

## PARADOX PEERS: A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO NAVIGATING A BUSINESS–SOCIETY PARADOX

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**Despite advancements in our understanding of organizational paradox, we know little about how individuals navigate paradox when tensions are core to one's occupational role but not a dominant concern for senior leaders. This study explores how grantmakers working in corporate philanthropy navigate a business–society paradox when their leaders prioritize business over social objectives at the organization level. By analyzing interview data from grantmakers, alongside observations of their group meetings, I induce a peer-based model of navigating paradox. The findings reveal the important supportive role of relationships with “paradox peers”—ongoing, cooperative connections to individuals external to one's organization but facing similar paradoxical challenges. I detail three relational mechanisms for engaging paradox that together facilitate the ability of individuals to navigate paradox in their home organizations: connecting with others to relieve tension, collectively protecting the paradox, and collaboratively brainstorming responses. My findings shift paradox scholarship toward a more relational understanding of navigating paradoxes, exploring how engaging tensions outside of one's organizational boundaries can support the navigation of paradox internally.**

This role can be a lonely one, particularly if you're a team of one or two. Inevitably, you rely on others to help you do your job. Yes, of course, it's critical to build internal support. But also look around; you need your peers.

—CSR consultant presenting to a group of grantmakers

Firms increasingly face paradoxical demands in their corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs, wherein social and economic objectives can be seen as both interdependent and in persistent tension (Hahn, Figge, Pinkse, & Preuss, 2018; Van der Byl & Slawinski, 2015). Despite the prevalence and recognition of the importance of these tensions, corporate leaders often fail to appreciate the paradoxical nature of business and societal goals (Hafenbrädl & Waeger, 2017; Hahn, Preuss, Pinkse, & Figge, 2014). Indeed,

when firm leaders promote engagement with social issues, they often prioritize the economic benefits and “business as usual” (Kaplan, 2020; Wright & Nyberg, 2017). Accordingly, the work of navigating business–society tensions is often left to those in CSR occupations, such as ethics officers (Chandler, 2014), sustainability managers (Augustine, 2021), and diversity professionals (Dobbin, Kalev, & Kelly, 2007). Individuals working in these occupations can feel frustrated and torn as they pursue competing goals, particularly when leaders do not engage with tensions (Carollo & Guerri, 2018; Wickert & de Bakker, 2018; Wright & Nyberg, 2012). This raises the following question: how do individuals navigate paradox that is core to their occupational role but not a dominant organizational concern for senior leaders? Unpacking this question is important because occupations with competing goals continue to proliferate (Sandholtz, Chung, & Waisberg, 2019), and those with less power may be ill-equipped to manage paradox (Berti & Simpson, 2021).

Existing research on paradox provides some insight into this question. For example, scholars have made important advancements in understanding the value of individuals' paradoxical cognition (Keller & Chen, 2017; Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith, & Lewis, 2018; Smith & Tushman, 2005), suggesting a paradox mindset is important for managing paradox at work. Yet, these studies offer less insight into

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how individuals develop and sustain a paradox mindset, including how one remains energized by tensions when they confront demotivating factors such as low organizational support. Other research has focused on the practices that individuals adopt to manage tensions, including sensemaking (Jay, 2013; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008), humor (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017), and debate (Huq, Reay, & Chreim, 2017; Wenzel, Koch, Cornelissen, Rothmann, & Senf, 2019). Because these practices often implicitly rely on interactions between internal organizational members, particularly supportive interactions with leaders (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Gotsi, Andriopoulos, Lewis, & Ingram, 2010; Huq et al., 2017), when leaders dismiss the importance of paradox, individuals miss out on key resources and internal support. It thus remains unclear how individuals navigate paradox in their occupational role when paradox is not a dominant organizational concern.

I explore this question through a qualitative study of corporate grantmakers—the professionals who oversee corporate philanthropy. Grantmakers navigate the contradictions and connections between business and social impact, a paradox with which their leaders typically do not engage at the organization level. My inductive analysis of interviews with 40 grantmakers and observations of their professional meetings reveals the critical role of relationships with *paradox peers*, i.e., ongoing, cooperative relationships with peers at other organizations who are navigating similar tensions, as suggested by the epigraph. I uncover three relational mechanisms for engaging paradox: connecting with one another to relieve tension, collectively protecting the paradox, and collaboratively brainstorming responses. Integrating my findings with existing research, I propose a peer-based model of navigating paradox that shows how relationships with paradox peers, through the relational mechanisms, facilitate the ability of individuals to work through paradox at their home organizations. The model offers a more relational approach to navigating paradoxes, encouraging scholars to consider how engaging paradox outside one's organization can facilitate the navigation of paradox within it. The findings also have implications for research on occupations and managing business–society tensions.

### HOW INDIVIDUALS NAVIGATE PARADOX IN THEIR OCCUPATIONAL ROLES

Paradoxical demands, or those that exhibit a “persistent contradiction between interdependent elements” (Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016: 10),

arise in a wide range of occupations. For example, paradoxical demands are evident in the everyday work of correctional officers (Wenzel et al., 2019), nurses (Huq et al., 2017), veterinarians (Pradies, 2022) and scientists (Bednarek, Paroutis, & Sillince, 2017). To date, most studies have considered cases in which individuals face a paradox in their role that is similar in nature to a paradox faced by their organization. For instance, prison organizations and the correctional officers within must balance rehabilitation and punishment (Wenzel et al., 2019), mental health clinics and nurses need to take into account competing medical and psycho-social needs (Huq et al., 2017), veterinarian clinics and vets must consider the care of animals and earning a profit (Pradies, 2022), and science centers and scientists must pursue scientific and commercial goals (Bednarek et al., 2017).

However, individuals may face paradoxes in their occupational roles that are not dominant concerns for their organizations. We know leaders may choose not to engage with paradox or may value one dimension at the expense of another (Cuganesan, 2017; Hahn et al., 2014; Smith, 2014). Yet, even if leaders dismiss the importance of a paradox, an individual's occupational role may still necessitate that they pursue competing demands. Consider occupations that involve contradictory business and prosocial goals, such as diversity officers (Buchter, 2021), sustainability professionals (Augustine, 2021; Carollo & Guerci, 2018), and the corporate philanthropists studied in this paper. Individuals in these occupations must prioritize both business impact and social impact even if leaders view social objectives as peripheral to a profit-focused strategy (Hahn, Pinkse, Preuss, & Figge, 2015; Hengst, Jarzabkowski, Hoegl, & Muethel, 2020; Risi & Wickert, 2017). Indeed, maintaining a focus on competing goals can be central to one's occupational mandate (i.e., the shared understanding of the purpose of an occupational group) (Hughes, 1958; Nelsen & Barley, 1997). For example, Sandholtz and Burrows (2016) outlined the challenges human resources professionals face with their opposing goals of pursuing state-supported employment protections and supporting organizational profit. In effect, tensions associated with navigating paradox are more likely to reside with individuals in their work roles to the extent that senior leaders choose not to grapple with tensions or consider the paradox as peripheral to the organization's dominant strategy.

In exploring how individuals navigate paradox, studies have often focused on how individuals draw on their inner ability to manage tensions. A growing

body of work has pointed to the importance of one's cognitive abilities (Keller & Chen, 2017; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Smith & Tushman, 2005). For instance, studies have highlighted the value of a paradox mindset wherein individuals accept and are energized by tensions, seeing generative opportunities in the face of competing demands (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Zheng, Kark, & Meister, 2018). Accordingly, those with a paradox mindset exhibit increased creativity and job performance (Leung et al., 2018; Liu, Xu, & Zhang, 2020; Miron-Spektor, Gino, & Argote, 2011). This research stream has provided an important understanding of the cognitive capabilities that allow individuals to effectively confront paradox. However, because this work has positioned managing paradox as an individualized endeavor, it has provided little insight into how contextual factors affect one's mindset (Keller & Chen, 2017). As a result, we lack an understanding of how individuals sustain paradoxical cognition and maintain their ability to engage paradox in environments that are demotivating or disempowering (Berti & Simpson, 2021), such as when one's leaders have low engagement with paradox.

Other research has identified the practices individuals adopt when navigating paradox. Upon close inspection, routine interactions appear to underlie many of these efforts. For example, it is through interactions with organizational colleagues that people recognize and make sense of paradox (Jay, 2013; Sheep, Fairhurst, & Khazanchi, 2017), use humor to relieve tensions (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017), debate the merits of competing goals (Huq et al., 2017; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Wenzel et al., 2019), and engage in discourse and framing practices (Abdallah, Denis, & Langley, 2011; Schneider, Bullinger, & Brandl, 2021). Moreover, some research has suggested that interactions with leaders encourage individuals to actively engage tensions (Besharov, 2014; Cuganesan, 2017; Huq et al., 2017; Jarzabkowski, Lê, & Van de Ven, 2013; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). For instance, Huq and colleagues (2017) showed that when counselors and psychiatrists experienced negative tensions around paradox, debriefing with leaders helped them better embrace competing demands. Additionally, Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009) documented how creative professionals who struggled with tensions between discipline and passion were encouraged by leaders to adopt the paradoxical identity of "practical artists." Building on this work, Gotsi and colleagues (2010) found that when consultants struggled with the "practical artist" identity, leaders helped them temporally differentiate between their "artist" and "consultant" identities as needed. In short,

studies have begun to hint at the idea that interactions with internal members, particularly with leaders, can support individuals as they navigate tensions in their work roles.

Overall, existing research on how individuals navigate paradox has emphasized individuals' inner abilities and the practices they adopt alongside other organizational members. It remains unclear how individuals avoid becoming "stuck" in tension-filled dynamics (Smith & Berg, 1987) when their occupational role necessitates that they confront paradox but paradox is not a dominant organizational concern. Such individuals appear to lack both interactional partners inside the organization who fully appreciate their challenges and the engagement of resource-rich leaders. As such, their attempts to navigate tensions may be particularly isolating and difficult, eliciting feelings of defensiveness, discomfort, and paralysis (Lewis, 2000; Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Vince & Broussine, 1996), as well as greater demotivation and burnout (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Sustaining a commitment to working through paradox in these situations is likely to be especially challenging even when individuals have strong cognitive capabilities. This study of corporate grantmakers addresses the question of how individuals navigate paradox in their occupational role when paradox is not considered core to the organizational strategy.

## DATA AND EMPIRICAL APPROACH

### Data Sources

**Research setting.** CSR offers a good context for exploring how individuals navigate paradox in their occupational role. Firms increasingly face potential paradoxes around social and economic objectives (Gao & Bansal, 2013; Hahn et al., 2018; Van der Byl & Slawinski, 2015). Despite the business and societal benefits that can accrue from viewing social and economic objectives as mutually reinforcing (Hahn et al., 2018; Jay, 2013; Sharma & Bansal, 2017), not all organizational actors view these issues through a paradoxical lens. Indeed, many corporate leaders primarily emphasize economic concerns, engaging with societal issues only to the extent that doing so benefits the business (Hahn et al., 2014; Kaplan, 2020; Wickert & de Bakker, 2018). In such cases, individuals whose occupations involve the simultaneous pursuit of both business and society goals may encounter paradoxes that leaders may not see or appreciate (Carollo & Guerci, 2018; Hahn & Aragón-Correa, 2015). Because for-profit firms typically prioritize

economic objectives, CSR functions are often “bolted on” rather than tightly coupled with the core corporate strategy (Risi & Wickert, 2017; Weaver, Treviño, & Cochran, 1999). Studies have identified the resulting frustration and demotivation faced by those working in CSR occupations (Carollo & Guerci, 2018; Wright & Nyberg, 2012; Wright, Nyberg, & Grant, 2012).

In this study, I explore the experiences of corporate grantmakers who oversee philanthropy activities. Grantmakers’ occupational mandate is rooted in the joint pursuit of business and social objectives; both goals are central to their occupation’s purpose (Gautier & Pache, 2015; Himmelstein, 1997). As often happens in qualitative research, the research project shifted based on what I encountered in the field. I originally intended to explore how grantmakers evaluated the outcomes of the donations they made to individual nonprofits, with a focus on measurement practices and relationships with nonprofits in the community. However, early interviews suggested that navigating tensions between social impact and economic objectives was a more salient concern for grantmakers than post-grant measurement practices. Thus, I redirected my study toward how grantmakers experienced and managed tensions in their work. As the interviews progressed, I began to see that grantmakers experienced the pursuit of business and social objectives as paradoxical, with demands that were contradictory, interrelated, and persistent (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Tensions were high in part because grantmakers perceived firm leaders to prioritize economic objectives. Moreover, unlike senior leaders (Pradies, Delanghe, & Lewis, 2020; Smith, 2014), grantmakers generally did not have access to the strategic and structural resources that could help them manage paradox. Thus, overall, the grantmaking context provided a strong setting in which to explore the research question.

**Interview data.** My interview recruitment focused on grantmakers working in large companies in a major U.S. city. Large companies are considered the most influential actors within corporate philanthropy (Tilcsik & Marquis, 2013), thus I expected grantmakers from these companies to keep abreast of current trends. Because I was initially interested in measuring post-grant impact, I focused on one geographic area to “control” for large differences between cities in terms of the focus of grantmaking (Marquis, Glynn, & Davis, 2007). As the study progressed and shifted toward managing paradox, the role of peer relationships became the core focus of my inquiry and analysis. Concentrating on one

geographic area enabled me to understand the connections between grantmakers in the local community at a depth that would not have been possible otherwise.

Using Fortune 500 companies as a starting point, I identified approximately 50 large companies in the metro area and invited every corporate grantmaker with publicly available contact information to participate in the study. Perhaps unsurprisingly, obtaining grantmakers’ contact information proved extraordinarily difficult as grantmakers purposefully limit their exposure to the “bombardment” of funding requests. Five grantmakers responded to my initial email. After each interview, I asked informants to provide additional grantmaker contacts. As such, the sample primarily grew by referral chains, a useful sampling strategy for gaining access to elite informants whose direct perspectives would be otherwise difficult to obtain (Babbie, 1995; Rivera, 2012). I continued to seek additional informants until I reached saturation, wherein subsequent interviews revealed very few new ideas or themes (Small, 2009a; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Overall, I interviewed 40 informants from 32 different large firms. Note that some companies employed multiple grantmakers and on eight occasions, I interviewed two grantmakers from the same company.

Informants ranged in terms of age and tenure with the company and included 33 (82.5%) women and 7 (12.5%) men. Most respondents had begun their careers in other corporate functions ( $n = 28$ ; 70%), although some had begun their careers in the nonprofit sector ( $n = 12$ ; 30%). Of those with a nonprofit background, many had transitioned from positions in corporate fundraising ( $n = 7$ ). Respondents reported that they had developed skills “on-the-job” by interacting with peers and attending local professional group meetings. Some also attended national grantmaking conferences and philanthropy courses. All informants oversaw corporate donations, including both direct giving and, when relevant, giving through associated corporate foundations.

During the interviews, I asked grantmakers general questions about their day-to-day activities, funding practices, the purpose of the grantmaking function, how they thought about success, and their reporting practices. Interviews were conducted in-person at a location of the informant’s choosing, though two were conducted by phone. Most interviews occurred between late 2014 and the end of 2016. In addition, I conducted four follow-up phone interviews in 2020 that also served as member checks to ensure the validity of the model with those in the field (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985). Interviews lasted between 45 and 120 minutes, averaging 75 minutes.

**Observational data.** After conducting a handful of interviews, I realized that the grantmakers from different firms were meeting as a group roughly once a month to discuss work-related issues. Although I had not initially intended to observe group meetings, and the meetings were typically only open to grantmakers, I was invited to join by an informant. Thus, as I shifted my analysis toward the role of peers, I began collecting observational data from the group meetings. I observed 12 meetings from 2015 to 2016. When appropriate, I introduced myself as a researcher studying CSR and highlighted my joint training in both sociology and management and my own background in nonprofit leadership. Events were organized by a committee of grantmakers and featured a rotating set of relevant topics. Typically, an outside expert shared remarks and answered questions about a given subject (e.g., assessing nonprofit program quality); less frequently, grantmakers shared their own approaches to specific aspects of their work (e.g., engaging employees during times of change). The meetings were held at various organizational headquarters. Presentations lasted about 90 minutes, with an additional 15 minutes before and after for informal conversation and light refreshments. Typically, about a dozen grantmakers attended. I carefully documented grantmakers' responses during the question-and-answer sessions as well as informal conversations before and after events. Although I observed the majority of interview informants at the group meetings, I did not interview every grantmaker in attendance. Overall, the observational portion of the study not only provided rich contextual data to complement the interviews but also opportunities to witness how grantmakers relied on each other to manage competing demands.

## Data Analysis

I adopted an inductive, grounded theory approach to the data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which is especially relevant for understanding how informants comprehend and respond to their work situations based on their lived experiences (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). I customized the analytical process (Fendt & Sachs, 2008; Gehman, Glaser, Eisenhardt, Gioia, Langley, & Corley, 2018), adopting a central focus on navigating tensions, as in other studies on paradox management (e.g., Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017; Smith, 2014). As I organized and coded the data using the ATLAS.ti software, I sought to understand

how grantmakers perceived and responded to contradictory demands and the emergent role of peers in the process. As the study unfolded inductively, I turned to the paradox literature after spending time in the field, but I frame this paper using paradox theory to ground the reader. My analytical process included coding, categorizing, and abstracting to higher-level concepts (Gioia et al., 2013; Locke, Golden-Biddle, & Feldman, 2008). While the process was nonlinear and iterative (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), I present my analysis as a series of three steps for readability purposes.

**Step 1: Identifying first-order codes.** I began by reading interview transcripts and field notes, engaging in a process of open coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). When tensions between business and social objectives became apparent, I focused on descriptions of experiences involving conflicting demands and how grantmakers grappled with those demands. During this stage, the role of peer relationships emerged as an important aspect of informants' experiences around competing demands. This coding process resulted in first-order codes describing experiences of tension, such as "grantmakers perceived that leaders prioritize business objectives and minimize social objectives," and codes describing peer interactions, such as "peer relationships experienced as noncompetitive."

**Step 2: Grouping codes into second-order themes.** Next, I searched for patterns, grouping first-order empirical codes into second-order conceptual themes (Gioia et al., 2013). Through this process of axial coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), I explored relationships among the groups of first-order codes, iterating back and forth between data analysis and the literature to better understand emerging themes. For instance, the theme "facing paradox in one's occupational roles when leadership does not engage paradox" emerged around two codes: (a) grantmakers recognize both contradiction and interdependence between social and business objectives, and (b) leaders prioritize business objectives and minimize social objectives. That social and business objectives were seen as paradoxical by grantmakers but not by senior leaders stands in sharp contrast to studies of paradox in social enterprises, in which a business-society paradox is faced by the entire organization (e.g., Smith & Besharov, 2019; Smith, Gonin, & Besharov, 2013). Indeed, in this study, tensions between goals increased as grantmakers interacted with their leaders, whom they

perceived to be predominantly focused on economic objectives.<sup>1</sup>

An insight derived from axial coding was that individuals had supportive peer relationships with grantmakers at other companies. Grantmakers described “connections to others who were situated inside the paradox but also outside the focal organization,” which became the label I adopted for a second-order theme related to peer relationships. Additionally, I grouped empirical codes highlighting the noncompetitive nature of ties and how they became stronger over repeated interactions, which became the second-order theme “connections developed via ongoing cooperative interactions.” While I came across related ideas in existing studies, such as research on the social position of “outsider-insiders” (Nigam, Sackett, & Golden, 2022), extant work has not precisely indicated how grantmaker peers relate to one another around paradox, hence my decision to use my emerging second-order themes.

This stage also involved analyzing themes about the different ways that peers were relating to one another around the tensions in their work. I continued to seek guidance from existing literature as I made sense of emerging categories, in line with grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For instance, I searched the paradox literature to compare the behavior of my informants to other studies in which organizational actors managed paradoxical tensions. In the setting for this study, I identified three primary ways grantmakers related to each other around paradox which I labeled to reflect both the grouping of empirical themes as well as existing research on paradox. First, to capture how grantmakers lightened the mental load of dealing with tensions alone, I used the label “connecting with one another to relieve tensions.” While scholars have often highlighted “accepting” tensions as a key way to address paradox (Hahn et al., 2015; Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011), my observations align more closely with depictions of relief (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017). Second, grantmakers worked together to prioritize both competing elements without allowing

one to dominate, thereby “collectively protecting the paradox.” This label aligns with the ideas of Huq et al. (2017) who argued that seeking to legitimize and equally represent competing elements, especially when it may be easier to choose one side over the other, “protects” paradox. Third, grantmakers worked together to explore new responses and give feedback to each other on responses, thereby “collaboratively brainstorming responses to paradox.” While many of the responses grantmakers discussed were similar to those highlighted in extant studies (for reviews of different responses, see Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016; Schad et al., 2016), my analysis identified the group brainstorming process that led to those responses (Sutton & Hargadon, 1996).

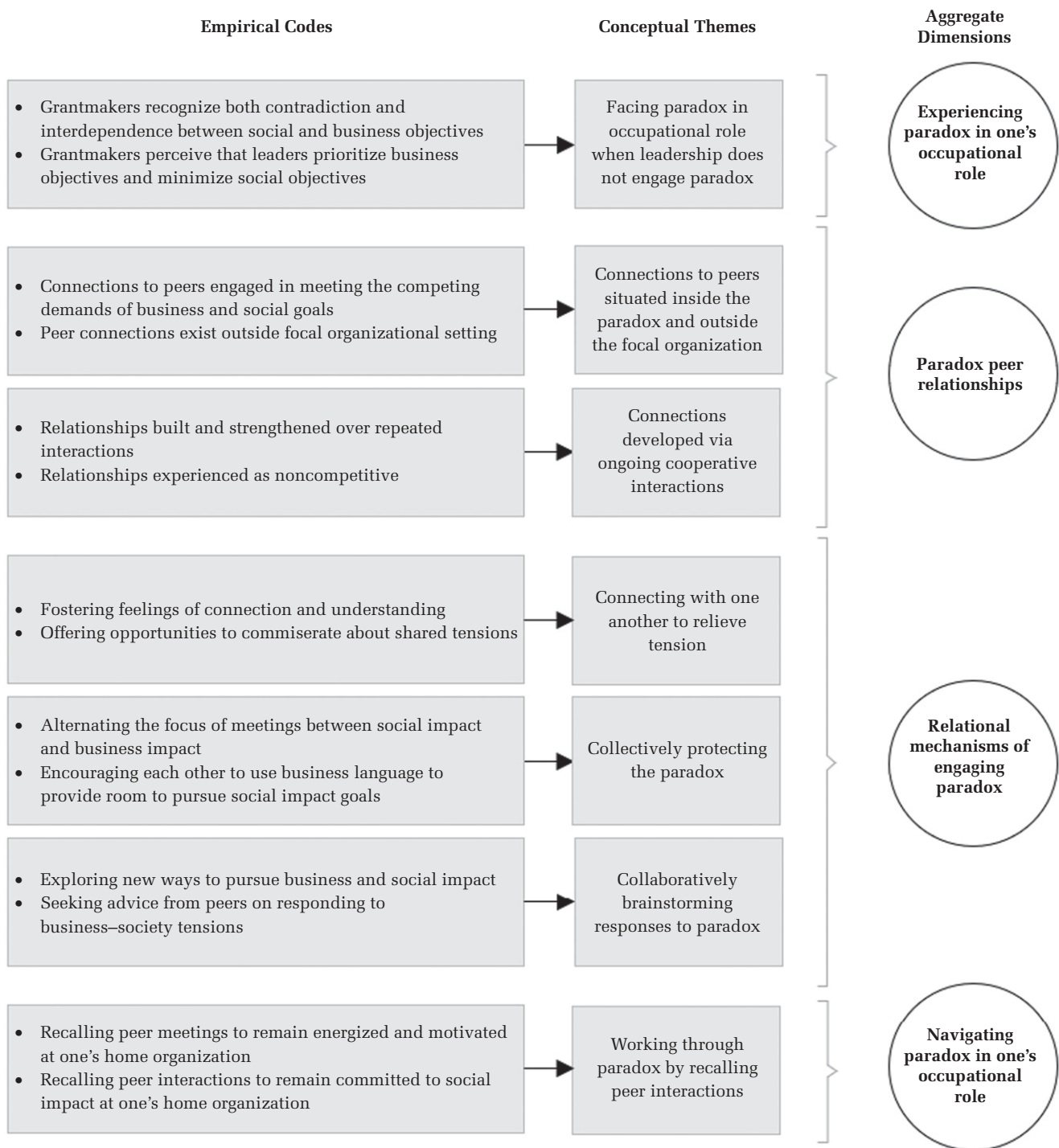
Finally, a set of codes related to how grantmakers relied on their peers while they worked in their home organizations, physically away from each other. I used the label “working through paradox by recalling peer interactions” to describe how, once back at their home organizations, grantmakers drew from their interactions with peers to remain motivated and resilient in the face of internal setbacks. In other studies, “working through paradox” has been used to reflect the continuous work necessary to reduce anxiety and move forward rather than attempt to resolve paradoxical tensions (Bednarek et al., 2017; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Pradies, Tunarosa, Lewis, & Courtois, 2021; Smith & Berg, 1987). Because leaders in this setting dismissed social objectives, part of working through paradox involved remaining committed to the pursuit of both social and business objectives.

**Step 3: Synthesizing second-order themes into aggregate dimensions.** In the final step, I sought to understand connections between the themes (Whetten, 1989), theorizing their interrelations by engaging the literature on paradox. I identified four aggregate theoretical dimensions that form the basis of the conceptual model (Gioia et al., 2013). For example, I combined all codes relating to peer connections into a dimension labeled “paradox peer relationships.” Additionally, after consulting the extant literature on responses to paradox (Lewis, 2000; Putnam et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011), I created the abstract category “relational mechanisms of engaging paradox” to highlight how grantmakers engaged paradoxical tensions through interactions with peers. Figure 1 illustrates the data structure for this study.

Throughout the data collection and analysis, I took several steps to ensure the accuracy and validity of my interpretations and key findings. First, I used both observational and interview data sources to triangulate my findings (Jick, 1979). Relatedly,

<sup>1</sup> Note that all grantmakers faced a similar business-society paradox but reported different levels of perceived leader support. Three grantmakers described leaders being deeply supportive of social impact as a firm goal, and thus they appeared to be able to discuss competing demands as paradoxical more openly within their company. In this paper, I describe the majority experience of grantmakers who perceived their leaders to prioritize economic objectives.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Data Structure**



I had the opportunity to shadow one organization in greater depth, which enabled me to better grasp the specifics of the “local landscape” (Miles & Huberman, 1994). While I do not analyze data from the

shadowing period in this paper, the experience gave me an in-depth understanding of grantmakers’ day-to-day reality that informed my interpretations. Second, to reduce single-coder bias when analyzing the

data, I had recurring meetings with external colleagues to discuss emerging constructs and ensure alignment between the constructs and related codes, revising my analysis when necessary (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Finally, I conducted member checks with informants to test my interpretations against the lived experiences of people in the field (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). All found the model to accurately represent their experience.

## FINDINGS

Here I detail four main findings, reflecting the aggregate theoretical dimensions that emerged from the data analysis. First, I show how grantmakers experienced paradoxical tensions in their occupation role inside their firms. Second, I provide evidence of grantmakers' cooperative relationships with peers facing a similar paradox at other organizations, what I term "paradox peer relationships." Third, I show how peer relationships enabled three key relational mechanisms of engaging paradox. Finally, I show that individual grantmakers drew on their peers as they worked through paradox at their home organizations. Table 1 presents additional evidence for each concept in the framework.

### Experiencing Paradox in One's Occupational Role

***Facing paradox in one's occupational role when leadership does not engage.*** Grantmakers faced paradoxical demands in their occupation, as evidenced by how *grantmakers recognized both contradiction and interdependence between social and business objectives*. Success for grantmakers involved positively impacting society and the business, two goals that are often inherently conflicting (Smith et al., 2013). Indeed, one grantmaker remarked that "you can never really align business impact and social impact fully." Still, grantmakers saw business and social objectives as interrelated in their day-to-day work, and believed success required achieving results in both areas. Without showing the business results, they risked losing the funding and autonomy to support societal welfare. Similarly, dismissing prosocial priorities risked appearing disingenuous or dishonest, with potentially negative reputational repercussions. Likewise, fulfilling business goals could support social objectives, and vice versa. Jennifer,<sup>2</sup> a grantmaker at a

large insurance company, described this as "always a push and a pull." She explained:

Here's what we're doing to bring up the business value and how we're doing it is through our social impact. The social impact work should be top-notch, well done, well delivered, with measurable results. If you do social impact well, that will help with the business value. It's actually the fabric of the social impact first. Here's what we're trying to deliver in communities and, if we do those things right, here's how it should impact the business. It isn't an either-or. It is because of these things we can get this, and if we are able to improve that reputation, why not?

Jennifer described how "top-notch" social impact work would produce strong results in communities and yield benefits for the business, especially regarding its reputation. This would, in turn, enable the firm to make additional social investments in communities. She explicitly contrasted her work with "either-or" situations wherein either social or business priorities dominate vis-a-vis when grantmakers pursued both simultaneously.

The challenge grantmakers faced in navigating paradox was heightened by perceptions that *leaders prioritized economic goals and minimized social impact goals*. Gretta, who led a team of corporate philanthropists at a bank, described how the executives primarily cared about business priorities: "All they care about is making money. Shareholders, compliance, bonuses, drive, drive, drive." These were the words used in leadership meetings, including when the team discussed the bank's philanthropy. Gretta felt executives did not engage with and often minimized the importance of social impact because it did not match their definition of corporate success. Given the firm's profit orientation, Gretta felt she needed to be "prepared to defend" the business value of her social impact work. While grantmakers like Gretta recognized that they faced paradox, it was demotivating to have leaders minimize what she considered a primary goal. Gretta said that people often joked that they wanted her job because they perceived it to be "fun." She emphasized that others did not see the challenges: "Businesses make it complicated generally. It's hard to do mission-driven work in a non-mission-driven organization."

Grantmakers realized that their social impact goals were considered secondary by corporate leaders in various ways. Olivia, a grantmaker at a manufacturing company, had spent months thinking about how to maximize social impact. Education was a major focus for her firm, and she developed an approach that considered a child's educational experience.

<sup>2</sup> To protect informant confidentiality, all names are pseudonyms and some industries have been changed.



TABLE 1  
Representative Data

Aggregate dimension	Conceptual category	Empirical codes	Representative data
Experiencing paradox in one's occupation	Facing paradox in occupational role when leadership does not engage paradox	Grantmakers recognize both contradiction and interdependence between social and business objectives	<p>"[It can feel like I am] talking out of both sides of my head at the same time . . . But I love being able to do both. It's great to—obviously to be able to give back to the community and have some resources to do that. If there's an agency that's doing like awesome, awesome work, great leadership, huge impact, I can advocate to fund them, and I can fight for them and usually we can get them some money. . . . On the business side, it's really good to know that like okay, I am part of a corporation, I am making an impact on the bottom line and like actually, here's how we align with the strategic goals, like we belong here, we're not just like the charity, fluffy fun side."—Allison</p> <p>"It's a lot of hard work. You're working with all internal and external forces to get things done. I mean every area [business and social goals] is important, but they don't align. And so, there is a lot of pressure around that. [At the same time], to me, it is the obligation, to help support, to help support the people who contribute to your growth and your welfare. It's the ability to, to give, as well as receive. It gives us an opportunity to help support the communities that are helping us grow and thrive."—Sharon</p> <p>"If your leadership in the company is not believing in it and it's not built upon that kind of structure of social good, it can be a pain in the ass to do this type of work because then it's all about 'How does this build the business?' . . . The job of this company is to make money, period. That's it. That's what they do. I'm going to try struggle to get . . . I'm going to do some good, darn it."—JoAnn</p> <p>"You have to understand the fundamental incentive of the institution. We're supposed to make money for shareholders and that's going to be our primary thing. There's not going to be an incentive to do that [social impact] necessarily . . . [Leaders] all fundamentally have hearts and they're all individually altruistic, but that's not what this organization is measured by. At the end of the year, it's about making their numbers, making their margins, selling more stuff."—Roxanne</p> <p>"You know, we just have similar experiences, professionally. Small teams. We know what it's like to be under pressure or to like fight above your weight to try and get something across . . . you're always fighting for your life, in a sense, or budget or reason to be because you're not a money generating department in a company—and money generation is everything, right?" —Michelle</p> <p>"We get together and try to figure out, 'Hey, what issues are you dealing with? What issues are we dealing with? How can we make an impact in these areas?' That sort of thing."—Jeff</p> <p>"Talking to outside people, it's nice because then you can hear different things that they're doing [outside of what we're doing at my organization]."—Elizabeth</p> <p>"[My peers] don't have to navigate the structure and the pressures of my company and the way it works. Every company is so different in the way they approach corporate philanthropy. . . . The diversity of perspectives [in the meetings] is really valuable."—Debra</p> <p>"And then you start seeing the same people over and over again, and then that helped, too [in building my network of peers]. Yeah. But you have to make an effort."—Nancy</p>
Paradox peer relationships	Connections to peers situated inside the paradox and outside the focal organization	Connections to others engaged in meeting the competing demands of business and social goals	
	Peer connections exist outside the focal organizational setting		
Connections developed via cooperative ongoing interactions	Relationships built and strengthened over repeated interactions		

TABLE 1  
(Continued)

Aggregate dimension	Conceptual category	Empirical codes	Representative data
Relational mechanisms of engaging paradox	Connecting with one another to relieve tensions	Relationships experienced as noncompetitive	<p>"I think you have more rich conversations in a smaller setting, and I guess then if it's recurrent, you—unlike a conference with 100 people all where you're sitting for an hour, you can build connections better, so you can build the informal ties that you wouldn't necessarily get from a huge conference. . . . otherwise, we wouldn't see each other in between those things."—Elizabeth</p> <p>"I think the really important thing is it's not competitive whatsoever, even though the space itself is trying to differentiate your company from others. I would say it's an extremely collaborative space, extremely positive space . . . complete collaboration and openness and willingness to share and help however you can among the community, no matter who I talk to."—Jessica</p> <p>"But it's nice because you are in a relaxed environment, and you can just kind of network and talk, and there is no, like I said, no agenda."—Ashley</p> <p>"[Olivia] actually mentored me when I started in the field. . . . I just love her to death . . . she is just such a sweetheart. When I first came into the space in CSR, she really showed me the ropes . . . I literally grew this department at [my company] from the ground up. When I started, I was alone. It was great to have someone like her there."—Pattie</p> <p>"Somebody that 100% understands what you are going through. So, your peer group will 100% understand what you're going through because the rules and things that apply to us don't necessarily always apply to other functions." — Hannah</p>
			<p>"I would also say that there's the commiseration piece. And it's just more the emotional support . . . I think it's just understanding the challenges of wanting to fund more than you're able to. The challenges of people in your company not understanding what you're doing and the value you bring and why this really isn't about just giving away money and having a party. It's about stakeholder engagement. It's about license to operate. It's about a larger sustainability program for the company, regardless of how they frame it. I think the commiseration is also around relationships with NGOs [non-governmental organizations], and that sort of strange dynamic that you can develop."—Cassie</p> <p>"You feel somehow better in discussing these challenges 'cause people get it."— Sharon</p>
			<p>Meeting on how to assess the social impact of portfolios over time; presentation given by consultant who works with nonprofits (high-level overview of a meeting on social impact, from fieldnotes).</p> <p>Meeting on communicating business results to executives using different reporting systems; presentation given by a CSR consultant (high-level overview of a meeting on business impact, from fieldnotes).</p>
			<p>In remarks after a group meeting, a grantmaker mentioned a useful resource provided by the Association for Corporate Contributions Professionals (ACCP), a group to which many grantmakers belonged. On its website, ACCP provides a template letter that offers appropriate business-framed language to frame their conference attendance to leaders as beneficial, even though the conference addresses both business and social impact (from fieldnotes 10/2015).</p>
Collectively protecting the paradox	Collectively protecting the paradox	Alternating the focus of meetings between social impact and business impact	
		Encouraging each other to use business language to provide room to pursue social impact goals	

TABLE 1  
(Continued)

Aggregate dimension	Conceptual category	Empirical codes	Representative data
	Collaboratively brainstorming responses to paradox	Exploring new ways to pursue business and social impact	<p>At a meeting about the future of the profession, a panel of grantmakers discussed how their ability to adapt was an asset that would support their status within firms and their longevity in a growing profession. One panelist shared: "You have to know how to think like your CEO. You have to know how to make your work relevant. We need to adapt. The good thing is that we can have a lot of different types of visibility within the corporate organization, within the structure." The panel discussed how, because they could have many positive influences on the business even from different departmental homes, they would be able to continue to pursue social impact and grow the profession (from fieldnotes 06/2016).</p> <p>At an event focused on volunteerism and engaging employees, a grantmaker panelist described a strategy that involved cultivating and engaging employees so that they could serve as "champions" for CSR. As he described his program and how it grew from 30, to 300, to 1,200, to 7,000 engaged champions in four years, a few grantmakers in the audience remarked that he had done a great job with the program. He received several questions from the audience. One asked how he managed to set it up, another asked about partners he worked with, a third asked how it might work in a company with a less-developed program where management was not as warm to the idea, and a fourth grantmaker asked about the tactics for growing at that speed. The panelist answered all questions, including details about the one-pagers he made for senior leaders, the steps he took to recruit and engage employees, and the partners he worked with (from fieldnotes 02/2015).</p> <p>A grantmaker in the audience asked the grantmaker panelists about engaging employees via matching gift programs, where companies match a donation made from an employee to a nonprofit group. A few grantmakers shared their approaches including the level of match their company provided (e.g., 1:1 matching up to 1:3 matching) as well as how they define and monitor the types of organizations that can receive funding. The benefit of this program is that this increases employee engagement and donations simultaneously (from fieldnotes 02/2016).</p> <p>"Part of it is because we're so unique in our company . . . so we do benchmark, and we talk to people. That helps us a lot. Then I was able to call on my colleagues and say, 'Well, how would you guys give it?' . . . There's a lot of benefits to having peers and that network that you talk to and getting information quickly . . . we're all chiming in on different things that we keep hearing, and then we all work together to figure it out."—Elizabeth</p> <p>"[Peer grantmakers] can help you see what isn't working too. To me that's very valuable, 'cause that way you get some kind of sense of what else is possible, and then provide resources to help someone solve whatever the problem is. You know, helping to push people forward."—Miranda</p> <p>"It's such a difficult role, because on the one hand, I think internal people often see me as either an environmentalist that's trying to push things too far, or they see me as doing fun things. And that's not the point . . . [Peer meetings are] a break from your normal routine of implementation, and it's energizing in the sense that you get re-inspired, re-committed, that other people are in the trenches with you."—Debra</p>
Navigating paradox in one's occupational role	Working through paradox by recalling peer interactions	Recalling peer meetings remain energized and motivated at one's home organization	<p>Seeking advice from peers on responding to business–society tensions</p>

TABLE 1  
(Continued)

Aggregate dimension	Conceptual category	Empirical codes	Representative data
		Recalling peer interactions to remain committed to social impact at one's company	<p>"I feel like every time I would attend a [peer meeting] . . . I would come back so pumped like, 'We can do so many things.'"—Anne</p> <p>"It's a lot of work to do that—to put the [social] measurements in place, and track all that, year after year. And no one likes it, but then when you have the results, people like it. But you have to lay the foundation—all of the stuff that no one sees until that result comes out. And that gets hard. So, [my peers help me] stop and celebrate those things."—Emily</p> <p>"We're in this field because we wanna make a difference, we wanna help the nonprofits, help communities, and things like that. All the crappy stuff [like the big emphasis on ROI] . . . you just be resilient and get through it, because at the end of the day, your job is so much better and broader as we do it collectively."—John</p>

Her plan included initiatives that directly supported students, their schools, teachers, parents, and so on. She organized grantees into an impact matrix, which she excitedly presented to senior leaders at the firm. Olivia recalled, "They basically looked at it, told us that it was not necessary, and that we didn't need to waste time with it." After a pause, she continued: "That hurt. But you know, I'm going to keep doing it anyway. To make a difference, we need to make sure that we have a handle on our grantees and their impact." In fact, despite being disheartened by that conversation, Olivia shared that she and her team had been using the impact matrix for several months. She described it as a tool that helps her "maximize success," even though "they clearly don't require me to do this." For her, maximizing success meant a focus on social impact even though organizational leaders did not see it as relevant to her functional success.

In summary, grantmakers confronted paradox because their daily work emphasized both business and social objectives which were contradictory (yet interrelated) and persisted over their careers (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Importantly, grantmakers perceived that their leaders viewed the social impact of philanthropy as secondary to its business impact (Hahn et al., 2014; Kaplan, 2020). Grantmakers thus felt they had little guidance from leaders on pursuing competing demands, particularly regarding how to realize social impact. This situation was challenging for grantmakers, as evidenced by how they sometimes described their work as "hard," "a pain in the ass," "generally complicated," and "hurtful." Indeed, as Michelle commented, "It's just really hard to educate people about your job, to understand the importance. You're using a lot of influence skills to get stuff done. If you're the only one, it's just hard."

### Paradox Peer Relationships

Grantmakers had important relationships with their "paradox peers," i.e., ongoing, cooperative connections with individuals facing similar paradoxes outside the organization.

***Connections to peers situated inside the paradox and outside the focal organization.*** Grantmakers described being *connected to others who were engaged in meeting the competing demands of business and social goals*. Helen, a grantmaker at a manufacturing company, explained that she and her peers "share the same challenge. They're doing healthcare. They're doing equipment. But at the end, we're all funding nonprofits in the community.

So just because their funding issue is different, we all have the issue on ROI [return on investment]." Indeed, the group appeared highly cognizant that all grantmakers shared the challenges of fulfilling both economic and social objectives. For instance, before speaking to the group about employee engagement, a grantmaker emphasized that they all were "tasked to be both stewards of the company and the community," and that this could lead to "difficult work" (fieldnotes May 2015). Discussing ways to address this difficult work was a core purpose of their group meetings.

At the same time, *peer connections existed outside grantmakers' focal organizations*. Every peer meeting that I observed was attended by a dozen or more grantmakers from different companies. The very existence of these meetings revealed that grantmakers often felt isolated and sought to interact with peers in other organizations. Grantmakers broadly recognized the external nature of these connections. Katie, who worked for a medical company, said that although her internal colleagues "understand the politics better" than her external peers, internal colleagues "get stuck in systems and processes that have existed for a while." Her peers at other organizations, by contrast, approached their work in different ways based on their own organizational contexts. In short, defining aspects of peer relationships were that peers were insiders to the paradox but outsiders to the organization.

**Connections developed via ongoing cooperative interactions.** An important aspect of peer ties was that they *were built and strengthened over repeated interactions*. Grantmakers reported that peer relationships grew stronger through repeated interactions in settings such as local peer meetings, lunches, and happy hours. Because people entered the career and the peer network at different times, some peer relationships were new and developing, while others were well developed. For instance, when just starting out in the field, Michelle went to every event offered by grantmaking associations and intentionally sought to connect with local peers. At the time, she simply "needed to learn" about her job. As Michelle progressed in the field and interacted more with her counterparts, her peer relationships deepened.

I think it takes time. It takes years, I mean, to build up these relationships. People aren't just gonna tell you stuff just 'cause we work in the same space. And it's going to meet people; it's that in-person kinda stuff where you get to know people and get to know them better. And you talk, and then you may not see each

other until the next conference or the next thing, but you grow closer.

Michelle also highlighted that the field was relatively small and well connected. "We know a lot of the same folks . . . you already have that halo effect, of being friends with someone, and then you can trust them."

Ongoing interactions with peers enabled grantmakers to develop deeper relationships, the kind in which "you can go and talk to them and just kind of be free." Gretta noted that because peers had different skills and experience levels, it was important "to form relationships that are strong or trusting between each other." She elaborated:

When I attend peer events or whatever, they're great. I learn something or I meet new people. But the biggest value, for me, is more on that inner level or more deeper level. We find our people. We find our connections and go from there.

While grantmakers appreciated their peer ties overall, they acknowledged the significance of the more intimate connections that they had built over time.

Another important aspect of peer ties was that *grantmakers experienced external relationships as noncompetitive*. They felt at ease with their counterparts at other organizations. Pattie, the sole grantmaker for a technology company, explained:

One thing I really, really enjoy about my job, and I'm sure you probably have heard, is that there's really no competing spaces. It really—there really isn't. Like even if the companies might compete on a different level, we're not sharing competitive intelligence. We're not. I mean, the whole opportunity in community relations is to elevate your community and to make your community a better place to live and work. And so, a way that you do that is by working together.

As Pattie described, by "working together" with peers, they could bring an added benefit and further uplift the communities they served.

Grantmakers often appreciated peers from similar organizations that might otherwise be market competitors. Miranda mentioned that she struggled with wanting her employer to stand out from competitors but that it was an "interesting dynamic" due to grantmakers' "tight-knit community" and "trust." Miranda described the pull toward collaboration over competition:

Your vision is to further social impact, both for the ROI for your company and for the community. So that's one of your core skills. And one of the core things you do in life is collaboration. And I think if

you're a good philanthropist, you're looking at . . . collective impacts that will make a difference in the long term, regardless of what might differentiate your company right now, because everyone gains when we work together.

In effect, grantmakers signaled they had more to gain by collaborating with their peers to advance the profession and help communities than any potential loss of a competitive edge due to sharing the inner workings of their initiatives.

Indeed, grantmakers frequently remarked on the collaborative and comfortable nature of peer relationships. Allison contrasted the sense of ease and trustworthiness of their grantmaking peer space with that of other professionals, such as attorneys, saying, "I think we're less competitive in our spaces, and . . . more collaborative, and I think that helps a lot." Similarly, Katie said, "It's interesting. I don't see any negativity. I'm not seeing, like, weird competition, competitiveness, or secrecy, or anything like that. Just positivity." Grantmakers reflected on how this comfortableness emerged, even when working across organizational lines. Roxanne for instance, thought it might be because "nine out of ten of us just really have hearts." Others attributed it to the fact that grantmakers are corporate "do-gooders" and that "helping professions" center on "building stakeholder relationships." Because peer relationships were cooperative, grantmakers stood out if they were "posturing" instead of being "real" or if they "annoyingly" seemed to be looking out for themselves. Katie said with a laugh, "This sounds really bad, but there are a few people no one likes. We all don't like the same people, kind of mutual dislike of that one or two people."

In sum, grantmakers built paradox peer relationships with other grantmakers in different organizations. The fact that peer relationships were ongoing, cooperative, and situated inside the paradox but outside the focal organization setting was critical because it provided the foundation for peers to interact on a deep level around paradox. Importantly, the external nature of peer ties provided access to social connections and resources that were lacking in their home organizations. Moreover, their regular engagement and cooperation shaped how peers related to one another around the paradoxical tensions in their work, as discussed in the next section.

### Relational Mechanisms of Engaging Paradox

Peers collectively engaged paradox through three key relational mechanisms: (a) connecting with one

another to relieve tensions, (b) collectively protecting the paradox, and (c) collaboratively brainstorming responses to paradox.

#### ***Connecting with one another to relieve tensions.***

Relationships with paradox peers supported grantmakers by relieving tensions they otherwise experienced in isolation. Catherine, a grantmaker at a retail company, provided an example of how peers relieved tensions by *fostering feelings of connection and understanding*. Catherine faced challenges in her role, sharing, "It's such a unique role, and so few people understand how it works and the pressures behind it. There is something really important about having those friendships and relationships to go to." When asked to elaborate on what she thought was important, Catherine continued by saying, "It makes me feel better." With a lighthearted laugh, she added, "I mean, it's like—it's [grantmaker] therapy. People understand how hard this is." Because internal colleagues did not understand grantmakers' competing demands, external relationships offered opportunities for deep connections that made them feel understood.

Lisa's experience also highlighted how peers helped her feel connected and understood. Lisa's company was facing a management crisis which meant potential cuts to the philanthropic program. She appreciated that some of her peers had faced similar challenges and understood what she was going through. She said, "It's just been reassuring going through a crisis to hear how other people have dealt with it, the good and the bad." Lisa expanded:

It's human experience, right? You're not alone. You're not doing this badly or well. This is the circumstance that we're in, and reassuring myself that I'm doing a good job, too, and other people understand me and my perspective, and appreciate and value the work, because not everyone does. I think philanthropy is often one of the first things to be cut, and so to know that other people have a deep understanding for what you do and how important it is, it's very helpful.

Lisa could talk with peers about the difficulties she was facing and be met with an understanding ear. Doing so allowed her to feel that she was "not alone."

Peer relationship also provided relief by *offering opportunities to commiserate about shared tensions*. For Jeff, peers provided an outlet to express difficulties that would be less appropriate to voice elsewhere. With his peers, Jeff could admit that he did not always know what to do and candidly discuss his roadblocks. He said, "When we're together, we can bitch about all the other executives," meaning

they could vent about the general challenges of executive pressure and the idiosyncrasies of their specific leaders, thereby collectively relieving some of the stress of balancing competing demands. Sharing difficulties helped to build a community in which challenges could be discussed freely and be met with compassion.

Similarly, Debra said that she specifically sought commiseration from her peers.

Every meeting, I'm like, "Who else is in a company that's really hard and you can't get anything through?" . . . I want to hear the good stuff, too. I'm really proud of all of my friends that are doing amazing work, but I want that commiseration of who else feels like they're just stuck right now, and they want to do great work and they can't.

Debra found it comforting not only to be understood but also to know that others felt stuck too. The commiseration aspect of the peer group allowed grantmakers to vocalize their challenges in a relatively empathetic group of people. One grantmaker described how she felt "safer" venting with peers than with internal colleagues. Additionally, some grantmakers remarked that longstanding relationships felt especially safe for venting about tough work challenges, the kind "that you want kept in a locked box."

**Collectively protecting the paradox.** Peers collectively worked to "protect the paradox," or to value competing business–society demands without letting one dominate (Huq et al., 2017). Grantmakers helped maintain this dual focus by *alternating the focus of their meetings between social impact and business impact*. Consider the difference between two meeting presentations on measuring impact. In one meeting, grantmakers learned about social impact measurement from a professor who researched nonprofit program evaluation (January 2016). The speaker outlined a variety of best practices that could help grantmakers maximize social impact by shifting their focus from outputs (i.e., nonprofit activities) to outcomes for beneficiaries (i.e., the effects of the outputs) and implementing theories of change and logic models to anticipate and measure impact. In contrast, the second meeting was led by a CSR consultant focused on a very different set of measures that grantmakers might consider adopting. He presented business-oriented metrics (e.g., consumer awareness, purchase intentions and behavior, and employee recruitment and retention) to better align grantmaking with business demands and cultivate relationships with different leaders from finance, marketing, government relations, and the like (fieldnotes March 2016).

The meetings profiled above evidenced how grantmakers independently engaged competing demands, valuing the unique skills associated with each goal. Importantly, exposure to a variety of topics over time offered grantmakers the ability to appreciate and develop expertise in both areas, strengthening the foundation for their dual commitment at their home organizations. Because grantmakers lacked internal guidance on social impact, meetings that focused on social impact were especially important for ensuring both demands remained valued.

Protecting the paradox also involved *encouraging each other to use business language to provide room to pursue social impact goals*. For example, at a meeting on measuring and communicating impact, Jeff described how difficult it was for him to achieve social impact in the face of constant changes in leadership and business strategy.

My leadership changes their mind on what they want too much for me to get any long-term data. The problem is you don't have continuous focus long enough to figure out if I am even making an impact. If I'm changing business strategies let's say every . . . at least three years, sometimes even less than that, how can I measure it? I'm going to have to keep changing programs to align with the strategy . . . I mean we all get it, it's frustrating!

Jeff then asked the group, "How do you ingrain our work into the company so that a change in executives doesn't mean a change in social impact?" Anne responded, "As much as you can, try to get the community engagement data in business terms." Rebecca added, "Try to build an appetite for what you're doing with the execs using their language so that you don't have to constantly justify your existence." Jeff's peers suggested that emphasizing the parts of his work that resonated best with executives would provide the stability necessary to pursue social impact over longer time horizons. This interaction provided one example of how peers worked within the constraints of their leaders' economic priorities to build room to pursue social impact.

**Collaboratively brainstorming responses to paradox.** When grantmakers got together, they engaged in group brainstorming to generate new ideas and solve problems associated with how they approached work. One way that peers brainstormed was by *exploring new ways to pursue business and social impact*. For example, at a meeting about how to use CSR to engage employees (fieldnotes February 2015), a grantmaker and her colleague, the director of diversity and inclusion, presented an innovative partnership they

established at their manufacturing company. Together, they sought to engage various employee-led groups in community work. The grantmaker provided funding and trained group members on how to identify potential beneficiary organizations that fit both the passion of each group and the company's business strategy. From the grantmaker's perspective, the partnership had helped her "make a difference in the community" by identifying important nonprofits that previously had not been on her radar. At the same time, it strengthened employee-company ties, a form of business impact. Through the recounting of this innovative partnership, the grantmakers in the meeting learned about a novel way to simultaneously pursue business and social impact. Because the field of corporate philanthropy was still developing, learning about potential initiatives together was noted as particularly helpful.

Grantmakers also worked together to develop novel initiatives. For example, Rebecca, an experienced grantmaker at an insurance firm, reached out to a peer at a bank to explore the idea of a new charitable flex fund for employees.

I need next level, I need strategy, I need people to help challenge my way of thinking. So, I talked to [an external peer]. "Hey, is anyone talking about charitable flex funds?" And he's like, "No, but our corporate group has a session we planned for March on innovation . . . Will you collaborate and see what people think about them?" I'm like, "Absolutely."

Rebecca said she was looking forward to the upcoming event and grateful for the opportunity to develop and test this potential strategy. As expressed by Rebecca, engaging with peers was especially important to "challenge" grantmakers to think in new ways. Even grantmakers with internal teammates valued the diverse perspectives and creative ideas that emerged from discussions with external peers about new initiatives. This was the case for Gretta, who worked on a small team of grantmakers. Gretta explained: "You never want to be too insular . . . the external benefit is, you get that diversity of thought, right?"

Grantmakers also described *seeking advice from peers on responding to business-society tensions*. For example, Debra shared that she reached out to peers when she was uncertain about how to structure proposals and end-of-grant evaluations in a way that would allow her to best capture both social and business impact. She wanted to know more about reporting metrics and "reached out to people and said, 'I know you have this. I know it's successful.

How does that work with you guys?'" She wanted feedback on the metrics she had implemented and was curious about "other innovative questions" she could add. By talking with peers, grantmakers like Debra could gain a sense of whether their own programs and initiatives were in line with best practices. This allowed them to "calibrate," as one grantmaker put it—to understand what might be possible and update their practices accordingly.

Similarly, Jessica described a regular breakfast meeting she attended with a few peers in the health industry as one of the most helpful venues for obtaining feedback on her programming and related challenges. She recalled seeking advice on potential disaster relief efforts in the wake of a hurricane, explaining that her desire to provide broader support was diluting her focus. Her peers provided "several helpful ideas" (e.g., to focus on providing water to the local community, given the company's expertise in water-related issues). This feedback helped Jessica balance social and business objectives. Realizing that she could help victims in a meaningful way while reinforcing the company's expertise renewed her motivation. She left the meeting saying, "I can do this better." Feedback thus not only provided tactical advice to improve responses but also a sense of energy and purpose.

### Navigating Paradox in One's Occupational Role

***Working through paradox by recalling peer interactions.*** Working through paradox involves remaining committed to and sustaining seemingly competing goals rather than resolving tensions between them (Bednarek et al., 2017; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). One way that individual grantmakers worked through paradox was by *recalling peer meetings to remain energized and motivated*. Jessica discussed how learning about her peers' accomplishments "reenergized" her by highlighting the potential impact she could have, thereby motivating her to continue to pursue competing demands at work. Jessica described a recent meeting at which she learned more about the approach of a peer grantmaker. She found it "incredibly motivating."

Their giving was way bigger than [our company's] giving in terms of actual dollars but [what stood out was that] they were incredibly strategic. That just reenergizes you . . . we all do amazing work, and we can do even more. Like, oh my god, we could do so much more! The sky's the limit.

Although Jessica's philanthropic budget was considerably smaller than her peer's budget, she did not



feel disheartened by financial limitations. Instead, she felt inspired to be more strategic. Her takeaway was that “you have to realign or, I guess, reframe your thinking in terms of your company’s size.” Following this meeting, Jessica reexamined her own grantee portfolio to better align her impact goals with grants, board placements, and volunteer opportunities.

Roxanne similarly shared how she felt motivated to advance her work and make a greater impact after attending peer gatherings. At conferences, Roxanne would chat with others about their major initiatives and listen to presentations about innovations in corporate social impact.

There are times when the conferences and the things you go to, it makes you feel good to be in this space. ‘Cause sometimes you don’t get that validation at work, right? People just think, “Oh, well, that’s a nice thing to do, whatever.” But then you go, and you realize, “Gee, collectively, we’re making this huge impact.”

Being reminded of the larger impact grantmakers were making in the sector made Roxanne feel good about her work. Although the social impact of her work was not always recognized directly at her home organization, she felt “a little boost” from being reminded about the successes of the collective, which she drew upon to motivate her own work.

Individuals also worked through paradox by *recalling peer interactions to remain committed to social impact inside one’s company*. Returning to an earlier example, although leaders had dismissed Olivia’s social impact matrix as “not necessary,” she and her team remained committed to using it, in part because she knew her peers were also dedicated to figuring out how to effectively advance social impact. She described how the field of corporate philanthropy had become more “sophisticated” and how measuring social impact was a “next-level” goal. In fact, talking with a peer about their measurement efforts had inspired Olivia to design an impact matrix in the first place, and she wanted to continue to advance the work.

Peer interactions also helped Michelle remain commitment to social impact. Michelle’s social impact measurement was extensive. She had spent three years working with an external evaluation researcher to determine appropriate metrics and implementing the impact measurement tools with their grantees. The initiative was successful, and nonprofits had begun to collaborate more with each other. Michelle could now look across her grantmaking portfolio and assess impact at a more macro level. Although

Michelle knew it was a unique and important effort, her internal colleagues and leaders sometimes did not recognize the achievement or belittled her efforts. Their dismissiveness wore Michelle down and occasionally she questioned why she was working so hard on the measurements. At these times, she reminded herself of her peers’ favorable responses to her work and their recognition of the initiative’s complexity.

You’re working hard, and no one at work thinks it’s all that great. But then you go, and you find out that you are the only one doing this kind of tracking, of the metrics and stuff. We’re the only ones that have that. And so, it’s like, “Yeah!” And then I can go back and tell my boss, “We’re the only one doing that. I should get more credit.” [Laughter.] . . . I think that validates the hard work that you’re doing. . . . Internally it’s like, “Eh, okay. Whatever.” But it’s a big deal.

Michelle knew that what her team was attempting to do with metrics was difficult to achieve. Although she was proud of her work, her peers’ reactions reminded her of the value of measurements. They left her feeling “validated” and enabled her to renew her commitment to work on tough initiatives despite tepid responses from organizational insiders.

Interestingly, I also spoke to one informant who lacked a robust peer network. Gerry, a grantmaker at a manufacturing firm, had responded to my “cold” email rather than a referral chain. Gerry largely worked alone. He was satisfied with his approach, which he felt aligned with the business strategy. Donations went only to communities that were home to their manufacturing plants, with a focus on organizations that supported local decision makers, such as police softball leagues and firefighter associations. He sought to build positive reputational capital with town decision makers, which he and the firm’s leaders believed would be useful if problems occurred at a plant. Unlike the other grantmakers I spoke with, Gerry did not have strong peer relationships nor did he work with peers to engage or work through business–society tensions. While Gerry may have prioritized business over social goals regardless, he lacked a connection to peers who could have encouraged or even challenged him to adopt a more balanced focus. Although grantmakers with peer relationships also exhibited some instrumental reasoning in their grantmaking, often to ensure a positive business impact, they also sought to maximize the social impact. The counterexample of Gerry thus highlights the value of peer relationships for motivating grantmakers to work through competing business–social demands.

## A PEER-BASED MODEL OF NAVIGATING PARADOX

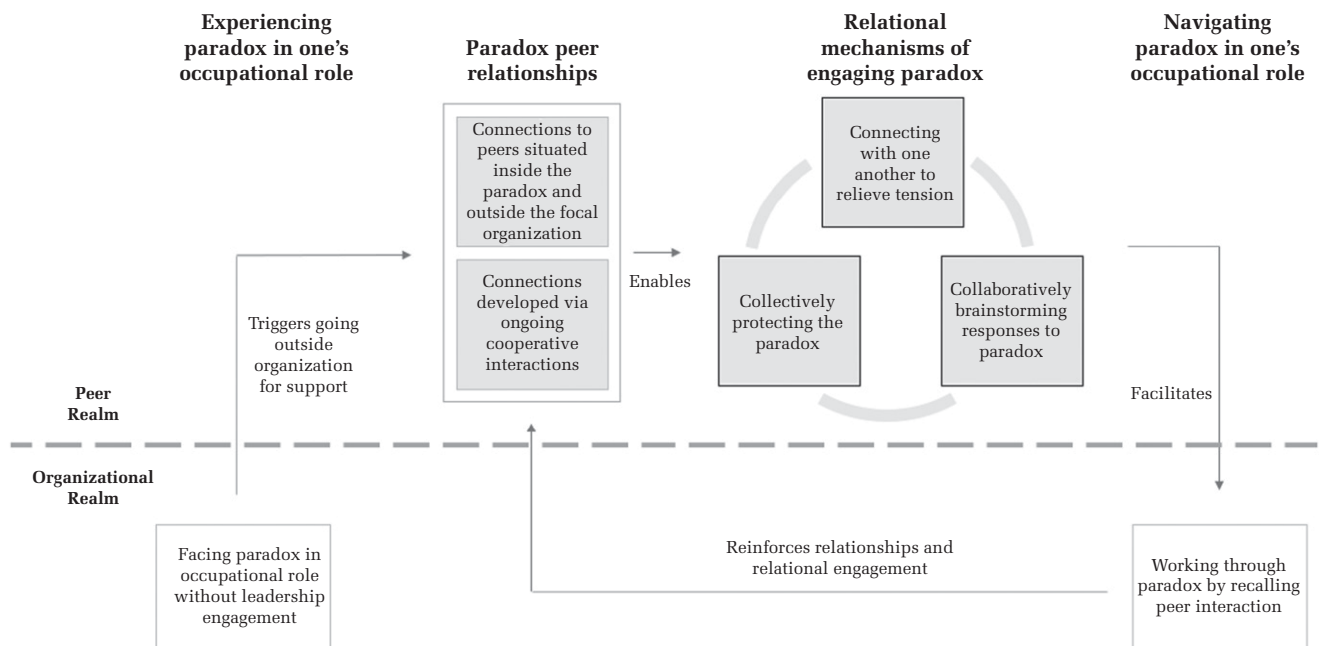
My objective in this study was to develop theory to explain how individuals navigate paradox in their occupational role when it is not a dominant organizational concern for senior leaders. In this section, I integrate relevant literature with my inductive findings to introduce a peer-based model of navigating paradox. The model highlights the importance of external relationships with paradox peers, the relational mechanisms of paradox engagement, and the enhanced individual commitment to working through paradox facilitated by these mechanisms. Figure 2 depicts both an organizational realm (white elements) as well as a peer realm (gray elements) to emphasize how individuals draw on external peer relationships to better navigate paradox in their home organizations.

Some organizations embed competing objectives at their very core such that both leaders and individuals across levels must find ways to navigate paradox (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Smith & Besharov, 2019). Other times, leaders may not integrate paradoxical goals into the organization's strategy (Hahn et al., 2014; Smith, 2014), even as some functional or occupational roles demand that individuals oversee competing goals on behalf of the organization. Grantmakers in this study represent individuals who *face paradox*

in their occupational role when leadership does not engage paradox. Because navigating paradox is difficult (Lewis, 2000; Vince & Broussine, 1996), particularly under resource constraints (Smith & Lewis, 2011), such individuals can experience anxiety, employ defense mechanisms such as avoidance, or even experience long periods of stagnation (Lewis, 2000; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Smith & Berg, 1987; Vince & Broussine, 1996). To avoid burnout, individuals must find ways to work through paradox (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Pradies et al., 2021; Smith & Berg, 1987).

Individuals who experience tension in their occupational role but do not receive robust support from other organizational members may seek support from like-minded colleagues in other organizations (Augustine, 2021; Bucher, 1988; Fayard, Stigliani, & Bechky, 2017). At the heart of my model lies the idea that in seeking support, individuals build relationships with paradox peers. These relationships are *situated inside the paradox and outside an individual's focal organization* and develop over time via *ongoing cooperative interactions*. Critically, the positioning of peers as both paradox insiders and organizational outsiders enables individuals to develop authentic relationships based on a shared experience of the paradox and the ability to harness differences between their approaches. This reflects

**FIGURE 2**  
**Peer-Based Model of Navigating Paradox**



the value of interactions with “outsider-insiders” (Nigam et al., 2022) and contrasts with extant work on paradox that has highlighted collaboration with colleagues inside the organization as a navigation strategy (Huq et al., 2017; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). The characteristics of peer relationships in this study highlighted how grantmakers formed an occupational community (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984) around paradox in that they were not just members of the same occupation but also fostered a sense of solidarity and had communal rather than competitive relationships.

Paradox peer relationships provide important relational resources (Blatt, 2009) that drive three primary mechanisms for engaging paradox. In Figure 2, the mechanisms are presented in a circular manner to indicate that they overlap in real time and are mutually reinforcing. First, paradox peers engage paradox by *connecting with one another to relieve tensions*. Rather than struggling with tensions in isolation (Rothman & Wiesenfeld, 2007), grantmakers found a sense of connection with external peers with whom they could commiserate. Relieving tension is an important part of managing paradox (Smith, Binns, & Tushman, 2010) as it helps reduce anxiety and encourage comfort with repeatedly engaging competing demands (Huq et al., 2017; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017). Whereas paradox studies have pointed to short-term relief offered by humor (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017) or irony (Gylfe, Franck, & Vaara, 2019), my findings emphasize how peer relationships provide ongoing relief. The social elements of my findings show that “colleagueship” develops when people face similar work challenges across organizations (Bucher, 1988; Fayard et al., 2017; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984) and contrast with the idea that relief from tensions primarily stems from the cognitive acceptance of paradox (Hahn et al., 2015; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Moreover, connection and relief are key to working through paradox as they are primary sources of individuals’ resilience at work (Stephens, Heaphy, Carmeli, Spreitzer, & Dutton, 2013).

Second, paradox peers engage paradoxical tensions by *collectively protecting the paradox*, which involves actively working to value each objective and ensure that one does not overpower the other (Huq et al., 2017). Through working together to give independent attention to business and social impact, grantmakers valued each element in its own right without attempting to eliminate tensions by merging the two goals or prioritizing one over the other (Beech, Burns, de Caestecker, MacIntosh, & MacLean,

2004; Clegg, da Cunha, & Cunha, 2002; Putnam et al., 2016). Practically speaking, collective effort and energy is useful when engaging opposing elements as it can be difficult to do so alone (Abdallah et al., 2011; Bednarek et al., 2017; Seo, Putnam, & Bartunek, 2004). Professionals suffer when they are unable to balance their prosocial goals with the economic realities of their work (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017) and benefit from being pushed to consider a more balanced approach (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Gotsi et al., 2010). In contrast to the idea that strategies for protecting paradox come from leaders or those with higher status in organizations (Gümüşay, Smets, & Morris, 2020; Huq et al., 2017; Knight & Paroutis, 2017), my findings show that peers help to value and keep the paradox open even when more powerful internal actors favor one of the competing objectives. This echoes findings that peer pressure can be especially important for countering complacency and sustaining commitment to both social and economic objectives in one’s occupational role (Howard-Grenville, Nelson, Earle, Haack, & Young, 2017).

Third, paradox peers engage paradoxical tensions by *collaboratively brainstorming responses to paradox*. Paradox peers work together to develop new ideas for initiatives to meet their dual goals, experimenting with different practices without prematurely investing resources in them (Smith & Besharov, 2019). This emphasis on interactions contrasts with existing work that has viewed the ability to generate new ideas and solve problems in the face of paradox as a cognitive skill (e.g., Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Sleesman, 2019). Discussing new ideas with external peers is particularly important because organizational insiders can become entrenched in existing responses to paradoxes (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003) and fall prey to path dependency (Sydow, Schreyögg, & Koch, 2009). Even when internal pockets of support are helpful to professionals (Soderstrom & Weber, 2020), relationships that span organizations provide access to unique information and diverse perspectives (Cross & Cummings, 2004) that that can help cast organizational tensions in a new light (Jay, 2013). Through brainstorming, peers harness contextual differences and heterogeneity in their approaches (Howard-Grenville et al., 2017) to solve problems and push each other to approach paradox in new ways inside their home organizations.

In the face of persistent competing demands, actors must exhibit similarly persistent responses (Cunha & Clegg, 2018). My model depicts how relational mechanisms facilitate the ability of individuals to

work through paradox at their home organizations. “Working through” paradox refers to the continuous steps actors take to reduce anxiety and move forward amid tensions (Bednarek et al., 2017; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Pradies et al., 2021) rather than counterproductively avoiding them (Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997). My findings emphasize that without robust engagement of paradox inside their organizations, individuals can find alternate ways of remaining committed. Grantmakers *worked through paradox by recalling peer interactions* to re-energize themselves and maintain their focus on both social and business objectives. This was particularly important for social impact goals which were not otherwise engaged at a deep level inside their firms. Indeed, without peers to support and push each other on this aspect, grantmakers may have focused primarily on business objectives, as Gerry did, or burned out. Working through paradox has been described as an interactional process of engaging and re-engaging tensions within organizations (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Pradies et al., 2021). In this study, grantmakers instead engaged tensions outside their firms and drew on those insights to motivate their internal responses. Reflecting the idea that individuals develop resilient aspects of their identities and better understandings of organizational life through occupational affiliations (Anteby, Chan, & DiBenigno, 2016; Bechky, 2011), my findings demonstrate the importance of affiliation with paradox peers for navigating tensions and living with paradox.

With the arrow in Figure 2 connecting “working through” back to peer relationships, my model shows how relying on peers to engage paradox can ultimately reinforce relationships and the relational engagement of paradox in the peer realm. How paradox peer relationships enable overlapping mechanisms evidences positive dynamics typically seen within well-functioning work groups (Lee, Mazmanian, & Perlow, 2020). Individuals who build strong work-related relationships are able to openly discuss and address challenges, thereby enhancing their capabilities at work and further strengthening their relationships (Carmeli, Dutton, & Hardin, 2015; Carmeli & Gittell, 2009; Lee et al., 2020). Put another way, paradox peer relationships, like strong work relationships, fuel positive cycles of engagement in building relationships and navigating paradox. Of note, as individuals iterated through these cycles, they developed stronger and more trusting relationships, including with peers from competing firms.

To summarize, my model explains how relationships with paradox peers help individuals engage

paradox in their occupations through three mechanisms, in turn facilitating the ability of individuals to draw on peers to continually work through paradox in their home organizations. Overall, those who thrive when navigating paradox do so by remaining energized and motivated (Keller & Chen, 2017; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). My model shows how this process can be based in supportive peer relationships.

## THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The model developed in this paper contributes a more relational approach to paradox studies, offering insight into the interactions and relationships between people that underpin how individuals navigate paradox. Research on paradox has begun to recognize that paradoxes emerge in social contexts, pointing to a form of relationality in how paradoxes are “talked into being” (Sheep et al., 2017), recognized as salient through interactions (Knight & Paroutis, 2017) and enacted through the everyday interactions of individuals (Lê & Bednarek, 2017). Yet research explicating the ways that individuals navigate paradox has emphasized the practices in which individuals engage rather than how those practices implicitly rely on interactions between organizational members (e.g., Abdallah et al., 2011; Bednarek et al., 2017; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Schneider et al., 2021). The core contribution of this study is to unpack how and why interactions with others, in particular with peers, enable individuals to more effectively navigate paradox. In doing so, I reveal the interactional threads that have been hinted at in extant studies of navigating paradox (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017; Keller, Wong, & Liou, 2020; Sheep et al., 2017) and move beyond existing work by providing a rich understanding of the relational mechanisms that allow individuals to engage paradox: connecting with one another to relieve tensions, collectively protecting the paradox, and collaboratively brainstorming responses to paradox. Thus, my research challenges paradox scholars to consider the centrality of social contexts in how paradoxes come to light and in how individuals grapple with and respond to paradoxical tensions.

Four theoretical implications follow from this relational perspective. First, my findings challenge individualistic assumptions about how actors navigate paradox. Much research has focused on the cognitive and behavioral capabilities of individuals as they respond to paradox (Schad et al., 2016). Advancements in research on paradoxical thinking

have placed responses squarely in the cognitive realm (Keller & Chen, 2017; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018), thereby highlighting individualized skill sets. For example, Miron-Spektor et al. (2018) depicted some individuals as holding more of a trade-off mentality between competing demands and other individuals as comfortable and energized by persistent tensions. From this perspective, responses to paradox appear to originate with the individual and are influenced by one's inner ability to engage tensions. Indeed, in many studies, responses appear to have been developed based on the thoughts, interpretations, and practices of individuals (Hahn et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2020; Smith, 2014; Zhang, Waldman, Han, & Li, 2015).

In contrast, my findings place relationality front and center in the process of navigating paradoxical tensions. My model offers a deeper understanding of how relationships allow for collective engagement with paradox, which in turn helps individuals navigate paradox. As Emirbayer (1997: 287) argued, the social world is composed of interconnected relations that provide meaning and significance, such that "individual persons . . . are inseparable from the transactional [relational] contexts within which they are embedded." Extending these insights, my model emphasizes how relationality is dominant in the ways that individuals navigate paradox, even when they appear to lack internal relational partners. My findings show that relationships with multiple actors, sometimes unexpectedly outside of one's home organization, support individuals as they work through paradox. Managing paradox may even be thought of as fundamentally relational, since it is through interacting with others that people debate the merits of competing goals (Huq et al., 2017; Wenzel et al., 2019), comfortably joke about tensions (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017), and respond to paradox (Putnam et al., 2016). My model thus resonates with research on relational sociology (Emirbayer, 1997; Mische, 2011) and psychological inquiries that have placed social relationships at the heart of work processes (Heaphy, Byron, Ballinger, Gittell, Leana, & Sluss, 2018; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Overall, my research challenges paradox scholars to expand their focus beyond the individual to a broader relational framework that enables a better understanding of how social exchanges cultivate and sustain engagement with paradox.

A second implication of my work is to challenge the implicit idea that individuals stay within the boundaries of their own organizations as they navigate paradox in their everyday work. Many studies

have focused on leaders who drive organizational responses to paradox (Pradies et al., 2020; Smith, 2014) and individuals who engage in practices from within their organizations (Huq et al., 2017; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017). The emphasis on intra-organizational dynamics has been reinforced in part by a continued focus on paradoxes that are core organizational concerns (Bednarek et al., 2017; Gotsi et al., 2010; Wenzel et al., 2019). My study invites scholars to recognize that paradox is not always championed by leaders and that individuals often navigate paradoxes from a more peripheral position without high levels of internal support (Berti & Simpson, 2021).

In contrast with existing work, my model highlights the value of building relationships with external peers to address paradoxical demands internally. My findings suggest actors who struggle with paradox—particularly when they lack organizational support or are in a peripheral position—benefit from actively engaging with external peers who allow them to step outside their own organizational experiences. This builds on the idea that external actors provide new ways of seeing tensions (Jay, 2013) and the idea that external actors draw attention to both demands (Smith & Besharov, 2019) by showing the generativity that comes from relationships with external peers facing a similar paradox. In doing so, my findings on paradox peers help explain the value of cooperative occupational communities (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984) for navigating paradox. Echoing the idea that occupational-based heterogeneity can be an enabling force (Howard-Grenville et al., 2017), my findings suggest that outsiders can be sources of creativity and motivation. Indeed, connections to outsiders can prevent insiders from becoming stuck in unproductive responses to paradox (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003). Moreover, while we might not expect to find open and vulnerable engagement between peers in competing organizations, it is the openness of paradox peer relationships that supports mutual success, both within organizations and across the professional field (see also Sonenshein, Nault, & Obodaru, 2017). The findings thus reflect an irony that individuals may need to be vulnerable with outsiders to advance responses to paradox internally. More broadly, my work encourages scholars to extend beyond the analytical boundaries of the organization to more accurately interpret the dynamics that shape paradox management.

A third important implication of this study is to extend the concept of a paradox mindset—the extent to which one accepts and is energized by tensions

(Miron-Spektor et al., 2018)—to include a relational dimension. Research on paradox mindsets has focused on identifying individual differences in cognition and thus has not offered much insight into how such mindsets are developed or sustained (Keller & Chen, 2017; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). My findings suggest paradox mindsets have an important collective element. Interacting with paradox peers enabled grantmakers to reduce their anxiety, value both goals, and generate new responses, thereby helping them remain inspired to pursue competing goals. These interactions were especially helpful because grantmakers were relatively isolated internally, suggesting that relational partners are important for sustaining paradox mindsets amid demotivating forces such as disempowerment (Berti & Simpson, 2021). I thus build on emerging findings on how cultural backgrounds shape paradox mindsets (Keller, Loewenstein, & Yan, 2017) by offering additional insights into the role of local interactions. Complementing calls for a deeper understanding of the factors influencing paradoxical cognition (Keller & Chen, 2017; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Schad et al., 2016), my work highlights the need to further consider how relationships enable individuals to develop and sustain paradox mindsets.

Fourth, my model offers new insights regarding the role of lower-power relational partners in shaping how individuals navigate paradox. Typically, paradox scholars have prioritized understanding how high-power actors like senior leaders shape the navigation of competing demands (Berti & Simpson, 2021; Pradies et al., 2020). In studies documenting how non-leaders manage paradox, researchers have similarly emphasized how higher-power actors (i.e., leaders) provide lower-power individuals with resources such as ways to frame one's identity (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Besharov, 2014; Gotsi et al., 2010), space to work through tensions (Gümüşay et al., 2020; Knight & Paroutis, 2017), and the support necessary to prioritize competing goals (Huq et al., 2017; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). When studies have looked at interactions between non-leaders, scholars have often emphasized conflicts between groups that are attached to one of the competing goals (Huq et al., 2017; Wenzel et al., 2019). My findings highlight that individuals do not always receive support from leaders (Berti & Simpson, 2021) and instead may obtain support from lower-power relational partners. Although grantmaking peers at other organizations lacked internal power, they offered key relational resources that ultimately empowered

individual grantmakers to work through a business–society paradox, even when they felt misunderstood by their own profit-minded leaders. Indeed, whereas high-power leaders have the authority to essentially require individuals to pursue paradoxical demands, my findings show that a community of relatively lower-power individuals who collectively struggle over tensions can inspire a strong sense of internal motivation that empowers individuals to work through paradox. This reflects the finding that subordinate group members can build a sense of collective efficacy through interactions without the presence of higher-power individuals (Kellogg, 2009; Polletta, 1999). My work joins that of other scholars in calling for greater attention to the power relations at play in navigating tensions (Berti & Simpson, 2021; Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Wenzel et al., 2019), while also laying the foundation for future research on understanding dynamics of empowerment around paradox.

Finally, my findings have implications for research on work and occupations and how for-profit firms engage business–society tensions. Both classic and recent research on occupations has focused on tensions and conflicts between different groups (e.g., Abbott, 1988; DiBenigno, 2018). By contrast, I consider paradoxical tensions as core and persistent dynamics within a single occupational group. As people become more attached to and reliant on their occupations as a source of meaning (Anteby et al., 2016; Bechky, 2011), I encourage scholars to explore how persistent contradictions in occupational roles influence how people experience work. Rather than attempting to narrow jurisdictional expertise through specific tasks and accreditation (Augustine, 2021; Sandholtz et al., 2019), members of occupations that face paradoxes may benefit by remaining open to seeing their work in dynamic and even inconsistent ways (Smith, 2014). My model suggests that the extent to which occupational members collectively engage tensions may be critical in explaining whether occupational groups become stuck in tension-filled dynamics (e.g., Anteby & Chan, 2018) or display the ability to embrace tensions and change (e.g., Howard-Grenville et al., 2017; Kellogg, 2009). In this way, my model reflects more interactionist approaches to understanding occupational groups (Anteby et al., 2016; Bechky, 2003; Huising, 2015; Kellogg, 2009). At the same time, interactional studies of occupational groups have tended to highlight relationships between an occupational group and other stakeholders, whereas my findings highlight the relational practices within an occupational community. Thus, while my model offers a more relational approach to

paradox theory by pushing paradox scholars beyond organizational boundaries, the findings also suggest that occupational scholars can benefit from adopting a more inward-looking approach to examining how relationships develop and provide resources within the boundaries of an occupation (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984).

My findings also draw attention to the fact that in order to answer calls to understand how for-profit firms engage with societal objectives given their dominant economic goals (Sharma & Good, 2013; Van der Byl & Slawinski, 2015), researchers must examine the work of those who navigate these tensions on behalf of firms. By hiring grantmakers, ethics officers, sustainability professionals, and individuals in similar roles, firms benefit from the pursuit of prosocial initiatives while retaining the option to decouple or buffer their core functions from engaging with contradictions (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Weaver et al., 1999). My findings imply that although firms may attempt to resolve paradox by creating these positions and segmenting tensions there, they may simply be shifting the paradox from the organizational level to the occupational level, thereby creating persistent challenges for individuals. Relegating business–society paradoxes to the purview of individuals in such occupations without engaging these issues at the organizational level may stall or even reverse social impact (Dobbin, 2009; Kanashiro & Rivera, 2017). My findings suggest that occupational peers can and do encourage one another to sustain their commitments to social impact. In future research, scholars could investigate how occupational groups work to move social issues from the periphery to the core of the firm. Professional associations have typically been recognized for the roles they play in promoting standards and providing training (Abbott, 1988; Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002). Scholars have only begun to see cross-organizational convening as pivotal to furthering social initiatives inside companies. My work suggests that cross-organizational relationships may fundamentally shape how individuals in CSR-related roles manage their work and calls for greater attention to be paid to these positions and relationships.

### **Limitations, Generalizability, and Future Research**

Although the grantmakers in this study successfully tapped into their external peer network to access positive relational resources, the model developed here may not apply in the same way to

all individuals who face paradox in their occupations. I was not able to capture several potentially important areas of variation in this study. My data collection strategies, which relied largely on referral chains in one geographic location where I observed the existence of an active peer group, likely directed my attention to grantmakers who were connected to one another rather than those who remained isolated within their firms. The case of the more isolated Gerry suggests that individuals without peer connections may struggle to engage competing demands compared to those who are connected. In future studies, researchers could more explicitly consider variation in the extent to which individuals connect with paradox peers. The grantmakers in this study all worked for large Fortune 500 organizations. It is possible that the model may not apply in the same way to those who fill the philanthropic function at smaller organizations where philanthropic resources are scarce and grantmaking may be one of many roles someone fulfills. Without the time and space to recognize and process paradoxical tensions in relation to one's mandate, individuals may struggle to develop deep peer dynamics around paradox and thus have less robust paradox engagement.

Moreover, additional research is needed to investigate whether some paradox peer connections matter more than others in shaping how individuals address tensions. In my setting, some peer relationships were closer than others, in part because some had just started their careers whereas others had been in the community for over a decade. I observed similar relational mechanisms in both mature and developing peer relationships, reflecting the finding that core networks comprise both long-standing and recent ties (Small, Pamphile, & McMahan, 2015). This may not always be the case. Other inquiries into paradox peer dynamics may uncover that new relationships bring “fresh eyes” and energy to paradox (Howard-Grenville et al., 2017), whereas more established networks may enable people to change entrenched responses (Reay, Golden-Biddle, & Germann, 2006). Additionally, I identified positive ways of interacting around paradox, but peers also could relate to each other in negative ways, potentially resulting in vicious cycles (Lewis, 2000) or an escalation of commitment to ineffective approaches (Sleesman, 2019). In future studies, researchers could further unpack the factors that prevent destructive cycles and enable positive relational dynamics (Lee et al., 2020) in cross-organizational peer settings.

It is also important to consider the extent to which the model depicted here generalizes to settings

beyond corporate philanthropy. The insights may apply to other occupations or work roles with competing demands that are not seen as congruent with the dominant strategy of leaders (e.g., human resources, CSR, legal, etc.), but additional research is needed to explore these boundaries. For instance, in more competitive contexts, it may be more difficult to establish trusting relationships and empathic peer dynamics. Moreover, it is possible that the relational mechanisms differ in occupational groups that are more established. While the still-professionalizing grantmakers were open to creative brainstorming and integrating expertise from opposing viewpoints, individuals in more mature occupations can become entrenched (Sandholtz et al., 2019) and thus may display different mechanisms for engaging tensions.

In the future, researchers could also explore the role of paradox peers for those whose work roles do not explicitly fall within specific occupational groups. In theory, a variety of individuals, from the most senior leaders (Smith & Tushman, 2005) to frontline employees (Schneider et al., 2021), could rely on paradox peers from other organizations to engage paradox in similar ways to the grantmakers in this study. Yet, it is likely that the occupational nature of the paradox peer ties in this setting significantly enhanced their ability to form peer relationships. Occupational communities are linked by expertise, which allows for rapid mutual understanding between members (Bechky, 2003; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984), and professional associations enable members to meet with regular cadence, supporting the building and maintenance of ties (Small, 2009b). Without an organizing function, such as group membership or a forum for exchange, paradox peer ties may be less likely to develop, and peers may not engage frequently enough to deal with challenges as they arise.

## CONCLUSION

As current societal challenges exacerbate the complexities and intricacies of our lives (Ferraro, Etzion, & Gehman, 2015; Sharma et al., 2021), understanding how individuals embrace and navigate paradoxical tensions in the workplace is increasingly important. This is true not only for top executives and strategists but also for individuals whose occupational roles require them to navigate paradox, particularly when paradox is not a dominant organizational concern for senior leaders. Developing knowledge about factors that support individuals as they work through tensions in the face of these challenges is a crucial step toward further integrating corporate responsibility,

ethics, diversity, and sustainability occupations into firms. I hope that the peer-based model of navigating paradox presented here inspires further exploration of the relational dynamics that help individuals collectively thrive while embracing tensions at work.

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