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-Embedded Paradox and Modernization in Work Place

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Process of Learning Paradox in the Japanese Context
- Embedded Paradox and Modernization in Work Place

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Abstract

This study clarifies how people working in Japan learned paradox theory based on the outcome of a series of online training on paradoxical leadership. Paradox theory has been the focus of attention in management studies, and its philosophy originates in Asian cultures. Japanese workplaces can be seen as complicated places that have been embedded in Japanese culture and simultaneously have the effect of Western working culture. Paradox is embedded in Japanese company activity because of its cultural context; however, the job scope of each one is becoming narrower and their language use is becoming more explicit because of modernization. Therefore, the paradox is seen as a problem for Japanese working people.

The observation of participants' discussion and outcome of their report also shows that they see the paradox as a "problem to be solved" and wish to learn a solution when the training started. They gradually understand the idea of paradox theory; each condition relies on each other, goes back and forth, synergizing each other, but never disappears. Participants then became interested in methods to navigate paradox such as guardrail, gradually gaining a positive image of paradox.

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Introduction

Paradox theory is focused on in management theory in addition to dominant theories such as dilemma or tradeoff. Being flexible is a key to survive in rapidly changing world for enterprises. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic caused enterprises to abruptly change their plans. This paradox's insights and behavior can be a key for making a strong company culture. Therefore, the paradox educational perspective has recently gained scholars' attention, regarding whether education on paradox theory is actually possible, and if we should educate all employees or only managers (Batool & Sarwar, 2023; Griffin et al., 2022; Ochiai et al. 2023).

Although paradox is receiving attention in the context of rapid global change, it originates from ancient Asian philosophy. Revealing the relationship between attitudes toward paradox and cultural context may enable appropriate navigation of paradox based on the cultural context of the company location. Therefore, this study clarifies the paradox learning process in its relation with the Japanese context using the data of an online course on paradox for working people in Japan.

Theoretical Background: Paradox

Paradox in management study means a condition in which interrelated yet opposing elements continue to exist simultaneously. The paradox theory proposes a view to appreciate such conditions and synergize those different elements (Smith & Lewis, 2022).

Enterprises today continuously manage relationships with multiple stakeholders, cultures, problems of global environmental change, and so on. Paradox is proposed in addition to the dominant management concepts of dilemma, choosing one from two or more alternatives (Cameron & Quinn, 1988), and tradeoff, choosing one loses the benefits of the other side (Modigliani & Miller 1958), to manage in this complicated situation.

The Yin-yang model of Chinese philosophy is often used to explain paradox. The balanced circle of the Yin-yang model shows the interdependent and continuous relationship of man and woman depending on each other. As is evident from the fact that Western researchers cite this Chinese philosophy, the content of paradox theory resembles eastern philosophy. The existing study also shows that Eastern people have more paradoxical thoughts than Western people (Keller et al. 2017). This cultural study states how people behave using paradox perceptions instead of revealing the paradox learning process related to culture. Ochiai et al. (2023) studied the paradox learning process, focusing on how the paradox mindset increases by education and its learning process; the Ochiai's study is not focused on cultural background either.

This study, therefore, focuses on the cultural-related paradox learning process: how Japanese people learned paradox by educational intervention. The paradox training course was done in Japanese to people who work in Japan.

Theoretical Background: Japanese Business Context

Japanese corporate activity was focused on by scholars in the Japanese period of high economic

growth, where Japanese companies were characterized by strong membership (Ouchi, 1981). Japanese people used to strive to achieve recognition and appreciation from other members, and the Japanese long-term hiring system also pushed this tendency. This membership orientation formed a strong commitment to the company, including long working hours. The employees' behavior meet with company demand, and led to the company's success. This kind of Japanese work value formed a particular internal communication skill called "Nemawashi, informal communication to organize feedback of the people concerned and having support from them before having formal meeting" (Saito, 1982) or bottom-up "Kaizen, continuous improvement by people working at the site" activities (Singh & Singh, 2009).

However, the manufacturing centered economy and Japanese high economic development gradually declined. Japanese work value affected by the membership culture caused several social problems such as workplace harassment or Karoshi, work to death (Kanai, 2009). In addition, the individualistic career view affected by western culture has increased. This caused the tendency of job specialization, where the duty of each one became more explicit in a company. Developing a portable skill to change jobs became necessary to survive in this situation   (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare of Japan: https://www.mhlw.go.jp/).

Method

An online course, "Paradoxical Leadership Development Program," was conducted by the Collaborative Research Chair for Paradoxical Leadership, Graduate School of Management, Kyoto University for people working in Japan. The researcher analyzed the results of the observation of the participants' discussions, assignments, and reports. This course was advertised by Kyoto University Original Co., Ltd., an industry-academic collaboration company of Kyoto University, and through online advertisement; a total of 25 people from 17 companies participated. The content of the course was as follows.

Dates:
Jan 23, 2023, Jan 30, 2023, Feb 6, 2023, Feb 13, 2023, Feb 27, 2023
(from 15:00 to 18:00 on each date)

Theme:
Jan 23, 2023: What is Paradoxical Leadership
Jan 30, 2023: Strategy, Business, and Paradoxical Leadership
Feb 6, 2023: Paradoxical Leadership in Organization Management
Feb 13, 2023: Japanese Company, Individuals and Paradoxical Leadership
Feb 27, 2023: How to Practice Paradoxical Leadership

Target:

Management Leaders in organizations (management level or higher)

Individuals related to educational strategy for management

Time for a discussion was provided between each lecture, where the participants can share their understanding and questions with each other. Five lecturers observed the participants' feedback by going through the discussion groups and shared the results of the observation after the lecture in a lecturer group. Furthermore, participants were required to answer the questionnaire about their understanding and impressions after each lecture. They were also asked to do an assignment related to paradox in their own company. The researcher summarized those results and analyzed the participants' process of learning paradox.

Findings

Paradox in Japanese (paradokusu) has a somewhat negative image; participants initially thought that the paradox is something to be solved and assumed the lecturer would give them a solution for it. After the lecturer taught them about Paradox theory in management studies in the first session, the participants look confused by the gap between their initial image and actual paradox theory. As described below, this tendency gradually decreased, however, level of understanding depends on the participant; some actually held this impression until the final stage of the program.

> As an overall impression of the lecture, it is unclear if the paradoxical leadership is an approach to resolve paradox or it is a leadership technique to manage organizations and companies by making the best use of paradoxical situations. I feel as if the academic explanation is proceeding without clarity, and I am not sure if I understand it at this point.
> (From participant's feedback of first lecture)

> Is the paradoxical leader oriented toward "eliminating contradictions"? or the essential aim is the result (outcome) brought about by the elimination (compatibility) of contradictions?
> (From the assignment before fifth lecture)

Along with the lecture progresses, the participants started to understand that the paradox was explained as a positive concept, not as something to reject. Therefore, they realized that they needed to release their initial negative image of paradox and that this course would not give them a solution.

> I understand being aware of the balance of paradoxes is necessary as an employee who is in charge of management and corporate planning.
> (From the assignment before fifth lecture)

Paradox is not a problem but it is a necessity for reforming the organizations?
(From the assignment before fifth lecture)

Owing to this change of mind, participants' interest moved toward how they can embrace a paradoxical situation. They initially hoped to receive a solution for paradox, implying that being in a paradoxical situation is stressful for them. To decrease this stress, the concept of guardrail, determining the limit in paradoxical management to navigate paradoxical situations, received considerable attention from the participants.

> Paradoxes are to coexist rather than be compatible, and guardrails should be used for continuous paradoxical management.
> (From the final report assignment)

> As a leader, I make it a top priority to be dynamically oriented toward the aim. Simultaneously, I ensure that guardrails (constraints) are clearly shared with team members.
> (From the final report assignment)

A lecturer taught about the ethnographic method during the second and third lectures, and also gave the participants an assignment to make a field note on paradox in their work. For example, a participant wrote about hospital management during COVID-19. It is verbally said that healthcare workers should take a day off if they are suspected to be infected by COVID-19; conversely, taking a day off because of the strained situation of hospitals at the time made it practically impossible.

> After a curt explanation, the head of the nursing department opened her mouth. "Beds for COVID-19 infected people in the wards continue to be full. But, we continue to receive COVID-19 and other patients brought by ambulances, even after closing hospitals and during night hours. If this continues, it will be difficult to provide safe medical care, so please consider stopping receiving participants brought by ambulance, stopping accepting COVID-19 patients, or limiting surgeries and outpatient visits." She stated in a weary voice. The director immediately sensed the situation and said to encourage the staff, "We will consider restrictions, but as the entire region is in the same situation, we will take measures to cooperate with other medical institutions. We medical institutions are the last defense of the community. I hope we can all work together to devise a solution." A member of the nursing department also commented, "Some staff members have to take a day off owing to family fevers, illnesses, or fevers of their own, but we have managed to persuade them to come to work by performing antigen tests every day. The staff members at the site say that other hospitals are proactively giving them a day off. We are at the limit of what we can sustain already." Everyone who

participated in the meeting left the meeting room for their duties at the start of the day with no answers.

(From the participant's ethnographic assignment)

Some participants struggled to find a situation related to paradox because this concept was integrated in their mind only recently.

To summarize what they learned, a participant stated that they need to think beyond their role in their workplace to think about paradox. This reflects the fact that the specialized duty of each role disturbs to think paradoxically.

We would like to put our usual "roles" to the side, perceive "change" without distinction, enjoy chaos and fluctuation, and create a place where we can ride the waves, go on a voyage by ourselves, and let the influence ripple out.

(From the participant's feedback after the last lecture)

Discussion

The existing studies about Japanese business context show that Japanese employment was characterized by long-term employment and a paternalistic relationship between the employer and employee. This kind of membership-oriented employment system formed an ambiguous duty scope of each employee; even if certain decisions of the employer or management appears ambiguous, employees could rely on the company policy because their individual responsibility was not clearly defined. This enabled Japanese company to perform paradoxical management that is non-verbal but aligned with the real world. However, these days, Japanese paternalistic management is getting weaker, and individual duty and responsibility are becoming clearer. In this situation, a stable environment became necessary to fulfill each one's responsibility; this may be a reason the participants initially thought the paradox was an issue that needed to be solved.

Therefore, the paradoxical situation became stressful in the modern Japanese working situation; the guardrail attracted their interest to solve this stress. In other words, having a guardrail means establishing a framework where each employee can move freely. This would provide the internal security that paternalism used to assure employees.

The paradox theory in management studies may be an ordinal part of decision-making for Japanese working people. Japanese people often do not recognize the paradoxical perspective of their work place because it is very natural for them. Problems for modern Japanese employees are in "paradox without norm," such as the anxiety about the paradoxical management without guardrails or the disconnect between reality and logic due to the effect of Western logic-dominated values. Owing to the characteristics of two or more things being equally aligned, explaining a paradoxical situation in words is very difficult, and if a business relies on linguistic communication, clearly explained logic, such as tradeoff or dilemma, wins. In other words, modern Japanese working people suffer from the

gap between values that are explicitly "correct" in language and those that are perceived as "correct" without being verbalized. While some people adapt to such a modern Japanese working situation without problems, those who question the paradoxical situation, such as the participants of the target lectures of this study, may be those who have experienced more Western culture, such as by living abroad during childhood or adolescence, or by studying business theory in an MBA program. The emotional benefits of recognizing this situation, which has not been verbalized before, as "a paradox, a newly emerging management theory," may be significant for those people. Some people were observed to be confused in this course owing to the initial impression of the paradox; learning paradox theory is expected to help alleviate individual stress, or if paradox theory is shared at the organizational level, psychological safety for employees will be ensured.

Limitations

Paradox theory is a newly introduced theory in management study, whose discussion is still ongoing; therefore, providing a total structural education remains difficult in this situation. Additionally, at the time of the first lecture, a book on paradox theory had not yet been released in Japanese, and the concept was not widely known by Japanese people. This situation may cause participants to take time to structure the knowledge. The researchers conducted a second course in January to March 2024 based on the recently released Japanese paradox theory book, which is expected to lead to further discussions regarding the Japanese learning process.

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