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Leading with an Open Heart by Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky

Leader to Leader, No. 26 Fall 2002

LEADERSHIP has never been easy, but at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is tougher than ever. As a nation, we are challenged by the events of September 11 and the ongoing threats that stunning day represents. As a society, we are challenged to maintain cherished values and rights and at the same time to change some of the missionary zeal with which we relate economically, politically, and culturally to other peoples. As an economy, we find our leaders and organizations more open and vulnerable due to increased scrutiny and persistent demands for transparency in the wake of Enron and Andersen. These and many other challenges require all of us to change some of our attitudes, habitual ways of doing things, and even deeply held values.

These are *adaptive* challenges. An adaptive challenge is not like technical work, in which you can prescribe a solution that doesn't require people to change. To take a medical example, when you give someone penicillin for an infection, she is cured. She doesn't have to change how she lives. But when you unclog the plumbing in someone's heart, that plumbing will stay open only if he changes his life -- changes how he eats; stops smoking; gets more exercise; learns to manage stress.

To meet adaptive challenges, people have to go through a period of painful adjustment. Leading people to make these changes is risky, because you are asking them to absorb various forms of loss -- asking them to out and out give up something in the interests of something to be maintained, to be conserved, or to be gained. They may have to go through a period of refashioning loyalty to the people to whom they feel beholden or of feeling disloyalty to their own roots. Or you may be asking them to go through a period of experiencing some incompetence as they fashion new competencies and sources of confidence.

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Thought Leaders Forum:
[Ronald A. Heifetz](#)

Ronald A. Heifetz is founding director of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Heifetz speaks and consults extensively in the United States and abroad. His widely acclaimed book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (1994) is now in its twelfth printing. His second book, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (written with Marty Linsky), has recently been published by Harvard Business School Press. (9/2002)

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Thought Leaders Forum:
[Marty Linsky](#)

Marty Linsky teaches at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, where he chairs several of the School's executive programs on leadership.

Adaptive change is painful; leading it can be dangerous. Just ask Martin Luther King Jr., Rudolph Giuliani, or Carly Fiorina.

If leading were about giving people good news, it would be easy. Unfortunately many leaders avoid the hard work. How many leaders have you heard say something like this? "We can't keep going on this way, but the new direction is yet undetermined, and how effective any plan will be in enabling us to thrive -- or even survive -- in the new environment is also unknown. We're going to have to go through disagreements and conflicts as we sort through what's precious and what's expendable; loss as we abandon comfortable pieces of the past, old routines, and even close relationships with people; feelings of incompetence as we strive to innovate and learn new ways; and doubt and uncertainty as we make inevitable wrong turns along the way." Clearly, this is a very difficult message to deliver, however honest.



Dangers of Collusion

WHEN you meet up with a significant challenge for which you don't have the answers and for which the people around you are even more desperate to hear some certainty, the temptation is to provide reassurance. This temptation is reinforced by the fact that it is also politically dangerous to express uncertainty. Most situations generate a mixture of technical and adaptive challenges. And because they are a mixture, the easiest way to avoid the adaptive challenges is to simply focus on the technical ones. We see this a lot in business. We certainly see it a lot in public life. People in authority will tackle that aspect of the challenge about which they feel confident, rather than tolerating the awful experience of feeling somewhat incompetent.

And what that often generates is a collusion, of the "blind leading the blind," in which the leader first deceives himself or herself by pretending to know more than he or she does know. (It's easier to sell something when you believe in it yourself.) And then others, wanting to believe, wanting to put the responsibility on people in authority and take it off themselves, convince themselves that the leaders really do have the answers.

The Enron debacle is a prime example of the dangers of collusion. Investors wanted to believe. Analysts wanted to believe. People in the company wanted to believe. The people at the top of the company wanted to believe. There may have been a few people who, in a more sinister way, knew what they were doing, but our guess is that they were rare players. Much more common is a systemic dynamic, in which lots of people are deceiving themselves because nobody wants to face reality. They don't want to face reality, in part because there are so many people around them looking to them to represent a happy certainty with a happy face.

As a leader facing difficult and dangerous challenges, how do you sustain yourself? How do you keep from sabotaging yourself by mismanaging your own hungers, by failing to discipline your own needs for control and for certainty, for importance, for recognition, or for intimacy?

He consults widely on leadership and communications in the United States and abroad. A graduate of Williams College and Harvard Law School, Linsky has been a journalist and politician, having served as a member of the Massachusetts House of Representatives. (9/2002)

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How do you anchor yourself? How do you remember who you are and what you want to protect and conserve at the same time that you are engaged in a process that's buffeting you and tossing you around?

In our new book, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading*, we offer five guidelines for dealing with the dangerous aspects of leadership (see the accompanying [sidebar](#), "Five Challenges in Leading Adaptive Change"). These five action guidelines offer strategic and tactical steps leaders can take in responding to dangerous situations, and they are critically important. But it is also critically important for leaders to learn to sustain themselves so they can come through the process unbroken and unbowed, with their spirit intact. Part of doing this is to work hard at maintaining an open heart.



The Open Heart

AFTER years of raising questions and accumulating scars, most of us develop a set of defenses to protect ourselves. We buy into the common myth that you cannot survive a demanding leadership role without developing a thick skin. But that diminishes us, because it squeezes the juice out of our soul. We lose our capacity for innocence, curiosity, and compassion. In a sense, our hearts close -- our innocence turns into cynicism, our curiosity turns into arrogance, and our compassion turns into callousness. We dress these up, of course, because we don't want to see ourselves -- and certainly don't want others to see us -- as cynical, arrogant and callous. We dress cynicism up as realism. So now we are not cynical; we're realistic. We are not arrogant, but we do have authoritative knowledge. And we dress up and cloak our callousness by calling it the thick skin of wisdom. But to stay alive in our spirit, in our heart, requires the courage to keep our heart open; it requires what Roman Catholics call a sacred heart or what in the Jewish tradition is called an open heart. We can talk about the practical reasons why it's important to keep an open heart -- and there are practical reasons -- but chiefly it is important for your own spirit and identity.



Innocence

INNOCENCE and naivete enable you to see things, to be alert to new, emerging realities that other people won't see because they think they already know the answers. We live in an age of expertise, where people pride themselves on knowing rather than on being naive. This can be a real trap for managers in today's organizations. People in authority have risen to their positions because they have been rewarded throughout their careers for taking responsibilities off other people's shoulders, solving problems through their experience and expertise, and delivering solutions. Managers take a great deal of pride in their capacity to solve problems and provide answers and be decisive. By the time you get to be a senior authority figure, that behavior has been reinforced through countless rewards. The seductive temptation for anybody in authority is to step in with the decision and resolve the problem. That's what people are going to reward you for doing. Even the people who aren't going to like your decision are at least looking to you to make a decision. If you don't step in, you'll be criticized as "weak."

But the toughest challenges that groups, organizations, and communities face are hard precisely

because they do not have answers, quick fixes waiting to be applied. Moreover, a group, community, or organization will not authorize anyone to push it to address those problems and do the hard work needed. To the contrary, organizational rules, cultures, and standard operating procedures regularly discourage people from facing the hardest questions and making the most difficult choices. It takes real courage for a leader to admit he doesn't know the answer or she doesn't have a solution.

Innocence, however, will enable you to maintain hope when a situation seems hopeless, at least to some people. And your capacity to maintain faith will be self-fulfilling in the sense that it will give other people courage to hope that life can be better. This is the capacity to maintain what Buddhists call a beginner's mind, or a naive perspective. The word *naive* has the same root as the words *genius*, *ingenuity*, and *Renaissance*. And so we think of naivete as a juvenile quality, but it is also a critical quality for a genius. It is a critical quality for being open to new possibilities and staying hopeful about new possibilities.

Cynicism is a very safe psychological position. One of the authors, Ronald, was part of the Avoiding Nuclear War project in the early 1980s, a time when the Cold War was still very hot, and all the project discussions centered on such issues as: Should the United States have a policy of first use of nuclear weapons? How do we contain the possibility of Soviet aggression in various places in the world? And so forth. Ronald, as a relatively naive member of the group, along with one or two other people, kept saying, "Well, maybe it's possible to transform the relationship between the U.S. and the Soviet Union." The response, Ronald recalls, was that "everybody looked at us as if we were incredibly naive. And they kept us around because then they could claim, at least, to have a diverse group of researchers and faculty, but in fact they paid us little attention. And lo and behold, in ten years the Soviet Union collapsed and, with it, the careers of numerous U.S.-Soviet policy experts."



Curiosity

CURIOSITY is critical, because, without maintaining doubt, you can't stay open to changing realities; you can't be open to hearing what the more naive people around you are saying. If you are too proud of your authoritative knowledge -- a shell for defensive arrogance -- then you are robbed of new information, and then, blinded in a sense, you simply reproduce the world in the image you know from your past.

Without maintaining doubt, you can't stay open to changing realities.

Those people who do pride themselves on their curiosity or naivete are frequently marginalized in a company, because even a genius gets it right only 30 percent of the time at most. We could learn from baseball, in which you get three strikes before you're out, you are permitted to strike out without being removed from the team, and if you get on base only a third of the time, you're considered a great baseball player. In other words, you're allowed to strike out two-thirds of the time and still be a great baseball player. Unlike baseball, in business you don't get to strike out two-thirds of the time. So the creative individuals, or the curious individuals, the people who are willing to ask the naive but radical questions, frequently get pushed aside because they are a source of inefficiency 70 percent of the time. They are raising questions that slow things down, and people don't like that. So they get forced out, which of course represents a loss of key

resources for the organization.



Compassion

FINALLY, without compassion you can't come to understand the stakes you're asking other people to give up. The work of adaptive change is emotional work and requires what Daniel Goleman describes as *emotional intelligence* (see Leader to Leader, no. 25); it requires an open heart to respect and appreciate the pains of change that you are asking people to sustain, and you need to have a stomach for those pains, but that doesn't mean you need to become callous -- and therefore blind to the disturbance other people are having to endure.

Without compassion you can't understand the stakes you're asking people to give up.

It is a sacred task to receive people's anger, and not to do so in an arrogant or defensive way, but to say, "This is helping me understand what I'm asking people to do." That capacity to receive people's anger with an open heart is a great gift to people in an organization in which painful adjustments need to be made.

In sum, there are a host of practical reasons why it's important not to lose heart, but more fundamentally it's important for yourself. It's important to maintain your own humanity, your own aliveness, your own spirit. We all know people who, even in the last decade of their lives, are enormously vibrant, full of questions, capable of hearing your story even though you know that they must have heard a thousand stories very much like yours. They listen to your story, and they really do care; they listen with an open heart, and they seem alive; they seem creative; they seem curious; they seem willing to doubt, willing to change their views. People who maintain that aliveness of spirit, even as they get on in their years, are an inspiration for us because they are modeling the delights of life, the blessings of life, the gift of being alive, because they have maintained an open heart.



Five Challenges in Leading Adaptive Change

1. *Get off the dance floor and onto the balcony.* Leadership is improvisational. It cannot be scripted. On one hand, to be effective a leader must respond in the moment to what is happening. On the other hand the leader must be able to step back out of the moment and assess what is happening from a wider perspective. We call it getting off the dance floor and onto the balcony. It may be an original metaphor, but it's not an original idea. For centuries religious traditions have taught disciplines that enable a person to reflect in action. Jesuits call it *contemplation in action*. Hindus call it *Karma Yoga*, the yoga of action. We call it *getting onto the balcony* because that's a metaphor people can easily relate to. But it's critically important, and the reason why religious traditions have talked about it for so long is that it's hard to do. You don't need a major spiritual practice for something that's easy to do. It's hard, in the midst of action, to step back and ask yourself: What's really going on here? Who are the key parties to this problem? What are the stakes they bring to this issue? How will progress require us all to reevaluate our stakes and change some of our ways?
2. *Think politically.* Successful leaders in any field place an enormous emphasis on personal relationships. They spend a great deal of time and effort creating and

nurturing networks of people they can call on, learn from, and work with to address the issues they face. They know that leadership is political -- it's about motivating and mobilizing people to change. So, thinking politically is absolutely critical, not only for the person trying to lead from below or from the middle but also for those trying to lead from authority on high. Leaders need to work hard on creating allies, keeping close to the opposition, and finding ways to generate commitment from the uncommitted.

3. *Orchestrate conflict.* People don't learn by staring in the mirror. People learn by engaging with a different point of view. When people are passionate about their different points of view, it generates conflict rather than simply disagreement. Successful leaders manage conflict; they don't shy away from it or suppress it but see it as an engine of creativity and innovation. Some of the most creative ideas come out of people in conflict remaining in conversation with one another rather than flying into their own corners or staking out entrenched positions. The challenge for leaders is to develop structures and processes in which such conflicts can be orchestrated productively.
4. *Give the work back.* To meet significant challenges requiring adaptive change, people must change their hearts and minds as well as their behaviors. Leaders cannot do this for others. This is their work, and they must do it themselves. Holding people accountable for this work is not easy to do, especially when people are looking to authority for easy answers or when people are in effect asking the authority figure to lie to them by projecting more certainty than she has. Leaders who attempt to step in and take this work off the shoulders of followers risk becoming the issue themselves.
5. *Hold steady.* Confronting major change generates a great deal of conflict and resistance. Managing the conflict, dealing with the politics involved, and making people accountable requires an ability to hold steady in the heat of action. Leaders often need to refrain from immediate action and understand that the stew of conflicting views has to simmer, allowing conflicts to generate new experiments and new creative ideas. The leader's job is to contain conflict -- prevent the disequilibrium from going too high and the conflict from getting destructive -- and simultaneously to keep people addressing the hard questions without opting for a technical fix, an easy solution, or a decision from on high. In doing so, in holding steady, the leader will be the recipient of considerable frustration and even anger.

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(formerly the Drucker Foundation)

320 Park Ave 3rd Fl

New York, NY 10022 USA

Tel: +1 212-224-1174

Fax: +1 212-224-2508

Email: info@leadertoleader.org

Web: leadertoleader.org

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