

Q&A

Surviving Leadership with Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky

When you lead people through difficult change, you challenge what people hold dear—their daily habits, tools, loyalties, and ways of thinking—with nothing more to offer perhaps than a possibility,” write Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky. Their new book, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, provides a sobering analysis of how organizations connive to oppose change—and how leaders get bruised, or even destroyed, in the process. Heifetz, founding director of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, and Linsky, faculty chair of many of the school’s executive programs, recently spoke with *Harvard Management Update* editor Loren Gary about how leaders can overcome organizational resistance.

How does resistance to adaptive work—work that requires people’s hearts and minds to change, not just their routine behaviors—manifest itself?

RH: When exercising leadership, you encounter four forms of resistance: marginalization, diversion, attack, and seduction. When people resist adaptive work, their first goal is to shut down leadership in order to preserve what they have. An adaptive challenge requires an organization to separate what’s precious—what should be held onto—from what is expendable. At the start of such work, many people feel everything is precious; they’re reluctant to give up anything.

Each form of resistance has its subtleties. For example, women in male-dominated institutions can get marginalized when they have to carry the gender issue for everyone—that is, do all the lobbying for pay equity or work/life issues.

People at the top can also get marginalized by colluding unwittingly with those who are trying to delay the pain of a necessary transition.

ML: With diversion, there are many ways in which communities and organizations will consciously or unconsciously try to make you lose focus. They sometimes do this by broadening or overwhelming your agenda, but they always have a seemingly logical reason for disrupting your game plan. When you're attacked, the goal of the attackers is to submerge the issue you are advancing by turning the subject of the conversation to your character or style, or even to the attack itself. Seduction, the fourth form, connotes any process by which you get taken out of action by an initiative that has a special appeal to you.

Your underlying point about all four of these forms is not to take them personally, but to understand the function they serve.

RH: Yes, these forms of resistance reduce the disequilibrium that would be generated were people to address the adaptive issues. They seek to take the adaptive issues off the table, to maintain the familiar, restore order, and protect people from the pains of adaptive work.

ML: Leaders are rarely neutralized for personal reasons. The role you play or the issue you carry generates the reaction. For the most part, people criticize you when they don't like the message. Still, it's difficult to resist responding to the personal attack. But exercising leadership often means bearing such scars.

So what are some of the strategies and tactics for mobilizing adaptive work?

RH: It starts with getting on the balcony. This image captures the mental activity of stepping back in the midst of action and asking, "What's really going on here?" Few tasks strain our abilities more than putting this idea into practice. Without some perspective on the bigger picture, you are likely to misperceive the situation and make the wrong diagnosis, leading you to misguided decisions about whether and how to intervene.

ML: We all get swept up in the action, particularly when it becomes intense or personal. Picking up the overarching patterns is very tough when you're also taking part in the action—the most difficult part to notice is what you do yourself. When you're on the balcony, try not to jump to familiar conclusions. See who says what. Watch the body language. Watch the relationships and see how people's attention to one another varies: supporting, thwarting, or listening.

And after you've climbed up to the balcony?

RH: You have to return to the dance floor if you want to affect what's happening. Staying on the balcony in a safe observer role is as ineffective as never achieving that perspective in the first place. The process must be iterative, not static. Next, you need to understand where people are—otherwise you can't lead them forward. Both your survival and your success depend on your reaching a true understanding of the varying perspectives among the factions.

ML: You also need to listen to the song beneath the words. People naturally, even unconsciously, defend their habits and ways of thinking and attempt to avoid difficult value choices. Thus, after hearing their stories, you need to take the provocative step of making an interpretation that gets below the surface.

RH: Read the behavior of the organization's authority figures for clues. The trap is thinking that they are operating independently and expressing personal points of view. In fact, they are trying to manage all the various factions, and what you observe is a response to the pressures they're experiencing.

What do you mean when you write that "the merits of a cause and the strategy used to move it forward are relevant but not controlling"?

ML: Successful leaders in any field emphasize personal relationships. Leaders have to think politically—in particular, they need to find partners. Admittedly, there can be internal pressures, inside of you, that resist joining forces. Partners might push their own ideas, compromising your own; connecting with them takes time, slowing you down. And working with a group might dilute your leadership—that can be a drawback if it is important that you get the credit for an initiative, or if you want to reassure yourself and others of your competence.

RH: Still, you need partners. And partners who are members of the faction for whom the change is most difficult can be especially significant. But partnerships are not unlimited, unconditional, or universal. A natural ally agrees with you on your issue and is willing to fight for it, but that doesn't mean she'll abandon all other commitments. If you forget about how these commitments influence your partner, you run the risk of undermining your effectiveness and destroying the alliance.

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The Perils of Adaptive Change

LEADERSHIP WOULD BE AN EASY AND SAFE UNDERTAKING if organizations and communities only faced problems for which they already knew the solutions. Everyday, people have problems for which they do, in fact, have the necessary know-how and procedures—what Heifetz and Linsky call technical problems. But there are also a whole host of problems that are not amendable to authoritative expertise or standard operating procedures. They cannot be solved by someone who provides answers from on high. The authors refer to these problems as adaptive challenges because they require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community. Without learning new ways—changing attitudes, values, and deep-seated behaviors—people cannot make the adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the new environment. The sustainability of real change depends on having the people with the problem internalize the change itself.

People cannot see at the beginning of the adaptive process that the new situation will be any better than the current condition. What they do see clearly is the potential for loss. People frequently avoid painful adjustments in their lives if they can postpone them, place the burden on someone else, or call someone to the rescue. When fears and passions run high, people can become desperate as they look to authorities for the answers. This dynamic renders adaptive contexts inherently dangerous.

When people look to authorities for easy answers to adaptive challenges, at best they get short-term order at the expense of long-term progress. They expect the person in charge to know what to do, and under the weight of that pressure, those in authority frequently end up faking it or disappointing people, or they get spit out of the system in the belief that a new “leader” will solve the problem. The deeper the change and the greater amount of new learning required, the more resistance there will be and the greater the danger to those who lead. For this reason, people in positions of authority understandably often try to avoid the dangers, either consciously or subconsciously, by treating an adaptive challenge as if it were a technical one. This is why we see so much more routine management than leadership in our society.

The single most common source of leadership failure—in government, community life, business, or the nonprofit sector—is that people treat adaptive challenges like technical problems.

In times of distress, when everyone looks to authorities to provide direction, protection, and order, this is an easy diagnostic mistake to make. In the face of adaptive pressures, people don't want questions; they want answers. They don't want to be told that they will have to sustain losses; rather, they want to know how you're going to protect them from the pains of change. And you naturally want to fulfill these needs and expectations, not bear the brunt of their frustration and anger at the bad news you're giving.

In mobilizing adaptive work, you have to engage people in adjusting their unrealistic expectations and in learning new ways, rather than try to satisfy them as if the situation were amenable primarily to a technical remedy. You have to counteract their exaggerated dependency and nurture their courage and resourcefulness. This takes an extraordinary level of presence, time, and artful communication, but it may also take more time and trust than you have.

When you are in a position of authority, there are also strong internal pressures to focus on the technical aspects of problems. Most of us take pride in our ability to answer tough questions that are thrown our way. We get rewarded for bearing people's uncertainty and want to be seen in a competent, heroic light. Yet raising questions that go to the core of people's habits goes unrewarded, at least for a while. You get booed instead of cheered. In fact, it may be a long time before you hear any applause—if ever. Leadership takes the capacity to stomach hostility so that you can stay connected to people, lest you disengage from them and exacerbate the danger.

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Leadership ON THE Line

Staying Alive through the
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Ronald A. Heifetz
Marty Linsky

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Visit our Website: www.hbsp.harvard.edu

Contact: Sharon Rice, Publicity Manager
(617) 783-7764 • srice@hbsp.harvard.edu
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Orchestrate the Conflict

WHEN TACKLING A TOUGH ISSUE, there will always be conflict—either palpable or latent. Most people have a natural aversion to conflict, but exercising leadership usually involves surfacing and working with conflict rather than squashing it. Conflicts generate distress and often casualties as well. But deep conflicts, at their root, consist of differences in fervently held beliefs, and differences in perspective are the engine of human progress. People are passionate about their own values and perspectives, which means that outsiders are threats. When that is the case, the texture of the engagement can move quickly from polite exchange to intense argument and disruptive conflict. Thus the challenge of leadership when trying to generate adaptive change is to work with differences, passions, and conflicts in a way that diminishes their destructive potential and constructively harnesses their energy.

Orchestrating the conflict may be easier to do when you are in an authority role because people expect those in authority to manage the process. However, Heifetz and Linsky offer four options for people who seek to enact change but are not necessarily in a senior position of authority: first, create a holding environment for the work; second, control the temperature; third, set the pace; and fourth, show them the future.

Create a Holding Environment

WHEN YOU EXERCISE LEADERSHIP, you need a holding environment to contain and adjust the heat that is being generated by addressing difficult issues or wide value differences. A holding environment is a space formed by a network of relationships within which people can tackle tough, sometimes divisive questions without flying apart. Creating a holding environment enables you to direct creative energy toward working the conflicts and containing passions that could easily boil over.

A holding environment will look and feel very different in different contexts. It may be a protected physical space you create by hiring an outside facilitator and taking a work group off-site. It may be characterized by a clear set of

rules and processes that give minority voices the confidence that they will be heard without having to disrupt the proceedings to gain attention. A holding environment is a place where there is enough cohesion to offset the centrifugal forces that arise when people do adaptive work. In a holding environment, with structural, procedural, or virtual boundaries, people feel safe enough to address problems that are difficult, not only because they strain integrity, but also because they strain relationships.

Control the Temperature

CHANGING THE STATUS QUO generates tension and produces heat by surfacing hidden conflicts and challenging organizational culture. It's a deep and natural human impulse to seek order and calm, and organizations and communities can tolerate only so much distress before recoiling.

If you try to stimulate deep change, you have to control the temperature. There are really two tasks involved. The first is to raise the heat enough that people sit up, pay attention, and deal with the real threats and challenges facing them. Without some distress, there is no incentive for them to change anything. The second is to lower the temperature when necessary to reduce a counterproductive level of tension. Any community can only take so much pressure before it becomes either immobilized or spins out of control. The heat must stay within a tolerable range—not so high that people demand it be turned off completely, and not so low that they are lulled into inactivity. Heifetz and Linsky call this span the productive range of distress.

Pace the Work

LEADERSHIP ADDRESSES emotional as well as conceptual work. When you lead people through difficult change, you take them on an emotional roller coaster because you are asking them to relinquish something that they hold dear. People can only stand so much change at any one time. You risk revolt, and your own survival, by trying to do too much, too soon. Pacing the work is not a new

or complicated idea. Change involves loss, and people can only sustain so much loss at any one time.

Yet pacing the work is often difficult because your own commitment and that of your enthusiasts push you forward. True believers are not known for their sense of strategic pace. Pacing the work can be ethically complicated because it can involve withholding information, if not outright deception. Pacing typically requires people in authority to let their ideas and programs seep out a little at a time, so they can be absorbed slowly enough to be tested and accepted. This kind of patient withholding must be done carefully, with an openness to the testing and revision of one's ideas, lest it be interpreted as deceitful or misleading.

Show Them the Future

TO SUSTAIN MOMENTUM through a period of difficult change, you have to find ways to remind people of the orienting value—the positive vision—that makes the current angst worthwhile. As you catalyze change, you can help ensure that you do not become a lightning rod for the conflict by making the vision more tangible, reminding people of the values they are fighting for, and showing them how the future might look. By answering, in every possible way, the “why” question, you increase people's willingness to endure the hardships that come with the journey to a better place.

It is not always possible to show people the future. It might not exist. You might not even be able to envision it yourself. But if it is possible, revealing the future is an extremely useful way to mobilize adaptive work and yet avoid becoming the target of resistance. If people can glimpse the future, they are much less likely to fixate on what they might have to shed. Confidence in the future is crucial in the face of the inevitable counter-pressures from those who will doggedly cling to the present, and for whom you become the source of unwanted disturbance. Showing the future is another way of staying out of the conflict yourself, and thereby helping the parties deal with the stresses of adaptive change. To survive and succeed in the exercise of leadership, you need to orchestrate the conflict rather than become it.

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