

Leadership Without Easy Answers

Dr. Ronald A. Heifetz — The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994

LEADERSHIP WITHOUT EASY ANSWERS

“Adaptive Work”

Dr. Ronald Heifetz of Harvard University has written an exciting new book on Leadership for the '90s. *Leadership Without Easy Answers* proposes that the true work of leadership today is helping people successfully adapt to new challenges.

“Leadership arouses passions,” Heifetz says, “because leadership engages our values. So the very concept of leadership is “value-laden,” writes Heifetz. So, today, it must not be imperialistic.”

Leadership’s concerns itself with “value-clarifying” and “reality-testing.” It helps “living systems” respond to stress by working toward “restorative responses” which seek or restore balance - the equilibrium all living systems seek. Leadership works toward the “adaptive success” of the enterprise.

Leadership authority—derived from dominance, deference, or delegation—brings both resources and restraints to the leader. Thus, equipped, the leader and the led act to “mobilize adaptation.” With this back drop, Heifetz “sets the frame” of leadership. First the values of leadership.

While we may detest the “values” of *leaders* like Pablo Escobar, head of the Medellin Drug Cartel, and Adolph Hitler, they can serve to document our ambivalence about what constitutes “leadership.” There are so many contradictions in what we “praise, teach, and get” in leadership. Heifetz explores the popular conception of leadership and explains its military origins. Indeed he says the word derives from an ancient word meaning “to go forth and die.” If in the conventional sense “leadership” means to influence others toward *their* vision and that vision fails—as with Hitler’s, then the fault lies primarily with the leader. On the other hand, if leaders mobilize people to address challenges and something goes wrong, “the fault lies with both *leaders and the community.*”

It is “this second image of leadership—mobilizing people to tackle tough problems—(which) is the image of the heart of this book,” writes Heifetz.

He reviews the four prevailing theories of leadership:

1. **Trait**—The “great-man” or “history maker” approach.
2. **Situational**—Times and social forces “call forth” leaders.
3. **Transactional**—“Authority consists of reciprocal relationships.”

Continued on page 2

Leading With Authority... Mobilizing Adaptation

In a complex, sometimes chaotic world, “social systems must *learn* their way forward,” says Ron Heifetz, author of *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. The “quick fix” we want (and some bogus “leaders” promise) is unavailable. True authoritative action and solutions in our world require the “processes of social learning.” This means that true leaders must today “mobilize adaptive work *toward* a solution.” Off-the-shelf solutions seldom work.

But this, then doesn’t fit our conventional ideas about leadership, does it? Heifetz notes our predilection in times of distress to turn—even then with mixed feelings—to authority to provide order and direction. Places and roles are, perhaps temporarily, reasserted; societal “norms” again prevail; and leaders “control.” We assume that “our authority systems *know*’ how to respond.” In simpler times perhaps that was true. A variety of selections were in the leader’s repertoire of solutions. But Heifetz says “no adequate response has yet been developed” for many of today’s problems, so the “flight to authority” tends to constitute more of a mass “work avoidance” scheme than a search for solutions. “We want answers, not questions,” Heifetz says.

“Our expectations of authority figures become counter-productive when our organizations and communities face an adaptive challenge,” he says. If our leaders do not act quickly—and satisfactorily to us— “we bring them down.”

Our so-called “crisis in leadership” is “symptomatic of the problem of habitually blaming authority.” Heifetz says, “We blame them for the persistence of frustrating problems that demand our own adaptive work. And so, predictably, our authorities supply us with fake remedies and diversions. If they want to maintain the authorization we give them, they have to deliver or provide *promises* of deliverance.”

The reason “quick fix,” stock answers don’t work is that we try to apply technical solutions to adaptive problems. Heifetz uses the practice of medicine to clarify proper matching of responses to situations. The following chart illustrates.

Situational Types

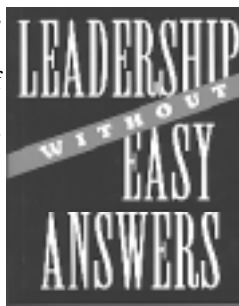
Situation	Problem definition	Solution and implementation	Primary locus of work responsibility	Kind of work
Type I	Clear	Clear	Physician	Technical
Type II	Clear*	Requires learning	Physician & Patient	Technical and Adaptive
Type III	Requires learning**	Requires Learning	Patient >physician***	Adaptive

* Definable, (e.g. heart disease) but no clear-cut solution is available.

Continued on page 4



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Leadership Without Easy Answers: “Adaptive Work”

4. **Contingency**—An attempt to synthesize the first two types.

Heifetz asserts that the most useful definition of leadership is “as an *activity*—the activity of a citizen from any walk of life mobilizing people to do something.” Something *socially useful*. Leadership theorist James McGregor calls this “transformational leadership,” but Heifetz asserts that such labels only fuel “grandiosity.” His is a much more practical approach. Heifetz says, “leadership as an activity” is essentially all about “leadership in terms of adaptive work.”

It requires “orchestrating” the conflicts inherent in “the inclusion of competing value perspectives”—a must in modern day leadership.

Leaders today, he says, while attending to goal formation and strategy, must consider both the values the goal represents as well as the goal’s ability to mobilize people to face tough realities and conflicts. The leader’s emphasis is on “giving clarity and arbitration to a community’s guiding values.” Heifetz asserts, “People discover and respond to the future as much as they plan it.”

But to be *leadership* that leadership “must not only meet the needs of followers but must also elevate them.” Heifetz outlines the several advantages to viewing leadership in terms of its *adaptive work*:

- “Reality testing” is pivotal in producing socially useful outcomes—which must have *accuracy*, “not simply imagination and appeal.”
- Evaluation “in process”—not just when the outcome is clear—is possible.
- One’s “hierarchy of human needs”—need not be imposed, so flexibility in response and the ideal of will and differing aspects of reality are more readily available to the leader and the community.

“Because leadership affects many lives, the concept we use must be spacious. It has to allow for the values of cultures and organizations. It cannot be imperialistic,” writes Heifetz.

“Adaptive work” seeks to “close the gap between reality and a host of values, which it also seeks to clarify. It favors a mix of values, some competition, even conflict between disparate values. “Conflict and heterogeneity are resources for social learning,” Heifetz says.

Human society is the story of successful and unsuccessful adaptation to ever-arising new challenges. While we have no perfect science, neither is there perfect adaptability. Mankind “operates at the mercy of its blind spots because it cannot prepare for what it does not see.”

To meet challenges, to make progress, we must “align reality with values, but the values themselves may also have to change. Thus, his title, “Leadership Without Easy Answers.”

“Like living systems, social systems under threat try to restore equilibrium. Generally, equilibrium means stability... yet there is nothing ideal or good about a slate of equilibrium per se,” he says. “Indeed, achieving adaptive change probably requires sustained periods of disequilibrium.” The

patterns of that disequilibrium take three forms:

- “*Current problems present no new challenge*—a response from the current repertoire may quickly restore equilibrium and solve the problem.
- “*No ready solutions are present to restore equilibrium*—so short-sighted “solutions” with long-term consequences temporarily procure a sense of restored balance.
- “*The society learns to meet a new challenge*—it mobilizes “to procure a new adaptation sufficient to meet the challenge.”

It is the second pattern which creates concern. Here the response is to “retreat to a constricted level of functioning”—or, failing to successfully adapt, die.

Heifetz lists three reasons why people fail to adapt to critical challenges. 1) They may *misperceive the threat*—like the people of Pompeii; 2) The challenge *exceeds their adaptive capability*; 3) They employ *work avoidance mechanisms*.

Continued on page 5

Introducing... *Leadership Without Easy Answers*

[March issue of *The Curious Journal*]

This series will build upon the popular Peter Senge “*Fifth Discipline*” distillation which we concluded in September 1996. This review of *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (1994, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press) is written by Dr. Ronald A. Heifetz. Your publisher was asked by Angela M. (Angie) Woodward to review this work on behalf of Leadership Kentucky. Executive Director Woodward wishes share the 1997 Class of Leadership Kentucky. Thus, the 1997 class will be added to *The Curious Journal* mailing list.

Dr. Ronald Heifetz, the author of *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, is a professor at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

Dr. Heifetz begins his work with an examination of popular values relating to the concept of leadership. He then moves to the dynamics of leadership’s “adaptive work”—and its end-goal: “*adaptive success*.”

Dr. Heifetz divides his book into four sections, and our review will follow his scheme. The four segments to be presented April through July are as follows:
April—“**Setting the Frame**”—Keying in on Values. This examines the roots of leadership authority.
May—“**Leading With Authority**”—Mobilizing Adaptation.
June—“**Leading Without Authority**”—Pioneering Change (Actually published in July 1997)
July—“**Staying Alive**”—Personal Challenges. (Actually published in August 1997)

It promises to be an interesting, thought-provoking review. So join us as we begin.

Leading *Without* Authority: Pioneering Change

This segment presents Part III—“*Leadership Without Authority*” of Dr. Ronald Heifetz’s book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. In the previous segment, we reviewed Part II—“*Leadership With Authority*.”

Heifetz writes two chapters on how one leads when he/she does not possess a formal position of authority. The two chapters are entitled “Creative Deviance on the Frontline” and “Modulating the Provocation”—two summary strategies one can employ to lead effectively even without the mantle of leadership. Indeed, those without position may have more power and influence than those who do. Heifetz notes, “We see leadership too rarely exercised from high office and the constraints that come with authority go far to explain why.” He also asserts, “The scarcity of leadership from people in authority, however, makes it all the more critical to the adaptive success of a polity that leadership be exercised by people without authority.” But, he admits, these people may be “perceived as entrepreneurs and deviants, organizers and trouble-makers.”

Informal leaders—those without authority-based positions—usually “do what they are not authorized to do.” Quite often, these are the kind of leaders that “step forward and mobilize others.” Examples of this kind of leader are Mohandas K. Gandhi; Martin Luther King, Jr.; Margaret Sanger; and Lech Walesa. Gandhi’s and Sanger’s leadership are reviewed in Heifetz’s book. Sometimes leaders with authority in some area exercise their most powerful influence in areas where they do not. Heifetz cites Abraham Lincoln as one of these leaders.

Without the constraints of *authority*, one has, Heifetz writes, more latitude for creative deviance “from the norms of authoritative decision making.” Unfettered from a broader array of concerns and “holding environment” responsibilities, the *informal* leader can focus on a single issue or selected, limited issues. The leader without the formal position of authority is also usually on the frontline where he/she can get the “detailed experiences” of stakeholders. And perhaps most importantly, that informal leader has “the latitude to use himself as the embodiment of the issue,” as did Martin Luther King, Jr.

Mahatma Gandhi—from whom “King took his lessons”—“developed, and refined the technique of nonviolent civil disobedience” as a means to surface societal contradictions and incongruities. Gandhi “identified the adaptive challenge and he used various methods of creative deviance to get people to face it.” For many, he was seen only as a *provocateur*: he provoked “learning targeted at the values, attitudes, and habits of his adversary”—the British. That’s true. But Gandhi’s greatest challenge and work was the “enormous adaptive work...getting India ready to rule herself” after the British left, not in merely getting the British out of India. Numerous times he shunned formal office believing he had

Continued on page 7

The Leader’s Challenge: “*Staying Alive*”

Ronald Heifetz concludes his book *Leadership Without Easy Answers* with advice on the leader’s personal challenge, which he terms “staying alive.” Heifetz says because of the “sustained period of disorientation and distress” brought about by adaptive work, “leadership can be dangerous.” For although “the adaptive pressures on us wait for no one,” those who lead the adaptive work often bear the scars and sacrifice much for their role. The leader, with or without authority, has two options to lessen their perils 1) embolden their followers “toward heroic effort,” or 2) seek ways to minimize the likelihood of personal injury for all involved—even the leader.

Indeed, “leaders are always failing somebody,” says Heifetz, so they can be very vulnerable. By its very nature “adaptive work often demands loss;” and often “the loss is real and sustained.” Thus, leaders are “sometimes assassinated because they come to represent loss, real or perceived.”

“Fear provokes defense,” and “taking authority itself is risky.” Authority figures “become repositories of hope...but they also become repositories of frustration.” As pressure and disequilibrium rise and constituent passions mount, “the authority figure becomes a likely scapegoat.” That is why Heifetz stresses the importance of a leader “staying alive” and knowing how that can be done.

It can’t be done indefinitely through mere denial, diversion, scapegoating, and externalizing conflict. Colluding in constituent work avoidance may temporarily anchor a leader’s popularity, but not succeed in the long run. “Members of society do not blame themselves,” says Heifetz. “The authority figure takes the blame.”

The leader “bears expectations for direction,” but must also provide *protection*: “He is expected to protect, but is not if protection means challenge.” That is why so many contemporary “leaders” seek comfortable “technical” solutions. Heifetz observes that no one gets to the top of a system “without representing the interests of the dominant factions in the system.” They tend too, to mirror the “problem dynamics” in the community. “People throughout the system collude in maintaining the dysfunctional status quo.”

So people tend to look to their leaders to take “bold action,” and produce change, but “with a minimum of loss to them.”

In the short run, leaders can “couple boldness *with protection*” by bold action on side issues. But, “adaptive success over time...demands coupling boldness *with challenge*, more than protection—risking one source of informal authority to gain another in the form of productive results.” They must “keep people within a productive discomfort zone.”

Ours is idealistically an equalitarian, inclusive society, but “from a strategic standpoint, some parties often must be excluded from the problem-solving process. They gener-

Continued on page 5

Leading With Authority: Mobilizing Adaptation

** Problem not clear-cut, and technical fixes are not available.

*** Leadership induces learning—both to define problems and implement solutions.

Heifetz explains two examples of adaptive “solutions” in his chapter on “Mobilizing Adaptive Work.” First, a 42-year-old man diagnosed with terminal cancer. Second, EPA’s William Ruckelshaus’ 1983 handling of a copper smelter’s emissions problem in Tacoma, Washington.

In the cancer patient case, the doctor had to pace her information-sharing and handling of the case to effectively, helpfully, re-orient the patient and his family to the stark realities of their situation. It was clearly a Type III situation in which the family faced an adaptive challenge. The doctor “conveyed a sense of order” and she “structured and paced the process of adjustment.” Heifetz says, “*She had to fail their expectations at a rate they could stand.*”

She was the “agent of adaptive work”, but she did not know what adaptation the family needed to make. They, with her help and guidance, had to come to that solution. The doctor “shifted away from answer-giving authority” to provide the family a learning process. She paced the process and regulated their levels of stress by *setting the agenda*. She helped the family take responsibility for their situation and achieve the best possible transition through a climactic period of their lives together.

The Tacoma case presented a dangerous community health threat juxtaposed with the fact that the polluting firm was the century-long economic anchor and employer for the community. Ruckelshaus had the authority to intervene solely, but he recognized the situation as “an adaptive challenge rather than a technical problem.” He chose to call for public deliberation, engage the citizenry, and orchestrate the debate. Environmentalists and the media condemned the approach as weak and abdicating, but Ruckelshaus held his ground. In time, the people themselves, through the public process, saw the need to adapt and for the community economy to diversify. The firm itself decided to shut down for reasons of non-competitiveness growing out of its use of outdated technology.

Ruckelshaus and the physician in Heifetz’s example both used all the tools at their disposal. They identified the adaptive challenges, regulated the levels of distress, paced the rate of change, gave structure to the process, shared information commensurate with the people’s capacity to engage the issues, managed risks, and helped people come to terms with new realities. They both shifted the responsibility for the problem to the primary stakeholders.

Both Ruckelshaus and the physician had the insight to recognize the difference between technical and adaptive situations and they used “authoritative provocation” as part of their strategy to produce “social learning” and “adaptive work” with their constituents. They both used their authority as a resource and with restraint. And perhaps most importantly, they both demonstrated that “as learning takes place, Type III situations may be broken down partially if not completely into Type II and Type I components.” This is done by “managing attention to issues instead of dictating

authoritative solutions.”

Both of these leaders knew how to “lead from a position of authority,” effectively using both forms of power—formal (positional) and informal (constituent-granted). Knowing how to use authority is a key asset for mobilizing adaptive work.

Heifetz provides seven ways—again in the context of a medical model—the leader can effectively empty authority as a tool, a resource.

1. Relationships provide a *holding environment*—primarily though not exclusively through “bonds of trust based on predictable values and predictable skills using the pressure-cooker metaphor.” Heifetz says their strategic task is to “maintain” a level of tension that mobilizes people. The leader’s pacing and sequencing is based on an assessment of the clues to constituents’ “carrying capacity.”
2. They *command and direct attention*. “Getting people to pay attention to tough issues rather than diversions is at the heart of strategy,” Heifetz asserts.
3. Having *access to information* provides a vantage point on which to make direction decisions. Authority positions are expected to *know*. They have special access to factual information but may have *no clear authorization* to communicate it.
4. Having control over the flow of information, they can sequence the release of factual data. Leaders must decide which issues are “ripe” enough to tackle. The “basic strategic logic:” People are more likely to provide attention when they feel some urgency. Acting on “unripe” issues, e.g., President Clinton’s gays-in-the-military action, can unduly “expend informal authority needed for other issues.”
5. Their *power to frame issues* allows them to influence the terms of discussions—to determine the direction of the process or debate.
6. They orchestrate conflict and contain disorder, sometimes orchestrating conflicting voices into some sort of harmony. The two key resources being “the right to mediate and the power to arbitrate.”
7. They have the power to choose the decision-making process itself, “be it consultative, autocratic, consensual, or some variation.”

“Adaptive work does not often fall within the purview of established organizational and social structures,” says Heifetz. The pieces—like those of a puzzle—lie scattered about. Thus, “leading across boundaries”—boundaries of diverse interest groups and issues—is a must. They must “contain the level of disequilibrium” and provide appropriate structure to orchestrate the conflict, direct the emotionalism of debate, and in so doing, create new relationships across old boundaries.

Shifting responsibility to primary stakeholders involves dealing with “problems” that lie “largely in their attitudes, values, habits, or current relationships.” The approach the leader *chooses for the decision-making process* depends on many factors, including: “the type of the problem, the resilience of the social system, the severity of the problem ... (and) the time frame for taking action.” A key rule of thumb, writes Heifetz:

One becomes more autocratic—exclusive—when the issue is

Continued on page 6

Leading Without Easy Answers: “Adaptive Work”

nisms—a response seeking to “avoid distress.” In the latter case, leadership must counteract natural work/distress-avoidance tendencies and “help people learn despite resistance.” Heifetz notes that leadership must often *pace the work* to help people undertake a hard task at a rate they can stand.”

Heifetz completes his stage setting with analysis of **leadership’s authority**. “Social living depends on authority,” he says; dominance and deference are their precursors. Dominance in animal “society” produces “reference points,” provides direction, protects from predators, orients new members, controls conflict, and maintains norms.

In human societies, the scope of the challenges are broader and more complex; different mechanisms—including pronounced differences among peoples—are at work; and humans so often tend to practice some form of “social Darwinism.” They proffer that some who “deserve” to do so *should* dominate. They “rationalize their prejudices”... “invoke natural law”... and “confuse biological potentially with biological determinism.”

Beginning as children, humans practice “*stratification*.” Two, dominant characteristics: Who’s the *smartest*? Who’s the *toughest*? Heifetz presents three generalizations that extend to small adult groups as well:

- Any new group tends to self-organize, to establish its “hierarchy of roles.”
- Its own “informal authority” tends to supercede authority imposed from outside the group.
- Once its hierarchy is settled, members tend to find their places and roles.

Authority thus established, it “provides orientation,” “diminishes stress”; and “provides a hub of cohesive bonding.” “*Authority provides direction*,” Heifetz says. It also “establishes places and roles” which produces a sense of calm within the group. A product of dominance?

He acknowledges dominance, but defines the authority leaders possess as “conferred power to perform a service.” “Dominance relationships are based on coercion or habitual deference;” he writes, “authority relationships are voluntary and conscious.” Yet, while some authority relationships are indeed a product of “conscious and deliberate conferring of power,” others are produced by “habitual deference.”

Authority is often seen in terms of a supposed “social contract” it signifies. Heifetz states the phrase “social habit” may be a more apt descriptor. He says the implications of a “social contract” are to incline people “to look to authority with overly expectant eyes.” But Heifetz-style leadership, where leaders have “conferred power,” causes people to understand “they have also to bear the risks, the costs, and the fruits of shared responsibility and civic participation.”

We internalize a host of competing authorities. People may not “sing in unison”—not even sing in “harmony.” We have room to choose; we evaluate and weigh options; we try out competing views. Human conflicts are both a burden and a blessing. Heifetz writes::

“We can trace the richness, creativity, and complexity of our cul-

tures and organizations to our ability as individuals to carry on an internal debate among a variety of voices including the one we call our own.”

Our capacity to “internalize the teachings of authorities” enables the norming process we call culture—and the resulting “cultural norms.” Heifetz says, “The social functions of authority have largely been incorporated into a stable system of norms and rules....” These cultural norms partially take the place of dominance and authority relationships in coordinating social activity.”

Heifetz closes “setting the stage” with a brief review of the factors of stress and charisma. He distinguishes the key between the start-up of an enterprise when charismatic leaders may flourish (because corporate norms have not yet formed) and what he calls “routinization” in established organizations. In the latter type, responding effectively to stress and restoring equilibrium are expected by followers. They will temporarily grant extraordinary power, expecting *they*—the leader(s)—can deliver. But Heifetz warns, “Dependency on authority discourages people from engaging with problems when they must.”

Whether driven by outside threats, stress, or a charismatic leader, broad, if possibly, dangerous authority “can generate a mindless following.” Bureaucracy and central control can result; creativity can be stifled. “Focusing upward, people lose touch with their communities, markets, and personal resources,” he says.

Heifetz cautions that real leadership is fashioned and it uses authority relationships “to mobilize rather than hinder a community’s adaptive efforts.”

The Leader’s Challenge: “Staying Alive” — from page 3

ate more disruption than can be contained effectively by the holding environment—the network of cohesive bonds and authority relationships among members of the community.”

Still, Heifetz asserts this can be done only with limited success and with a temporary, if false, sense of scrutiny.

“Challenging people to face harsh realities can be brutal work.... People can only sustain so much loss at any one time.” Leadership, says Heifetz...

Demands respect for people’s basic need for direction, protection, and order in times of stress. Requires compassion for the distress of adaptive change.

Leaders must understand their constituent community’s “sources of cohesion” and “limits of tolerance for productive distress.” “Knowing how hard to push and when to let up are central to leadership.” Pacing the work, in other words. And strengthening the holding environment helps create trustworthy relationships and increase adaptive capacity—even excluding strident voices, issues—can help bolster the leaders efforts at pacing adaptive work.

In addition to these tools, the leader must know his/her social system “well enough to predict how stressful the chal-

Continued on page 8

Leading With Authority: Mobilizing Adaptation

likely to overwhelm the current resilience of the group or society given the time available for decision.

Heifetz states that “*exercising leadership from a position of authority means going against the grain.*” It’s not about “fulfilling expectations,” but...

- “ providing questions
- “ letting people feel the threats
- “ disorienting people so that new role relationships develop
- “ generating conflict
- “ challenging norms

He likens it to “walking a razor’s edge.” Challenge people too fast, and they will push the authority figure over for failing their expectations for stability. But challenge people too slowly, and they will throw him down when they discover that no progress has been made. “Either way,” says Heifetz, “an authority figure cuts his feet.” The leader has to “oversee a sustained period of social disequilibrium.” He must help, people 1) confront contradictions in their environment and 2) adjust their values and behavior—both required to accommodate new realities.

Heifetz provides the following chart to depict how leadership function in five key leadership and social functions:

Leadership With Authority in Adaptive Situations

Social Function	Technical	Adaptive
Direction	Authority provides problem definition and solution	Authority identifies the adaptive challenge, provides diagnosis of condition, and produces questions about problem definitions and solutions
Protection	Authority protects from external threat	Authority discloses external threat
Role orientation	Authority orients	Authority disorients current roles, or resists pressure to orient people in new roles too quickly
Controlling conflict	Authority restores order	Authority exposes conflict, or lets it emerge
Norm maintenance	Authority maintains norms	Authority challenges norms, or allows them to be challenged

Assessing “current carrying capacity” has already been noted but this is only an interim measure “on the short-run task of making progress on an adaptive challenge.” The long-term task of leadership “(is) developing adaptive capacity,” he later suggests. Heifetz uses President Lyndon Johnson’s handling of domestic policy, particularly the movement to pass the Voting Rights Act, to demonstrate how to “push people to engage,” how to ripen an issue and *corral people into* collaborative work.

Heifetz describes at length how President Johnson deftly used the Selma march and its associated threats in March 1965 to mobilize the nation to support his and Congressional action on civil rights. Johnson correctly assessed the “level of disequilibrium” in the society, “defined the upper limits of tolerance” the nation would endure, “unbundled the issues” clarifying this was about civil rights, not states’ rights—and thus clarified the ensuing debate. Johnson wanted and “raised the stakes” until the nation itself was ready to act.” He kept people’s attention focused on the issues.”

Only then did Johnson move—even then forcing Governor George Wallace to *request* his intervention to maintain order—and then he addressed the nation and a joint ses-

sion of Congress. In that speech Johnson spoke to the orienting values of the nation: freedom, equality, democracy—and identified the next adaptive challenge: poverty. He understood that “the challenge of civil rights would require adaptive and ongoing work: the attitudes and structure of the society would have to change.” The Voting Rights Act (signed into law August 6, 1965) was simply “a catalytic step,” not a final remedy.

In his chapter entitled, “Falling Off the Edge,” Heifetz shows how an adept leader like President Johnson can also fail and *mis*-lead, as Johnson did in Vietnam. There, Johnson pursued a course of autocratic action, Congress “let Johnson bear the burden,” and Vietnam became “Johnson’s War.”

While President Johnson had pursued domestic policy as an adaptive-change leader, in Vietnam and foreign policy Johnson viewed himself as a *solitary* leader. He did not “create a holding environment for getting others to share responsibility” and “he squandered his unique position as orchestrator of the policy-making process,” says Heifetz. In so doing, he “created more disequilibrium than the public could tolerate,” “sabotaged his own capacity to lead,” and lost his presidency—deciding in 1968 not to run for re-election. In Vietnam and foreign policy, Johnson misjudged these as only technical arenas for technical experts. He practiced a circumvention of the public will and the people felt betrayed and *mis*-led.

Heifetz depicts President Richard Nixon in the same mold, but more “imperial,” secretive and autocratic. His ploy was to create “the policies of division”—an “us versus them model”—the “us” being anyone who opposed his policies and administration. In both cases, their “lone warrior model of leadership” worked against them.

Heifetz notes that President Jimmy Carter “tried, in some ways, to meet that challenge of a nation facing adaptive work.” But he, an engineer, operated “too much like the technician.” An “anti-Washington outsider,” he had weak relationships with Congress. He launched many major policy initiatives to a nation then “ill-equipped to digest so much so fast.” July 15, 1979, he gave his famous “malaise” speech in which he pronounced to the nation the *answers* he’d carefully thought out over many months— while he had failed to engage the public “through (a) similar learning process.” He followed that by dismissing his entire Cabinet, creating a public sense of chaos, disorder, confusion at the top of government, according to Heifetz.

All three, then, failed the essence of Presidential leadership the framers of the Constitution had in mind. They hoped, says Heifetz, that Presidential action “would pay high regard in its synthesis to the conflicting values, priorities, and behaviors of a diverse nation facing adaptive hurdles everyday.” Their “revolutionary conception of executive leadership,” was grounded in their “antiauthorization sentiment.” He summarizes:

The colonists had grown tired of being misled by rulers whose

Continued on page 8

Leading Without Authority: Pioneering Change

“more latitude without formal position. In time, he came to be called “Mahatma”—*The Great One*—and he was held in “great awe, trust, fear, and occasional dread.”

With great skill, Heifetz says, Gandhi “regulated the levels of social disequilibrium” to his own goals ends. He exercised “pivotal control over how the system would be challenged, and how fast and hard.” Heifetz says, “Outside the center, Gandhi had the freedom to present a focused and coherent message, and to embody it. He had only to meet the expectations of those who, believing in him already, provided a base for his challenge to the nation and to Britain.”

Margaret Sanger mobilized the United States early this century to face the poverty and plight of women in a nation where, then, “birth control of any sort was illegal.” Initially quite radical, she learned how to “frame the debate in ways far more understandable to a broader audience.” After some years, she forged a partnership with the virtually all-male medical profession, and in 1937 the American Medical Association finally adopted a position of “voluntary family limitation”—a euphemistic endorsement for contraception.

Heifetz describes Sanger as “a persistent nuisance.” No one *asked* her to speak, so she was totally free to speak! “Sanger had the latitude to speak to the issues *because* no one asked her to,” says Heifetz. “Asking generates expectations, and expectations create limits.”

Sanger fostered allies and, using an “educative strategy,” she fostered the debate. She had “the discipline to stay away from distracting arguments..., she stayed the course,” and she ultimately led the nation to change its laws as a product of its “social learning.” Because she understood her issue, she “became increasingly understandable to a wider group of people.” Accordingly, writes Dr. Heifetz, “Sanger touched intimately the life experiences of women. She knew them, worked with them, and never forgot they were her primary constituency.”

Heifetz closes his *creative deviance* chapter with a comparison of two Vietnam-era lieutenants—one an Air Force bomber pilot, the other a platoon commander in the Army. Both felt the inclination in the dying days of the Vietnam War to defy the senseless orders of their superiors. The pilot saw his choices only as these: follow or disobey, obedience or insubordination. He flew; he prayed; luckily, he survived. Army platoon leader Richards saw more and more creative options for himself and his men, who were ordered to carry out daily search-out-and-destroy-the-enemy missions. He “found a way to accommodate both obedience and insubordination, to lead beyond his formal authority,” says Heifetz. He allowed the platoon to break into two groups. One group voluntarily chose to continue fighting; the other, since the end of the war was imminent, did not see fit to place their lives in jeopardy.

Sanger, Gandhi, and Richards all showed leadership *without* formal authority. Heifetz summarizes:

Distinguishing leadership and authority is more than an analytic and strategic tool. It is also a means to de-

scribe the personal experience of leading. As we often experience it in real time, leadership means taking responsibility for hard problems beyond anyone’s expectations. Ironically, many people wait until they gain authority, formal or informal, to begin leading. They see authority as a prerequisite. Yet those who do lead usually feel they are taking action beyond whatever authority they have...[But the leaders highlighted by Heifetz: Gandhi, Sanger, Richards] continued to experience leadership as an activity performed without authority beyond expectations. They were not waiting for the coach’s call.

Heifetz notes that while Gandhi and Sanger eventually gained informal authority, they had spent many years without it. “...It was not a precondition for leading, but a product of leading.”

Clearly, their kind of activism and provocation leads to social distress. So in his chapter on *modulating the provocation* Heifetz provides insights on how to keep that distress “within a productive range,” “ripening” issues, and “giving the work back to the people.” “A leader without authority can spark debate, but he can not orchestrate it. Without authority, a leader must regulate distress by modulating the provocation.”

He or she must closely monitor the levels of distress, understand their “special vulnerability of becoming a lightning rod,” and carefully strategize ways to mobilize stakeholders—usually a better, more productive approach than “challenging authority,” he says.

Heifetz employs the 1965 Selma, Alabama voting rights march to show how “modulating the provocation” can work. Here, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “strategic challenge was to dramatize” the contradiction in what the nation professed to believe and what was actually happening as a result of blatantly racist voter registration policies. King himself came on the Selma scene late: “The people who first exercised leadership in Selma had no authority to organize for voting rights.” An active “education campaign” laid the groundwork for the Selma march, and a number of activists prior to King’s arrival mobilized the Selma black community to action—and its white community into a defensive posture.

But King, already the 1964 recipient of the Nobel Prize for Peace, possessed the means to focus the nation’s eyes on the plight of Selma’s disenfranchised citizens. Also, writes Heifetz, “King’s informal authority, like Gandhi’s, gave him major resources: attention, the power to frame the issues, and some power to pace the work, to turn up the heat or to lower it.”

One of King’s key roles in Selma was to recognize the “limits of tolerance” and “systemic distress” both in Selma and in the nation’s reaction to it. “King had no control over the system’s resilience. He could adjust the level of challenge, but he could not increase the system’s capacity to tolerate it,” says Heifetz. King had to be attune to the President (Johnson), the local activists, local and state officials, and

Continued on page 9

The Leader's Personal Challenge: "Staying Alive"

allenge facing it will be and how capably it will absorb the stress." The leader "stays alive" not merely by "playing it safe," but also by "taking deliberate risks based on his ongoing assessment of the territory." Heifetz says that leaders must have "an experimental mindset—the willingness to work by trial and error—where the community's reactions at each stage provide the basis for planning future actions."

Leaders with authority are compassionate, but *not* soft. An "authoritative and hopeful presence," "clear direction and protection," and helping people understand the reasons behind the hardships all help reduce followers' distress and strengthen the leader's hold. "With a strong hold, he can generate more productive stress and faster. With a weak hold, he has to move more slowly."

Leaders *without authority* can only "control the severity" of their challenge; they cannot structure the process, corral their stakeholders, or merely issue calming statements.

And perhaps all leaders "race against the ticking clock of expectations."

"Leadership is a special sort of educating in which the leader raises problems, questions, options, interpretations, and perspectives, often without answers, gauging all the while when to push through and when to hold steady," writes Heifetz. Socrates is his example of how not to perform that kind of educating. Socrates "challenged through inquiry" guided only by his own logical understanding, not theirs. In

the end, they focused on him, not his questions, and they sentenced him to death for his "corrupting" influence.

Leaders need courage, but "staying alive" is their goal, not "martyrdom" or self-sacrifice. Leaders must direct "disciplined attention" to the issues. They must understand their issues—which are "ripe", which are not. They must understand their groups work avoidance patterns. The object is a long-term challenge: "to develop people's adaptive capacity for tackling an on-going stream of hard problems. They must "carry the load" and contain constituent distress only for the time required helping their followers "adapt sufficiently to take it back." The object is not to create or reinforce follower dependency on some charismatic "leader." While a leader may be charismatic; while he may weave hope; formulate a compelling vision; and provide energy, strategy and faith in that vision, to "sustain adaptive change" the community must eventually "discover and develop its own capacity," not depend on the leaders. "Over time, a leader has to help people let go" (of him/her).

From beginning to end, it can be "lonely on the point." The reason: "Those who lead take responsibility for the holding environment of the enterprise." But as lonely as it may sometimes feel, the leader is not—must not be—alone. He bears the weight of problems only "for a time." But his "strategic challenge is to give the work back to the people without abandoning them." Heifetz says this often amounts to "the form of orchestrating conflict."

Heifetz says it is important for leaders to maintain an "inner discipline." The leader must not only manage his social environment, but himself as well. Heifetz lists seven practical suggestions for bearing up under the strain leaders endure:

1. **Get on "the balcony"**
2. **Distinguish self from role**
3. **Externalize the conflict**
4. **Use partners**
5. **Listen—"using oneself as data"**
6. **Find a sanctuary**
7. **Preserve a sense of purpose**

The balcony. "Leadership is both active and reflective. One has to alternate between participating and observing." And to get a better view and sense of the patterns in "the dance," one must "stop moving and get to the balcony"—but only for observation, not to retreat.

Complex systems seldom yield to superficial or technical treatment. Systemic problems require systemic diagnoses and treatment, not symptomatic responses. Among other issues, leaders must be mindful of the dangers inherent in their own bases and limited understanding of systemic behaviors and interrelationships.

The diagnostic principles of the "balcony perspective" entail a set of basic questions for leaders:

What's causing the distress?

What internal contradictions does the distress

Continued on page 9

Leading With Authority: Mobilizing Adaptation

Continued from page 6

visions came from within. They wanted public officials whose visions were derived or shaped from without. Presidential perspectives had to be really tested against a multiplicity of views. Presidential action would require collaboration.

Franklin D. Roosevelt exemplified that in identifying the adaptive work needed and prodding the nation to face the threats of World War II. He "paced the challenge" and "did not shield Congress and the public from the work that only they could do."

Heifetz closes his four-chapter section on *Leading With Authority* with the following thoughts:

Authority constrains leadership because in times of distress people expect too much. They form inappropriate dependencies that isolate their authorities behind a mask of knowing. And then everyone rationalizes the dependency.

Raise hard questions and one risks getting cut down, even if the questions are important for moving forward on the problem. Thus, the need for leadership from people in authority becomes ever more critical during periods of disequilibrium, when people's urgency for answers increase. Yet that role is played badly if authorities reinforce dependency and delude themselves into thinking that they have to have the answers when they do not. Feeling pressured to know, they will surely come up with an answer, even if poorly tested, misleading, and wrong.

Leading With Authority: Mobilizing Adaptation

the response of the rest of the nation. “Leading without authority, therefore, became a sort of modern ballet—some-what choreographed, somewhat improvised—in response to those in authority, with the wider public as the audience.” King had to “keep the distress within the proper range—above the threshold for stimulating public and political engagement with the issue, but below the breaking point. At all costs, (he) wanted to avert work avoidance on a national scale.” King came up against the boundaries, but he was careful not to cross over.

King commanded attention. “Attention has costs and benefits,” notes Heifetz. For one thing, he says, “Groups are inclined to protect their authority figures for quite a while”—and turn on them only after “a prolonged period of disappointment.” So, “without authority, a leader stands rather naked” and the problems presented by them can, at least temporarily, be evaded “by shooting the messenger” rather than by changing the system or its authority figures.

“A major challenge of leadership, therefore, “writes Heifetz, “is to draw attention and then to deflect it to the questions and issues that need to be faced. To do so, *one has to provide a context for action.*” King was adept here as well. While he became “a living embodiment of the issue to which he wanted to draw attention”—civil rights, “*he never became the issue...King only represented the issue... The context of his activity was clear.*” On the other hand as noted in a previous review, President Johnson *became* the issue with respect to the Vietnam war. “King made people feel the contradictions in their own attitudes...The nation could not easily attribute its contradictions to King.”

Heifetz closes Part III, “Leading Without Authority,” with a brief summary of leaders mobilizing the stakeholders. “Leaders without authority—deviants, as they are often perceived—have to think hard about where to direct their challenge.” Attacking *the system* or *authority* head on may well meet overwhelming resistance. The “community of stakeholders (may) resist a disturbance of their equilibrium” and support *their* authority figure(s), “their proxy,” and the “leader’s efforts lead nowhere.

So Heifetz asserts:

Any challenge must mobilize the real stakeholders, not just their proxies. One begins with four questions:

- “Who are the primary stakeholders in this issue, and how might they need to change their ways?
- “What expectations do they have of their authority?
- “How could the authority figure reshape those expectations to provide himself with latitude to take action?
- “And what could one do, leading without authority, to reshape those expectations to pave his way?

The events in Selma illustrate the principle of mobilizing the stakeholders.

“(SCLC co-founder Ralph) Abernathy and King avoided the trap of directing their challenge at the top authority figure. Instead, they targeted the nation and, indirectly, Congress,” says Heifetz.

“...They were dramatists in the shaping of teaching moments for each of their audiences, be it rallies, sermons, sit-ins, marches, boycotts, letters from prison, or freedom rides. At the end of the day, some people might have to take a beating or die, but learning took place. Attitudes and habits changed and behaviors became more consonants with them.

After Selma and the passage in 1965 of the Voting Rights Act, more than 9,000 black people registered to vote in Selma—Dallas County in just six months. As Selma lawyer J.L. Chestnut said, “A voteless, helpless people had moved in a matter of months to a position of almost being able to elect their own leaders, to govern themselves.”

But that was just the beginning. For as Chestnut continued to say:

The reign of terror was over...That’s what America is all about—freedom to breathe, freedom from fear. That was fundamental. King often said, “The vote is not the ball game, but it gets you in the ballpark. That’s where we were in 1965. We had gotten into the ballpark. Now we had to learn to play the game.

If this story does not convey within our contemporary framework the powerful potential in leading without authority, perhaps nothing does.

Based on the examples Heifetz employs, might **Leadership Without Authority** also be termed as “Provocative Leadership”?

The Leader’s Challenge “Staying Alive” — from page 8

represent?

What are the histories of these contradictions?

What perspectives and interests have others and I come to represent to various segments of the community that are now in conflict?

In what ways are we in the organization or working group mirroring the problem dynamics in the community?

Self Versus Role. Heifetz uses President Kennedy’s handling of the Cuban missile crisis to illustrate. Kennedy had two letters from Premier Khrushchev, the second much more strident than the terms in the first. Kennedy patiently took counsel from his advisors; he resisted personalizing his outrage and reacting in kind. In the end, Kennedy simply chose to ignore the second (“bureaucratic”) letter. He “accepted” Khrushchev’s initial terms. It worked; the crisis was resolved. His response was strategic, not reactive.

Externalizing the Conflict. Here Martin Luther King, Jr. was the model. He never influenced the Civil Rights struggle as his own, but externalized it as “a conflict between American values and American reality.” We saw it practiced again in the ‘80s in President Reagan’s “teflon” presidency. Great leaders are adept at “redirecting attention” from themselves to the issues they represent. Thus distanced,

Continued on page 10

The Leader's Personal Challenge: "Staying Alive"

they can better frame those issues for others to embrace as their own.

Partners. Heifetz states that *leadership cannot be exercised alone*. All of us have "blind spots," so "every person who leads needs help in distinguishing self from role." Partners come in the general types of **confidant** and **ally**. Confidants help "provide a holding environment for someone who is holding everybody else." Allies are cross-boundary partners. They come from across different organizations or within an organization from junior and/or senior authority. Allies close to the frontline are particularly necessary: They have information and perspectives that matter and they usually must implement whatever solutions are devised.

Listening. "To listen, one has to live with doubt," says Heifetz. Leaders must "learn by reflecting" on events and they must "use partners as a hedge against self-deception." Leaders are open to many possibilities. They are flexible. "Improvisation is the norm" and "improvisation demands ongoing assessment." Heifetz writes:

Interventions are not simply proposed solutions; interventions are wars to test the waters and gather information to refine the strategy.

Sanctuary. Quiet walk. Prayer. "Sanctuaries" exist in many forms and leaders need them. Heifetz says:

Just as leadership demands a strategy of mobilizing people, it also requires a strategy of deploying and restoring one's own spiritual resources.

Purpose. "Leadership oftentimes is a passionate and consuming activity... So strong are the emotions of leadership, they can overwhelm the person who has not developed a sufficiently broad sense of purpose," our author writes. With that sense of purpose intact, one can "step back and review, perhaps with doubt, perhaps with delight, the orienting values embedded in any particular mission." It's the fulcrum that "keeps people asking the question, 'What's our next adaptive challenge?'" "Preserving a sense of purpose helps one take setbacks and failures in stride," he continues. "Leadership requires the courage to face failures daily. Otherwise, one cannot take corrective action." "It helps generate the personal freedom to change"—our venues, our sights, our direction. "A sense of purpose provides the ongoing capacity to generate new possibilities," Heifetz asserts.

Changes and challenges represent "educative" tasks. So Heifetz concludes:

Leadership, seen in this light, requires a learning strategy. A leader has to engage people in facing the challenge, adjusting their values, changing perspectives, and developing new habits of behavior.

(This, observes Heifetz, is hard for "an authoritative person who prides himself on his ability to tackle hard problems," but it should also ease the burden of having to know the answers and hear the uncertainty"—a mixture of good and bad news.)

The adaptive demands of our societies require leadership that takes responsibility without waiting or revelation or request. One may lead with no more than a question in hand.

Thus, anyone who feels the call, need, or desire can embrace this *leadership without easy answers*. We're all in this together, and "none of us are as smart as all of us." Heifetz has presented us the key strategic principles of contemporary leadership:

- ◆ **Identifying the adaptive challenge**
- ◆ **Regulating distress**
- ◆ **Directing disciplined attention to the issues**
- ◆ **Giving the work back to people**

This concludes our review of Dr. Ronald H. Heifetz's book. Following his text, Dr. Heifetz provides sixty pages of documentation and notes pertaining to the research behind his book.

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