



**CAO & Assistant
Break-Out: Specific
Strategies for
Navigating the
Double Bind**

Session Goals / Norms / Deliverable

Serving in the CAO role as woman has distinct challenges. This session seeks to create shared language around those challenges and named strategies to tackle the challenges head-on. This is an open session with discussion anticipated on every slide. We will take anonymous notes with the idea to share the observations and strategies as a future deliverable on our website. You can specify if you do not want to post a story / strategy.

Paradoxes & Strategies

- Demanding / Caring
- Authoritative / Participative
- Advocating / Serving
- Distant / Approachable
- Adapt to the Situation
- Go in Order
- Win-Wins
- Tough on Tasks/
Soft on People
- Reframe

Discussion Questions:

1. What other paradoxes do women face that are not named in this article?
2. What other strategies have you used? What should we name the strategy?
3. This study was not done specifically in local government, what special context applies to the paradoxes in our field? What special strategies should be documented and shared?



Paradox 1: Demanding Yet Caring

The female executives we studied told us they must demand high performance from others, while also demonstrating that they care about them. For example, Norma*, an HR executive in financial services, recalled how, in a past project, her perseverance led to successful project outcomes but also earned her some negative feedback: “I remember a program that I designed that everyone was doubting... and I truly just knew deep in my heart and... gut that it was going to work. So I kept pushing forward... and it was a huge, huge success... I’ve gotten feedback on being intimidating and that kind of stuff. Would I get the same feedback if I were a man?”

Reflection: In what situations / leadership feedback have you observed this paradox?



Paradox 2: Authoritative yet Participative

This paradox lies between asserting one's competence, and admitting one's vulnerability and asking others to collaborate. On the one hand, women leaders learned to project authoritativeness, because without doing so, they risked being perceived as not credible, especially at the beginning of a new business engagement. They learned to “toughen up,” “speak louder,” and “act decisively.”

On the other hand, to prevent being perceived as arrogant, women leaders were also quick to acknowledge their own weaknesses and work with others. For example, Claire, a general manager in manufacturing, commented: “I'd learned about [my] tendencies of being directive. I'm having to manage and maybe take it down and go slower, go slow to go fast, to bring people along and to ensure that we have alignment.”

Reflection: In what situations / leadership feedback have you observed this paradox?



Paradox 3: Advocating for themselves yet serving others

Our study subjects sometimes struggled to be seen as leaders, separate from colleagues and team members, while also developing close relationships. To generate respect, women leaders kept a distance from others, maintaining an impersonal “leadership presence” that was marked as “professional,” “objective,” and “serious.” At the same time, they noticed that they might then create impressions of being “stiff,” “ego-centric,” and “apathetic,” making it difficult to earn trust and commitment.

Reflection: In what situations / leadership feedback have you observed this paradox?



Paradox 4: Maintaining distance yet being approachable

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Reflection: In what situations / leadership feedback have you observed this paradox?



Strategy 1: Adapt

- **Adapt to the situation.** Most of our study subjects told us that they demonstrate niceness and toughness in different situations, toward different audiences. For example, to signal both distance and approachability, Melissa, a general manager in a manufacturing firm, said: “I specifically don’t sit at the head of the table at certain times. [It] depends on the meeting and the environment. At certain times, I want to send the signal I’m just one of the team today, and other times I want to be very clear that I’m here to make a decision, and then I take a slightly different stance.”
- **Reflection Question:** Do you recognize this strategy? When have you employed it? When was it most successful?



Strategy 2: Go in Order

- Another strategy is to be nice (or caring and collaborative) first, then tough (or demanding and directive). First, you build relationships, establish trust, and engage people, and then you follow up with harder behavior or language to challenge the status quo or achieve goals. For example, Marilyn, a general manager in a financial services firm, talked about her philosophy of working with others: “I think it’s just [building] that day-to-day relationship where people want to help you succeed. And so when you... advocate for something, people generally bend over backwards to figure out how to help you get it done.”
- **Reflection Question:** Do you recognize this strategy? When have you employed it? When was it most successful?



Strategy 3: Look for Win-Wins

- Many women we talked to focused on identifying opportunities where niceness and toughness converge — what they sometimes called a “win-win” strategy. For example, Dorothy, a general manager in health services, described her mindset this way: “The most important thing is understanding what are the values, the traits, the goals of that person that you’re trying to influence... So, I’ve always tried to know what it is that I’m trying to achieve, tie that back to something that I know they want to achieve.”
- **Reflection Question:** Do you recognize this strategy? When have you employed it? When was it most successful?



Strategy 4: Tough on Tasks Soft on People

- With this strategy, women leaders focused on simultaneously being nice to people and tough on tasks. For example, Sally, a state legislator, shared her experience: “I learned that we could vehemently disagree on an issue, and when we walked out of the room, we were friends. I really came to see the importance of being able to separate [that] out.”

Denise, a strategy executive in a financial organization, shared another example: When a colleague presented an unsatisfactory proposal, she used a soft approach to deliver a hard message: “I wanted to lay enough on the table to say, ‘Boy, this is very interesting.... Can we do some more research on this? Can we test this against some other organizations?’ That’s an example of where you can get an idea across without saying: ‘Hey listen, I think this is really dumb, and we’re not going to do it.’ I’m much more effective as a leader if I lead with a question.”



- **Reflection Question:** Do you recognize this strategy? When have you employed it? When was it most successful?

Strategy 4: Reframe

- We found that the leaders also tried to reframe what it meant to be nice and tough. They focused on connecting the two and reinforcing positive associations. This involved recasting behaviors that might be considered weaknesses as strengths. For example, women leaders described displays of vulnerability as reflecting inner confidence — feeling secure enough to comfortably reveal their own faults and weaknesses. Shannon, a president in a manufacturing company, explained, “I am very confident in saying ‘I don’t know the answer but I’m keen to find out’ or ‘I don’t know the answer but I know I have the ability to find out.’”
- Another approach was to frame assertive behaviors that others might find threatening as originating from genuine care. For example, Lorraine, Jordan, and Norma described giving negative feedback or voicing disagreements as trying to help others.



- **Reflection Question:** Do you recognize this strategy? When have you employed it? When was it most successful?

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