting. From reacting to results to truly engaging with the underlying reality of the organization.

Closing Perspective

The conversation with Ivo Brughmans shows that polarization is not only a social issue, but also a leadership challenge. In organizations where tension, change, and competing interests come together, the ability to deal with contradiction is not a luxury - it is a necessity.

Paradoxical leadership therefore asks for more than consistency or speed. It calls for attention, language, patience, and a willingness to look beneath the surface. Those who learn to do that discover that opposites do not always have to be resolved in order to remain productive together.

Read more: Ivo Brughmans, *Paradoxical Leadership. How to Make Complexity an Advantage* (University of Toronto Press, 2023) and on <https://de-polarisation.com>