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Fernando Del Vecchio

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CONTRAST LEADERSHIP AND THE STRATEGIC SPARRING PARTNER IN THE C-SUITE

Fernando Del Vecchio¹

Email: fdelvecchio@ucema.edu.ar

Abstract

This article explores the emerging concept of contrast leadership and the role of the strategic sparring partner as a mechanism to mitigate the risks associated with decision-making in the C-suite. It argues that the loneliness at the top and the cognitive biases inherent in power can erode the quality of strategic decisions. Drawing on the academic and management literature, it proposes a conceptual framework for contrast leadership and distinguishes it from other approaches such as executive coaching and traditional consulting. The article analyzes the role of the strategic sparring partner as a core component of this leadership style and examines relevant case examples, including Bridgewater Associates' culture of "radical truth" and Bill Campbell's role as Silicon Valley's "trillion-dollar coach." It concludes that, although the term contrast leadership is relatively new, it rests on solid principles from organizational psychology and leadership theory and offers a practical, effective way to improve the quality of decision-making processes in complex, high-uncertainty environments.

¹ Fernando Del Vecchio holds a PhD in Business Management (2012) and an MBA (2000) from Universidad del CEMA (UCEMA), and a bachelor's degree in Business Administration from Universidad de Ciencias Empresariales y Sociales in Argentina. He has more than twenty-five years of experience as a university professor in five countries and as a strategic sparring partner to leaders, founders, and CEOs across Latin America and Europe. He has spoken in twenty-three countries and is the author of nine books on leadership, entrepreneurship, and professional development. He has served as dean of the UISEK Business & Digital School at Universidad Internacional SEK and as director of master's programs at the Business School of Universidad de Las Américas (UDLA), both in Ecuador. His areas of interest include executive leadership, organizational strategy, and talent development. The views expressed here are his own and do not represent the position of Universidad del CEMA.

Keywords: contrast leadership, strategic sparring partner, executive leadership, CEO loneliness, decision-making, cognitive biases, false consensus, constructive friction, behavioral corporate governance.

1. Introduction

Decision-making at the top of the organization is a complex, high-stakes process shaped by factors that go well beyond the simple availability of information. One of the most documented and yet most underestimated phenomena is the “loneliness at the top” [1]. As leaders move up the organizational hierarchy, the circle of people who can—and dare to—offer truly critical and honest perspectives shrinks dramatically. This cognitive isolation, often masked as respect or efficiency, creates an echo chamber that amplifies the leader’s biases and fuels a dangerous “false consensus” [8]. In this context, decisions—even those backed by extensive data—can be fundamentally flawed.

This article introduces and develops the concept of contrast leadership. I use this term to refer to a leadership style in which the executive deliberately designs mechanisms of constructive dissent around them in order to stress-test their own hypotheses, surface biases, and improve decision quality. Contrast leadership is thus defined as a leadership style that actively and systematically seeks out divergent points of view and integrates them into the decision-making process as a necessary condition for making better decisions, rather than treating them as a threat to the leader’s authority.

In an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) business environment, a leader’s ability to actively seek out and process perspectives different from their own becomes a critical competence. Contrast leadership is not a sign of weakness or indecision; it is a deliberate strategy to mitigate the risks inherent in power and in loneliness at the top.

As a central component of this leadership style, I examine the figure of the strategic sparring partner (hereafter, “sparring”), an external (or internal) interlocutor who acts as a critical and trusted thinking partner. Unlike the executive coach, whose work focuses on the leader’s personal development, or the traditional consultant, who

provides specific technical solutions, the sparring partner concentrates on the decision-making process itself. Their primary role is to question the leader's assumptions, point out potential blind spots and biases, and subject the leader's ideas to rigorous analysis.

This article seeks to build a theoretical framework that clearly defines what it means to lead through contrast and what role the sparring partner plays at the highest levels of management. Based on that framework, it also aims to offer practical guidelines for designing relationships and organizational structures that help raise the quality of strategic decisions. The contribution is threefold. First, it formalizes the concept of contrast leadership drawing on the literature on leadership, organizational psychology, and cognitive biases in top management. Second, it positions the sparring role as a key operating mechanism of this leadership style, differentiating it from established figures such as the executive coach and the traditional consultant. Third, it integrates these notions with the evidence on CEO loneliness, false consensus, and the “price of complacency” in top management and proposes practical implications for designing corporate governance mechanisms that are more attuned to behavior.

This article builds on prior work on sparring and cognitive biases in top management, developed in a series of UCEMA working papers. In particular, it takes up and extends the conceptual framework presented in Del Vecchio (2025a, 2025b, 2025c) on the role of the sparring partner in CEO decision quality, the most frequent cognitive traps, and the effects of false consensus and the “price of complacency” in top management teams [11][13][8].

2. CEO loneliness and the need for contrast

Leadership in the upper echelons of the organization—often associated with power and clarity—contains a paradox: loneliness at the top [1]. This phenomenon refers to the cognitive and emotional isolation leaders experience as they move up the hierarchy. It is not physical solitude, since executives are usually surrounded by teams and colleagues, but a critical shortage of honest, unfiltered feedback.

Various surveys and recent studies show that loneliness at the top is widespread and widely perceived as a factor that can undermine executive performance. Despite differences across studies, the pattern is consistent: the lack of honest feedback creates echo-chamber environments and reduces the deliberative quality of top management teams [2][3][4].

This dynamic has direct, detrimental consequences for the organization. It reduces the leader's ability to detect errors early and makes it harder to identify emerging risks. When decisions are not subjected to contrast, internal narratives tend to close in on themselves and are rarely challenged.

Over time, this combination of isolation and self-congratulatory narratives translates into rigid structures, reduced sensitivity to weak signals in the environment, and a diminished capacity to adapt. In high-uncertainty contexts, such rigidity increases the likelihood of delayed strategic pivots, reactive responses, and ultimately value destruction for the organization [5][6].

One particularly insidious outcome of loneliness at the top is false consensus [7]. This phenomenon occurs when the team's silence or passivity in approving a proposal is misinterpreted as agreement or validation of the leader's ideas. Instead of honest debate and constructive intellectual friction, an illusion of alignment emerges that conceals objections, doubts, and alternative perspectives. As previous work has noted, this "illusory consensus" deprives the leader of the chance to subject their ideas to rigorous scrutiny, increasing the risk of costly errors [8].

Against this backdrop, the need for deliberate contrast emerges as a strategic imperative. Experts in leadership and organizational psychology agree that leaders must actively seek people who will offer critical and honest feedback, even when it is uncomfortable [9]. The search for dissent is not a sign of weakness but of intellectual humility and an effective way to safeguard decision quality. It is in this context that the concept of contrast leadership and the figure of the sparring partner become fundamentally relevant.

3. Strategic sparring partner: origins and definition

The concept of sparring comes from the world of boxing, where it refers to the training partner who helps the fighter prepare for the real bout. The sparring partner's role is to simulate different fighting styles, test the boxer's reflexes, and strengthen their ability to react in a controlled environment. This image was later brought into the business world to describe an analogous relationship: an interlocutor—either external or inside the organization—who tests the leader's thinking, challenging their ideas and reasoning with the goal of improving decision quality [10][12].

In the context of top management, a sparring partner is a trusted professional who interacts with the CEO or senior executive and subjects their plans, hypotheses, and assumptions to rigorous scrutiny. Their main function is not to provide ready-made answers or solutions, but to ask incisive questions, present alternative scenarios, and play “devil's advocate” in order to identify blind spots and mitigate cognitive biases. As defined in earlier work, the sparring partner stands out for their “radical independence, with nothing to gain from pleasing the leader and nothing to lose from confronting them,” and for offering an “intellectual honesty” that the internal environment often cannot—or does not dare to—provide [11].

Although the label “strategic sparring partner” is relatively recent in the formal management literature, the essence of the role—the need for an intellectual counterweight—has been implicitly recognized in leadership practice over time. For example, David Maister and colleagues in *The Trusted Advisor* (2000) describe the importance of trusted counselors who accompany executives through complex decisions [12]. However, the sparring partner goes beyond being a simple advisor: the interaction is more active and confrontational, focused on the leader's thinking process rather than on providing information or solutions [13].

The emerging literature on the topic highlights several key characteristics of the sparring partner:

- Independence and confidentiality. The relationship is grounded in deep trust that allows the leader to “think out loud” and reveal vulnerabilities without fear of judgment or political repercussions. The sparring partner has no hidden

agenda or vested interests inside the organization. This pattern of professional trust is aligned with the logic of the “trusted advisor” (trust + credibility + intimacy – self-interest) [12].

- Focus on the thinking process. Unlike other support roles, the sparring partner focuses on how the leader thinks, analyzes, and decides, rather than on the specific content of the decision. The goal is to strengthen the leader’s reasoning architecture, in line with process consultation and the design of managerial work [19][23].
- Constructive confrontation. The sparring partner does not seek confrontation for its own sake but uses it as a tool to generate clarity and insight. They challenge assumptions, explore alternatives, and push for ideas to be rigorously justified [9][11].
- Strategic experience. Without offering “recipes,” an effective sparring partner understands the business context and structures the leader’s thinking through questions and framing that elevate the quality of judgment. This function is akin to process consultation [19] and the design of managerial work [23], with a focus on how leaders think and decide rather than on which solution to apply.

In the Anglo-Saxon context, the notion of sparring overlaps with concepts such as *thinking partner* or *challenge network*. Adam Grant (2021) popularized the idea of a “*challenge network*”: a group of people the leader trusts to point out blind spots and help them overcome their weaknesses [9]. This network, like the sparring partner, provides the dissent needed to avoid groupthink and improve decision quality. In high-pressure contexts such as *private equity*, internal figures such as the CFO can act as the CEO’s “copilot,” challenging decisions and bringing a distinct, often opposing point of view [15].

In short, the sparring partner is a deliberate mechanism for introducing contrast and independent thinking into the leader’s decision process. It is not a substitute for the executive’s experience or intelligence, but an essential complement that protects decision quality against the traps of loneliness, bias, and false consensus.

4. Contrast leadership versus coaching and consulting

To fully understand the value of contrast leadership and the sparring role, it is essential to distinguish them from other well-established forms of executive support, such as the executive coach and the traditional consultant. Although all three roles ultimately seek to improve the performance of the leader and the organization, their approaches, methodologies, and objectives differ [16][17][18][19][20].

4.1. Executive coaching

Executive coaching focuses on the leader's personal and professional development. A professional coach works on self-discovery, reflection, and the improvement of competencies such as communication, emotional intelligence, time management, and leadership style [16]. The coaching methodology is based on asking powerful questions, listening actively, and providing empathetic feedback, under the premise that the client holds the answers [17]. The coach acts as a catalyst, helping the leader clarify their vision and unlock their potential, but rarely offers advice on business decisions. Any confrontation that occurs tends to be gentle and oriented toward personal growth, not toward directly challenging strategic assumptions [18].

4.2. Traditional consulting

Traditional consulting, by contrast, focuses on specific organizational problems and on providing expert, technical solutions. Consultants are hired to diagnose situations, contribute specialized knowledge (in areas such as finance, marketing, operations, or HR), and deliver concrete recommendations or action plans [19]. Their value lies in their industry experience, proven methodologies, and ability to structure information and propose "recipes" or clear roadmaps. Their relationship with the CEO is more that of specialist advisor than confidential interlocutor, and it typically lasts only as long as a given project. The consultant focuses on the "what to do" (the solutions) rather than on how the leader thinks, and any challenge to the executive's ideas generally stems from the findings of their analysis [20].

4.3. Strategic sparring partner and contrast leadership

The sparring partner—and, by extension, contrast leadership—occupies a distinct but complementary space relative to the coach and the consultant. Its primary focus is neither the leader’s personal development nor the provision of technical solutions, but the quality of the thinking and decision-making process. It operates as an intellectual counterweight: stress-testing ideas, identifying blind spots, and mitigating biases before decisions are implemented, in line with process consultation and the design of managerial work [19][23].

Table 1 summarizes the main differences among these three roles:

Dimension	Executive Coach	Traditional Consultant	Strategic Sparring Partner
Primary focus	Leader’s personal development	Organizational problems and technical solutions	Leader’s thinking and decision-making process
Methodology	Questions, active listening, empathetic feedback	Diagnosis, data analysis, expert recommendations	Challenging assumptions, incisive questioning, “devil’s advocate”
Objective	Self-discovery, skill development, unlocking potential	Concrete solutions, action plans, best practices	Intellectual friction, bias mitigation, improved decision quality
Relationship	Confidential, long-term, centered on the individual	Formal, short/medium-term, project-centered	Confidential, long-term, centered on thinking
Primary contribution	Personal clarity, self-confidence, well-being	Technical knowledge, efficiency, roadmap	Contrast, clarity, independent thinking
Confrontation	Soft, through questions	Based on findings and data	Direct, intellectual, with no hidden agenda

Table 1. Comparison of the executive coach, traditional consultant, and strategic sparring partner.

Contrast leadership therefore integrates the sparring partner as an essential element to ensure that decisions are not made in a thinking vacuum but are the result of a robust process that has actively considered diverse perspectives and withstood critical scrutiny. The goal is not to replace coaches or consultants, but to add a layer of intellectual rigor that is indispensable amid today’s complexity [19][23].

5. Case examples: contrast leadership in practice

The relevance of contrast leadership and sparring is vividly illustrated through concrete examples in the business world. Two paradigmatic cases that demonstrate the effectiveness of these approaches are Bill Campbell's role in Silicon Valley and the organizational culture of Bridgewater Associates.

5.1. Bill Campbell: The “Trillion Dollar Coach”

Bill Campbell, known posthumously as the “Trillion Dollar Coach,” became a legendary figure in Silicon Valley. Although he did not call himself a “strategic sparring partner,” his role with some of the most influential leaders in the tech world—such as Steve Jobs at Apple, Larry Page and Sergey Brin at Google, and Eric Schmidt—fits the sparring description almost perfectly. Campbell was neither a traditional coach focused mainly on personal development nor a consultant offering technical solutions. His value lay in his ability to challenge these leaders' thinking, forcing them to see their blind spots, confront uncomfortable realities, and make more robust decisions [21].

Campbell operated from a position of deep trust and complete independence. He had no direct financial stake in the decisions he helped shape, which allowed him to offer “brutal honesty” without fear of repercussions. His method was based on asking incisive questions, listening actively, and, when necessary, directly confronting executives' ideas—always with the goal of strengthening their strategic thinking. This form of “personal sparring” enabled leaders with outsized egos to benefit from an intellectual counterbalance that their own teams, constrained by hierarchy or fear, often could not provide [22]. Campbell's legacy underscores that even the most visionary leaders need an honest mirror that reflects the truth, however uncomfortable, before the market does.

5.2. Bridgewater Associates: institutionalized “radical truth”

Another outstanding example of contrast leadership—this time at an organizational level—is Bridgewater Associates, the hedge fund founded by Ray Dalio [14]. Dalio built a distinctive corporate culture grounded in the principles of “radical truth” and

“radical transparency.” At Bridgewater, constructive dissent and intellectual confrontation are actively encouraged as foundational pillars of decision-making. The premise is that the best idea should win, regardless of who proposes it or that person’s place in the hierarchy [14].

To institutionalize this approach, Bridgewater introduced several practices [14]:

- Recording meetings. All meetings are recorded and made available for any employee to review, which promotes accountability and honesty in discussions.
- Real-time rating of ideas. Tools are used so employees can rate one another’s ideas during meetings, fostering constant critical evaluation.
- Designated “devil’s advocates.” In many discussions, individuals are explicitly assigned to challenge dominant ideas, ensuring that all relevant perspectives are explored.
- Explicit principles. The culture is guided by a clear set of principles that emphasize honest feedback and learning from mistakes.

Although Bridgewater’s culture is intense and not for everyone, it shows how contrast can be institutionalized to mitigate false consensus and cognitive biases at scale. Dalio’s “radical truth” is, in essence, a form of institutionalized sparring, in which the entire organization acts as a challenge network for its leaders and their ideas. This model has enabled Bridgewater to sustain a significant competitive advantage in a highly volatile sector by ensuring that its strategic decisions are the result of relentless intellectual scrutiny [14].

Taken together, the cases of Bill Campbell at the individual level and Bridgewater at the organizational level highlight that contrast leadership is not a theoretical abstraction but a practice with tangible results. Both show that the courage to seek out and embrace constructive dissent is a defining feature of leaders and organizations that achieve sustained success in complex environments.

6. Implications for leadership and the organization

Adopting contrast leadership and integrating the sparring role have profound implications both for the leader's individual development and for organizational culture and performance. This approach not only improves decision quality; it also fosters a culture of continuous learning, resilience, and adaptability.

6.1.For the individual leader

For the CEO or senior executive, contrast leadership represents a fundamental shift in how they conceive their role. They move from being the “solitary decision-maker” to becoming the “architect of the decision” [23]. This implies:

- Stronger judgment. By subjecting their ideas to constant scrutiny, the leader develops more robust judgment and a greater ability to identify and challenge their own biases. Intellectual friction and the deliberate practice of contrast strengthen thinking [9][24].
- Greater clarity and insight. Interaction with a sparring partner allows the leader to “think out loud” in a safe environment, which makes it easier to clarify complex ideas and uncover hidden assumptions. This reduces the “mental fog” that often surrounds high-stakes decisions [5].
- Reduced stress and anxiety. Sharing the cognitive load of critical decisions with a sparring partner can ease the stress associated with loneliness at the top. Knowing that ideas have been rigorously tested before implementation provides greater confidence and peace of mind [25].
- Development of intellectual humility. Recognizing the need for contrast and actively seeking constructive dissent fosters intellectual humility, a key trait of effective leaders who remain open to learning and continuous improvement [26].

6.2.For the organization

At the organizational level, promoting contrast leadership can transform culture and decision-making processes:

- Improved decision quality. By institutionalizing mechanisms for challenge and contrast, organizations reduce the likelihood of errors stemming from bias, groupthink, or false consensus. Decisions benefit from multiple perspectives and informed debate in environments with psychological safety and active challenge networks [9][27].
- A culture of open dialogue. When leaders actively demonstrate openness to dissent and value constructive confrontation, they create an environment in which employees feel safer expressing their views and challenging the status quo. This counters “complacent silence” and fosters a culture of “thinking out loud” [27].
- Greater agility and resilience. Organizations that cultivate contrast are better equipped to anticipate and respond to environmental shifts. By constantly testing their assumptions and exploring alternative scenarios, they develop greater strategic agility and resilience in the face of uncertainty [28].
- Resource optimization. Early identification of flaws in plans or erroneous assumptions through sparring can prevent resources from being allocated to “zombie projects” or doomed initiatives, freeing up capital and talent for more promising opportunities [5][6].
- Building “thinking organizations.” Ultimately, contrast leadership helps create organizations where critical thinking and informed debate are core values rather than exceptions. This, in turn, translates into greater capacity for innovation and a more sustainable competitive advantage [28][29].

Implementing these practices requires top management to role-model the behavior and design structures that protect constructive dissent. Declarations alone are not enough; psychological safety is needed to speak candidly, along with double-loop learning to question deeply held assumptions [27][29].

7. Conclusions

The concept of contrast leadership and the figure of the sparring partner emerge as critical responses to the challenges inherent in top-management decision-making. In

an environment where loneliness at the top and the proliferation of cognitive biases can compromise strategic quality, the deliberate search for constructive dissent becomes an imperative. This article has outlined a conceptual framework for contrast leadership and positioned it as a style that values and cultivates intellectual friction as a path to greater clarity and decision robustness.

The article has argued that, although the sparring partner shares some characteristics with executive coaching and traditional consulting, it is distinct in its focus on the leader's thinking process, its radical independence, and its mission to challenge assumptions without a personal agenda. Cases such as Bill Campbell and the culture of Bridgewater Associates illustrate how this approach, whether at the individual or institutional level, can generate extraordinary results by shielding decisions from the traps of self-deception and false consensus.

From a practical standpoint, the contrast leadership framework invites CEOs and top-management teams to translate the idea of constructive dissent into concrete mechanisms. These include institutionalizing the sparring role, revisiting the composition and dynamics of decision-making committees, creating safe spaces for informed disagreement, and embedding routines of systematic contrast before high-impact decisions. Rather than an abstract recommendation, contrast leadership is presented here as a deliberate architecture of constructive friction in the service of better decisions.

Although the term “contrast leadership” is still emerging, its foundations rest on a solid body of research in organizational psychology, decision theory, and leadership studies. Building on this base, the article seeks to help formalize the field and opens several avenues for future research. The first is to operationalize and measure contrast leadership and the sparring role in concrete organizational contexts. A second is to empirically assess the relationship between the presence of contrast mechanisms and the perceived quality of decisions in top management. A third is to explore how cultural, sectoral, and corporate-governance differences shape the adoption of this approach. Advancing along these lines would move us from a promising conceptual framework toward a more robust evidence base on its impact. The courage to seek

contrast is not merely a personal virtue; it is an essential strategy for effective leadership in the twenty-first century.

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