

## Li Huang

Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour

### Key Finding

**Contradictions between internal experiences and external expressions can boost individual creativity.**

### Business Application

**Organisational members are often confronted with contradictions between their internal experiences and their external expressions. When an organisation's culture and norms encourage its members to treat these experiences as signals of complexity rather than inauthenticity, these experiences can lead to creativity, learning and personal growth.**

Intrapersonal contradictions abound in organisations: a teammate's smile as she privately disagrees with the team; a CEO awash with pride as he makes a humble bow while accepting a new product award; a colleague's sarcastic "Here's some more work as you're clearly not busy enough", conveying "I recognise how incredibly busy you are". These contradictions between organisational members' internal experiences and their external expressions, although not necessarily daily occurrences, are part and parcel of working in organisations. Most research has focused on the negative consequences of intrapersonal contradictions. In particular, when individuals experience such contradictions as personal inauthenticity or as a lack of autonomy, they can have a negative effect on their wellbeing, self-image, task performance, interpersonal relationships and work engagement.

My research, however, has uncovered an overlooked benefit arising from intrapersonal contradictions. I have found that, when experienced as signals that indicate the complex and extraordinary nature of the contexts in which they occur, intrapersonal contradictions can encourage novel perspectives and creativity. Therefore, in the constant quest for a coherent self, it is imperative for individuals to recognise the creativity and learning that they would forgo if they did not experience these contradictions. More importantly, organisations looking for unfettered perspectives and fresh ideas should foster an organisational culture where employees enjoy a sufficient level of autonomy, trust and support, so that their occasional experiences of intrapersonal contradictions are not causes for self-questioning, emotional exhaustion and disengagement. In that kind of culture intrapersonal contradictions can become opportunities for creative thinking and personal growth. These findings are especially relevant in today's world, where the workplace becomes increasingly professionalized and demanding and consequently must manage employees' intrapersonal contradictions.

#### Read more:

- **Galinsky, A., Huang L. and Gino, F.**, "That time your boss caught you watching cat videos and said, 'don't work too hard'", *Fortune*, 10 August 2015.
- **Prinz, J.**, "A New Tool for Creative Thinking: 'Mind-Body Dissonance'", *Scientific American*, 8 March 2011.



**Li Huang** is an Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour. She is an expert on creativity, power, trust, and negotiations. To know more, visit her [website](#).

**Research interests:** mind-body dissonance; creativity; power; trust; cooperation.