



## Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading

This book presents the suggestions of two Harvard professors with varied backgrounds and experiences in high-profile leadership and years of study on how those willing to undertake leadership in tough situations can manage the traps of such efforts and protect themselves.

Key points:

- “Adaptive challenges” are problems that are not solvable through expertise or standard operating procedures. They take more than just hiring the right expert and pointing her at the problem.
- Solutions to adaptive problems come through experiments, discoveries, and adjustments from many persons or organizations.
- Often, the benefit of the effort will not be clear at the beginning, but the reality of loss involved in the effort will be.
- Because of the fear of loss, organizations will resist dealing with adaptive challenges by attempting the following on anyone daring to attempt to lead it:
  - Marginalize
  - Divert
  - Attack
  - Seduce

How can leaders keep themselves and the organization together during the change process? Chapters 3- 7 suggest techniques and approaches.

### **Chapter 3: Get on the Balcony**

Basically, this means the ability to view the situation and the responses of participants from a mental “balcony”, from which one can see patterns, minimize one’s own emotional responses, and react (or not!) in ways that will help the community engage in the adaptive challenge.

“Getting on the balcony” means being able to identify adaptive challenges. Adaptive challenges are those where:

- Hearts and minds need to change, choices must be made between contradictory values, and the essential must be distinguished from the expendable
- All technical fixes are not sufficient
- Conflict persists
- If unaddressed, leads to crisis

As techniques for the overall strategy of “getting on the balcony”, the authors suggest that at times the leader will need to discover where the members of the community are on the issues raised by the challenge, listen beyond the words of participants, and even reach interpretations different from what the people are saying. The leader must watch for clues from “authority figures” that the heat of the change process is becoming too much for the community.

## **Chapter 4: Think Politically**

Leaders need to find partners, including authority figures, but also members of areas where change will be very difficult. Point out the values in the organization that support the change and the reasons it is needed, but also acknowledge and name the loss that will be suffered by members of the community. The leader should accept responsibility for her piece of the mess, model the type of behavior needed through the change process, and be willing to accept casualties.

## **Chapter 5: Orchestrate the Conflict**

Leaders of adaptive change must manage the pace and process of the change to keep the stress such change generates from either destroying the organization, or causing factions within it to heighten their efforts to “take out” the leader to all-out efforts. Techniques for managing pace and process include:

- Create a “holding area” - something that can “isolate” or “contain” the change process enough to give the participants sufficient security to move ahead. This can be a format (off-site retreat with outside facilitator), a process (rules and sequencing for dealing with issues that insure all participants a voice), or anything you know will be effective.
- Control the “temperature.” The leader can increase the focus and effort on the change by calling attention to the hard issues and letting the participants feel their own responsibility. When the stress of that focus and effort threatens to become too great, it can be reduced or managed by:
  - Focusing on a technical, solvable problem
  - Creating a structure for attacking the challenge
  - Framing the challenge in a less threatening way, or simply speaking directly to fears
  - Using humor, a break, or even a party to “let off steam”
  - Separating conflicting parties or issues
  - Pacing the work
  - Temporarily taking back responsibility for tough issues
  - Showing them the future. Answer “why” in terms of the primary mission and values of the organization in every possible way

## **Chapter 6: Give the Work Back**

“By trying to solve adaptive problems for others, at best you will reconfigure it as a technical problem and create some short term relief” p.123.

“Whenever a senior authority in an organization resolves a hot issue, that person’s position becomes the story. Winners and losers are created simply by virtue of authority and no learning takes place” p. 125.

“To meet adaptive challenges, people must change their hearts as well as their behavior” p. 127.

To avoid taking the work away from the community, the leader should:

- Make only short, simple interventions
- Observe
- Ask questions
- Interpret
- Intervene with an adaptive solution

### **Chapter 7: Hold Steady**

This chapter is like Chapter 5: Orchestrate the Conflict, but focused on the leader's actions. Leaders in adaptive challenges must be prepared to receive angry, attacking actions from members of the community and not react defensively. These can be especially hard to take when they come from friends or allies.

The leader also has to exercise personal pacing by allowing (or causing) issues to ripen. The community must sense the urgency of the challenge. That means they cannot be distracted by other, more compelling crises, must understand how deeply it affects them, must sense that they can master any required learning, and must get the right signals from authority figures. In some cases, the leader can focus attention on the issue. Routine methods (calling a meeting, sending a memo, holding a press conference) may not always work, especially for non-routine problems.

The organization will likely react with some type of work avoidance mechanism: outright denial of the problem ("sweeping it under the carpet"), scapegoating, reorganizing, setting up a committee, finding an external enemy, blaming authority and character assassination.

### **Chapter 8: Manage Your Hungers**

Leaders are only human, and each of us has common hungers for power and control, for affirmation and importance and for intimacy and delight. These hungers must be met, but leaders can be trapped and undermined by the meeting them (or denying them) inappropriately.

For example, the need for power and control leads to the development of expertise and mastery. These qualities are rewarded by the organization. But, in the face of an adaptive challenge (which must be met by the community and requires changes in hearts and minds), it can lead the potential leader to try and take responsibility for the whole solution. Since this takes the pressure off others, they will generally acquiesce, thus allowing the "leader" to produce a "technical" fix that will but divert attention from the real challenge of change while destroying the "leader" through Herculean efforts to make the "fix" work.

The need for affirmation and importance can lead to a similar, but subtly different, trap. This hunger can cause a leader to listen too much to those who support him while paying insufficient attention to voices of those urging caution, or even in opposition. This can obviously create missteps in orchestrating the crisis and holding steady. It can increase opposition efforts by not

acknowledging and addressing fears. And it can lead to incorrect judgments based on inadequate or erroneous information.

Finally, the need for intimacy and delight can lead to inappropriate personal relationships. But, defending against such inappropriate relationships, can lead to a “walled off” person unable to continue and contribute in relationships.

## **Chapter 9: Anchor Yourself**

The truth is that members of the community will react to the leader’s role, to the issues she brings to the fore based on their fears and perceived loss, or based on their shared assessment of the challenge and its importance. They will attack or defend, denigrate or praise the leader as a person based on the leader’s identification with the adaptive challenge, not based on the qualities of the leaders. What leader hasn’t had inappropriate motives or intentions assigned to them by those who opposed their actions?

“The absolute best long-term defense against personal attack is to be perfect and make no mistakes in your personal life. But, of course, none of us is perfect. Our human hungers and failings are there always, causing us to lose our tempers in public, to hit the send button before thinking twice about the effects of an e-mail, to lie reactively when we feel cornered, to make an off-handed remark that offends people we are trying to reach. ... The key, however, is to respond to the attack in a way that places the focus back where it should be, on the message and the issues.” p. 194.

Use anchoring techniques.

- Utilize allies and confidantes.
  - Allies are in the struggle with the leader. They share values, strategies, but they also cross boundaries as parts of various groups. Confidantes, on the other hand, are often outside the change effort and have few, if any, conflicting loyalties. If inside, they are VERY close insiders whose interests are perfectly aligned with those of the leader.
- Seek sanctuary
  - Sanctuary can be a place, an activity, or both. It can be the gym, or a daily walk, a group, or whatever restores and protects the leader. But, it has to be daily. Once a week is not enough.

## **Chapter 10: What’s On the Line?**

This chapter addresses the question of why, in spite of the dangers, someone might choose to lead. To meet his personal hungers would not be a good reason. Personal destruction and failure of the effort lie down that road. The answer is ultimately love, caring, the concern for others that makes a leader willing to expose self to risk, but that also offers the possibility of meaning and significance. The very word “lead” has an Indo-European root that means “to go forth, die.”

Even given the motivation of love, two beliefs can stop leadership: the myth of measurement and concern about the form of the contribution.

The myth of measurement confuses “metrics” with “meaning”. Not all success is measurable. Use measurement, but don’t mistake it for what’s worthwhile.

By “form of contribution”, the authors mean “role”. Here, the threat to leadership, as a form of service and giving to the community, can be threatened by the potential leader’s unwillingness to abandon a role. Whether it’s the role of “lawyer”, or “legislator”, or “stay-at-home-mom”, the opportunity for leadership may require either voluntarily leaving, or (and even more scary) risking that role. They suggest that Jimmy Carter had to leave the role of president behind to start building houses for Habitat for Humanity, but that doing so positioned him to contribute by exploring ways for communities and societies to explore ways to resolve long-standing conflicts.

### **Chapter 11: Sacred Heart**

If leadership comes from love, then the leader must have a “sacred”, i.e., “set apart” heart. The leader must retain innocence – the capacity to entertain silly ideas, think unusual and perhaps ingenious thoughts, to be playful, even “strange” – rather than dressing up cynicism as realism. She must retain curiosity rather than portraying arrogance as authoritative knowledge. These qualities, maintained in spite of attacks, keep the leader “in” the community and a part of it, thus allowing her to be part of the scary, challenging work of setting out to change that community in ways that cannot be known in the beginning, to meet a challenge that requires the hearts and minds of those in the community to change in order to survive.

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