Leadership on the Line

Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading

By

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The Challenge

The Heart of Danger

Leadership is Dangerous

You appear dangerous to people when you question their values, beliefs, or habits of a lifetime. You place yourself on the line when you tell people what they need to hear rather than what they want to hear.

Leadership becomes dangerous, then, when it must confront people with loss. Of all that we value, what's really most precious and what's expendable?

The Perils of Adaptive Change

Every day, people have problems for which they do, in fact, have the necessary know-how and procedures. We call these technical problems. But there is 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. We call these adaptive challenges because they require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community.

Indeed, the single most common source of leadership failure we've been able to identify—in politics, community life, business, or the nonprofit sector—is that people, especially those in positions of authority, treat adaptive challenges like technical problems.

But when you focus your energy primarily on the technical aspects of complex challenges, you do opt for short-term rewards. Leadership takes the capacity to stomach hostility so that you can stay connected to people, lest you disengage from them and exacerbate the danger. What makes a problem technical is not that it is trivial; but simply that its solution already lies within the organization's repertoire.

Going Beyond Your Authority

Thus, leadership requires disturbing people—but at a rate, they can absorb.

At the Heart of Danger is Loss

Moreover, change challenges a person's sense of competence. Habits, values, and attitudes, even dysfunctional ones are part of one's identity. To change the way people see and do things is to challenge how they define themselves.

Indeed, our deeply held loyalties serve as a keystone in the structure of our identities. On one hand, it represents loving attachments and on the other hand, our loyalties and attachments represent our bondage and limitations. People hold on to ideas as a way of holding on to the person who taught them the ideas.

The Faces of Danger

When people resist adaptive work, their goal is to shut down those who exercise leadership in order to preserve what the have.

Marginalization

Getting marginalized sometimes takes literal form. Most of the time organizations marginalize people less directly.

As is often the case, this problem had both a technical aspect ("How can we get more people of color into the Aquarium?") and an adaptive aspect ("Which of our values are keeping people of color away from our door and, are we willing to change them?"). The nature, design, and location of this program were strong signals that the trustees wanted to address only the technical piece.

The institution from the top down really did not want to face the implications of the deep changes that would have to be undertaken throughout. The programs were fine, but the role they were playing in the overall organization served to marginalize the issue, not resolve it. One wants to avoid as long as possible the hard work of facing the change and the challenges that would inevitably follow.

Marginalization often comes in a more seductive form. For example, it may come in the guise of telling you that you are special, sui generis, that you alone represent some important and highly valued idea, with the effect of keeping both you and the idea in a little box. First, the role of "special person" keeps you from playing a meaningful part on other issues. Your are kept from being a generalist. Authority figures can be sidelined, particularly when they allow themselves to become so identified with an issue that they become the issue.

Personalization tends toward marginalization. Authorities commonly have to represent a variety of constituents. They rarely can afford to embody one issue. They need to keep their hands free so they can orchestrate conflicts, rather than become the object of conflict.

Diversion

Another time-honored way to push people aside is to divert them. There are many ways in which communities and organizations will consciously or subconsciously try to make you lose focus. They do this sometimes by broadening your agenda, sometimes by overwhelming it, but always with a seemingly logical reason for disrupting your game plan. Some people are promoted or given new, glamorous responsibilities as a

way of sidetracking their agenda. People in top authority positions can easily be diverted by getting lost in other people's demands and programmatic details.

Second understand that they can squash the agenda more easily by overwhelming her with demands and details than by fighting her head-on.

"What happened?" Marty asked. "It's the most amazing thing," she replied. "I've never been so busy. My appointment calendar is full, and each meeting is important. Many are contentious. I am working more hours than I ever did before. I'm exhausted at the end of every day. I take work home on the weekend. But I have barely begun to work on my agenda. I finally realized that since I've been in the job, I've only seen a hundred or so people. It's as if they all got together, whatever their differences, and agreed to keep me so busy with their lists, that I would never get to anything on my list!"

Attack

Attacking you personally is another tried-and true method of neutralizing your message. Whatever the form of the attack, if the attackers can turn the subject of the conversation from the issue you are advancing to your character or style, or even to the attack itself, it will have succeeded in submerging the issue.

Fortunately, your opponents, those people most disturbed by your message, are far more likely to use verbal rather than physical attacks. The attacks may go after your character, your competence, or your family, or may simply distort and misrepresent your views. They will come in whatever form your opponents think will work. Through trial and error they will find your Achilles' heel. They will come at you whenever you are most vulnerable.

Attacks may take the form of misrepresentation. It is difficult to resist responding to misrepresentation and personal attack. We don't want to minimize how hard it is to keep your composure when people say awful things about you. It hurts. It does damage. Anyone who has been there knows that pain. Exercising leadership often, risks have to bear such scars.

Seduction

Many forms of bringing you down have a seductive dimension. We use the word seduction, a politically charged word, as a way of naming the process by which you lose your sense of purpose altogether, and therefore get taken out of action by an initiative likely to succeed because it has a special appeal to you.

One of the everyday forms of seduction, for example, is the desire for the approval of your own faction, your own supporters. When you are trying to create significant change, to move a community, the people in your own faction in that

community will have to compromise along the way. Often, the toughest part of your job is managing their disappointed expectations.

Seduction, marginalization, diversion, and attack all serve a function. They reduce the disequilibrium that would be generated were people to address the issues that are taken off the table. They serve to maintain the familiar, restore order, and protect people from the pains of adaptive work. It would be wonderful if adaptive work did not involve hard transitions, adjustments, and loss in people's lives. Because it does, it usually produces resistance. Being aware of the likelihood of receiving opposition in some form is critical in managing it when it arrives. Leadership, then, requires not only reverence for the pains of change and recognition and the manifestations of danger, but also the skill to respond.

Part Two
The Response

Get on the Balcony

Few practical ideas are more obvious or more critical than the need to get perspective in the midst of action. Jesuits call it "contemplation in action." Hindus and Buddhists call it "karma yoga," or mindfulness. The mental activity of stepping back in the midst of action and asking, "What's really going on here?"

Why do so many of the world's forms of spiritual and organizational life recommend this mental exercise? Because few tasks strain our abilities more than putting this idea into practice.

The observational challenge is to see the subtleties that normally go right by us. Seeing the whole picture requires standing back and watching even as you take part in the action being observed. But taking a balcony perspective is tough to do when you're engaged on the dance floor, being pushed and pulled by the flow of events and also engaged in some of the pushing and pulling yourself.

Achieving a balcony perspective means taking yourself out of the dance, in our mind, even if only for a moment. The only way you can gain both a clearer view of reality and some perspective on the bigger picture is by distancing yourself from the fray.

If you want to affect what is happening, you must return to the dance floor. The challenge is to more back and forth between the dance floor and the balcony, making interventions, observing their impact in real time, and then returning to the action.

The most basic question is always the best place to start: What's going on here? Beyond that question, we suggest four diagnostic tasks to safeguard against the more common traps that snare people.

1. Distinguish technical from adaptive challenges.
2. Find out where people are at.
3. Listen to the song beneath the words.
4. Read the behavior of authority figures for clues.

<u>Distinguish Technical from adaptive challenges.</u>
Why was Amanda rendered invisible?

Style

Track Record
Ripeness
Status
Prejudice

Typically, the group will strongly prefer the technical interpretation, particularly one in which the "problem" lies with an individual rather than the group as a whole. This allows for a simple, straightforward solution, one that does not require any hard work or adaptation on the group's part.

If Amanda gets to the balcony, collects information, listens carefully, and questions her usual mindset, she may find that here invisibility provides a clue, not to an individual issue, but to a group issue. She may find that she's "carrying the ball" for her team on this adaptive challenge, and being chased down the field accordingly.

Most problems come bundled with both technical and adaptive aspects. Before making an intervention, you need to distinguish between them in order to decide which to tackle first and with what strategy.

Budget crises provide a good, general illustration of the pressures toward technical interpretations. Typically, a budget crisis in the public or private sector stimulates an effort to find more money. The people in authority might squeeze expenses here, postpone some expenditure there, or do some short-term borrowing. Those solutions deal with the problems as a technical issue. But very often the source of the crisis is a clash of values, a difference in priorities. Finding more money temporarily smoothes over the conflict, but does not solve it. Solving the underlying problem would require the factions with competing priorities to acknowledge the gaps between them and work through the differences. It would require strategic trade-offs, and losses. The result might well deeply disappoint some people, perhaps many. "Balancing the budget" might in fact mean refashioning the organization's agenda and changing the way it conducts business. Thus, the task of leadership would be to mobilize people to adapt to a world with different constraints and opportunities than they had imagined.

First, you know you're dealing with something more than a technical issue when people's hearts and minds need to change, and not just their preferences or routine behaviors. Cultures must distinguish what is essential from what is expendable as they struggle to move forward.

Second, you can distinguish technical problems from adaptive challenges by a process of exclusion. If you throw all the technical fixes you can imagine at the problem and the problem persists, it's a pretty clear signal that an underlying adaptive challenge still needs to be addressed.

Third, the persistence of conflict usually indicates that people have not yet made the adjustments and accepted the losses that accompany adaptive change.

Fourth, crisis is a good indicator of adaptive issues that have festered. A crisis represents danger because the stakes are high, time appears short, and the uncertainties are great. Yet they also represent opportunities if they are used to galvanize attention on the unresolved issues.

Sudden crises tend to include both technical and adaptive parts. Consequently, you will face a lot of pressure, both external and internal, to see the crisis as a technical problem, with straightforward solutions that can quickly restore order, even if it means ignoring the adaptive issues and focusing on only the technical fixes.

In the short term, you may want to deal with the technical aspects first. However, many crises manifest issues that have been festering for a long time.

Find Out Where People Are At

Getting people in a community or organization to address a deeply felt issue is difficult and risky. If people have avoided a problem for a long time, it should not be surprising that they try to silence you when you push them to face it. Both your survival and your success depend on your skill at reaching a true understanding of the varying perspectives among the factions. Learn from them their stakes and fears.

This time he put aside his well-practiced and impressive presentation. He started by simply asking them what they wanted to talk about. They raised the issues. They set the agenda. Working off their ideas, he engaged them in an intense conversation over several hours. The sessions had a huge impact. He caused people to rethink long-held views.

Listen to the Song Beneath the Words

Thus, after hearing their stories, you need to take the provocative step of making an interpretation that gets below the surface. You have to listen to the song beneath the words.

In political and organizational life, no one finds it easy I the midst of action to step back and interrogate reality. Some people may be better at it than others, but no one has the "playbook."

Beware of making interpretations immediately and aloud, since this can provoke strong reactions. Interpreting other people's intentions is best done first inside one's own head.

Read the Authority Figure for Clues

When you seek to instigate significant change within an organization or community, focus on the words and behavior of the authority figure; they provide a critical signal about the impact of your action on the organization as a whole.

The senior authority will reflect what you are stirring up in the community. He or she will consider and react to the responses of the factions in the organization. Look through the authority figure as you would look through a window, understanding that what you are seeing is really behind the plate of glass. The trap is thinking that the authority figure is operating independently and expressing a personal point of view.

In general, no one in an organizational system will be more tuned to the levels of distress than the person in charge, because an essential part of that job is to control any disequilibrium and restore order.

In times of adaptive stress, groups exert pressure on people in authority to solve the problems that seem to be causing it. Consequently, the behaviors of authority figures provide critical clues to the organization's level of distress and its customary methods for restoring equilibrium.

Quickly begin to focus on the budget as the central issue facing the organization. Although the budget problem was quite real, it more deeply reflected the organization's unwillingness or inability to resolve fundamental questions and disputes about its identity, purpose, and priorities. There were two major factions in the company, each believing that it represented both the core values and the potential for future success. One faction wanted the company to deepen its commitment to its main product line. The product dominated the market and was responsible for the company's early success. The other faction wanted to diversify and build on the early success by introducing new products by existing satisfied customers. Rather than resolve the deep, fundamental issues, however, the company tried to do everything without exciting anyone, and growth began to flatten out.

The more passion Petrey put into dealing with the budget as a technical issue, the more apparent it should have become that the underlying problems were somewhere else.

But we suggest it is just as likely, if not more likely, that the conduct you observe is a response to pressures the authority figure is feeling from key constituents.

People in authority want to think of themselves as supporters of innovation, as modern managers who, "empower" their subordinates, rather than as political creatures limited by the resistance of factions wedded to the old order. So they often continue to pay lip service to those in the trenches who are tackling tough issues, long after they have began to respond to the pressures on them to curb the action.

Watch them closely and interpret their behavior as a reflection of what is going on in the system. You might retreat, engage, or try to outflank the opposition. In any case, a cooling attitude from your authority figure indicates the resistance of the larger organization to your initiative, and therefore provides an essential clue for leading and staying alive.

To be effective, you must respond to what is happening. You take action, step back and assess the results of the action, reassess the plan, then go to the dance floor and make the next move. You have to maintain a diagnostic mindset on a changing reality. A plan is no more than today's best guess. Tomorrow you discover the unanticipated effects of today's actions and adjust to those unexpected events.

Think Politically

One of the distinguishing qualities of successful people who lead in any field is the emphasis they place on personal relationships.

Find Partners

As obvious as it was to Jack and to Douglas Ivester that it would be impossible to do it alone, there were real and formidable incentives inside and around each of them pushing them to be our there by themselves. It's not a good idea. Partners provide protection, and they create alliances for you with factions other than your own.

Partnering on an issue means giving up some autonomy, causing both you and your potential partners some degree or reluctance about getting together. Moreover, developing trust takes the time and the perseverance to move productively through conflicts. But without working together, your efforts incur greater risk.

But even people with great authority and a powerful vision need partners when they are trying to bring about deep change in a community. Partners who are members of the faction for whom the change is most difficult can make a huge difference. These intelligence and enabled each of them to monitor what was happening in pockets of resistance, but they were much more effective advocates and useful lightning rods within their own camps.

Keep the Opposition Close

React in a way that is human and understandable. Enough power and support to push his way through and he shuddered at the prospect of subjecting himself to difficult, contentious, time-consuming meetings with people who did not share his vision. He enjoyed in his words "a false sense of invulnerability."

To survive and succeed in exercising leadership you must work as closely with your opponents as you do with your supporters. Most of us cringe at spending time with and especially taking abuse from people who do not share our vision or passion. Too often we take the easy road, ignoring our opponents and concentrating on building an affirmative coalition. Rather than simply recognize your own anxiety and plow ahead, as Pete did, you need to read this anxiety both as vulnerability on your part and as a signal about the threat you represent to the opposing factions.

People who oppose what you are trying to accomplish are usually those with the most to lose by your success. In contrast, your allies have the least to lose. For

opponents to turn around will cost them dearly in terms of disloyalty to their own roots and constituency; for your allies to come along may cost nothing. For that reason your opponents deserve more of your attention, as a matter of compassion, as well as a tactic of strategy and survival.

Keeping your opposition close connects you with your diagnostic job, too. If it is crucial to know where people are at, then the people most critical to understand are those likely to be most upset by our agenda.

While relationships with allies and opponents are essential, it's also true that the people who determine your success are often those in the middle, who resist your initiative merely because it will disrupt their lives and make their futures uncertain. Beyond the security of familiarity they have little substantive stake in the status quo—but don't underestimate the power of doing what's familiar.

Accept Responsibility for Your Piece of the Mess

In short you need to identify and accept responsibility for your contributions to the current situation, even as you try to move your people to a different, better place. But if you are with them, facing the problem together and each accepting some share of responsibility for it, then you are not as vulnerable to attack.

Acknowledge Their Loss

Remember that when you ask people to do adaptive work, you are asking a lot. You may be asking them to choose between two values, both of which are important to the way they understand themselves. You may be asking people to close the distance between their espoused values and their actual behavior.

Of course, this takes time. Confronting the gaps between our values and behavior—the internal contradictions in our lives and communities—requires going through a period of loss. Adaptive work often demands some disloyalty to our roots. To them, the change does not seem like much of a sacrifice, so they have difficulty imagining that it seems that way to others. Exercising leadership involves helping organizations and communities figure out what, and whom, they are willing to let go. Of all the values honored by the community, which of them can be sacrificed in the interest of progress?

People are willing to make sacrifices if they see the reason why. You also need to name and acknowledge the loss itself. People need to know that you know what you are asking them to give up on the way to creating a better future. Make explicit your realization that the change you are asking them to make is difficult, and that what you are asking them to give up has real value.

Model the Behavior

He had to let them know that he appreciated the risk he was asking them to take, even if he believed their concerns were unwarranted. He had to acknowledge to loss he was asking them to accept, in this case the loss of a sense of personal safety. Because their fears were so deep, verbal acknowledgement would not suffice. He had to model the behavior.

Accept Casualties

An adaptive change that is beneficial to the organization as a whole may clearly and tangibly hurt some of those who had benefited from the world being left behind. You have to choose between keeping them and making progress. Accepting casualties signals your commitment.

People seeking to exercise leadership can be thwarted because in their unwillingness to take casualties, they give people mixed signals. The lone warrior myth of leadership is a sure route to heroic suicide. You need partners.

Orchestrate the Conflict

We all learn—and are sometimes transformed—by encountering differences that challenge our own experience and assumptions.

Create a Holding Environment

Orchestrating the conflict 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.

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 ingenuity, but also because they strain relationships.

Managing conflict (and your own safety) requires you to monitor your group's tolerance for taking heat.

If partners wanted to resist firm-wide change, they did not kill the issue directly but silently, through inaction. They even coned the phrase "Say yes, do no" to describe this behavior.

Attitudes and behaviors changed—curiosity became valued more than obedience. People no longer deferred to the senior authority figure in the room—genuine dialogue neutralized hierarchical power in the battle over ideas.

The emphasis on each individual representing his or her pet solution gave way to understanding other perspectives. A confidence emerged in the ability of people in different units to work together and reach solutions.

None of this would have happened without a strong vessel of the right design, allowing those leading the effort to keep everyone at just the right temperature, influencing each other in the progress toward a more creative organization.

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.

There are really two tasks here. The first is to raise the heat enough that people sit up, pay attention, and deal with the real threats and challenges facing them. The second is to lower the temperature when necessary to reduce a counterproductive level of tension. 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 inaction. We call this span the productive range of distress.

You can constructively raise the temperature and the tension in two ways. First, bring attention to the hard issues, and keep it focused there. Second, let people feel the weight of responsibility for tackling those issues. Conflicts will surface with the relevant group as contrary points of view are heard.

To reduce heat you can start on the technical problems, deferring adaptive challenges until people are "warmed up." A little progress on a partial, relatively easy problem may reduce anxiety enough that the tougher issues can then be tackled.

How To Control The Heat

Raise the temperature

1. Draw attention to the tough questions.
2. Give people more responsibility than they are comfortable with.
3. Bring conflict to the surface
4. Protect gadflies and oddballs

Lower the temperature

1. Address the technical aspect of the problem
2. Establish a structure for the problem-solving process by breaking the problem into parts and creating time frames, decision rules, and clear role assignments.
3. Temporarily reclaim responsibility for the tough issues.
4. Employ work avoidance mechanisms.

5. Slow down the process of challenging norms and expectations.

To exercise leadership, you may have to challenge the assumptions that the needed change is not worth the upset it will cause. You'll need to tell people what they do not want to hear.

Of course, there's a significant change that when you generate the heat, and take it in return, you may simply end up in hot water with no forward progress to show for your effort. But if you don't put yourself on the line and take the step of generating that constructive friction, you'll deprive yourself and others of the possibility of progress.

Pace the Work

People can stand only so much change at any one time. You risk revolt, and your own survival, by trying to do too much, too soon.

Do not fail to appreciate that no matter how much enthusiasm the public felt for the contract as an idea, in reality people needed more time to get their heads around so many deep and important changes. How much radical change could people absorb at once? Parceling out the change, spreading the agenda over a longer period of time, would have enabled people to assess the value of the new versus the loss of the familiar, through every step of the process.

Change involves loss, and people can sustain only 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 patience.

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 of information 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.

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. And if someone else has been there before them and achieved the vision, it increases their confidence not only that the future is possible, but also that you are the person to get them there.

Give the Work Back

Until you find yourself facing adaptive pressures, for which you cannot deliver solutions. At these times, all of your habits, pride, and sense of competence get thrown out of kilter because the situation calls for mobilizing the work of others rather than knowing the way yourself. By trying to solve adaptive challenges for people, at best you will reconfigure it as a technical problem and create some short-term relief. But the issue will not have gone away. It will surface again.

Take the Work off Your Shoulders

"Personality conflicts" turned out frequently to mask a fundamental conflict in the division of responsibilities, the primacy of cultural values, or even in the vision for the agency.

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 or authority, and no learning takes place. And because the person with authority has taken sides, that authority may later be in jeopardy if the "winning" position on the issue no longer receives adequate support in the organization.

We know from our own mistakes how difficult it is to externalize the issue, to resist the temptation to take it on ourselves. People expect you to get right in there and fix things, to take a stand and resolve the problem. After all, that is what people in authority are paid to do. When you fulfill their expectations, they will call you admirable and courageous, and this is flattering. But challenging their expectations of you requires even more courage.

Place the Work Where It Belongs

Solutions are achieved when "the people with the problem" go through a process together to become "the people with the solution." The issues have to be internalized, owned, and ultimately resolved by the relevant parties to achieve enduring progress.

It's a common ploy to personalize the debate over issues as a strategy for taking you out of action. By resisting attempts to personalize the issues, perhaps by fighting the urge to explain yourself, you can improve the odds of your survival. You prevent people

from turning you into the issue, and you help keep the responsibility for the work where it ought to be.

Make Your Interventions Short & Simple

Generally short and straightforward interventions are more likely to be heard and to be accepted without causing dangerous resistance. Four types of interventions constitute the tactics of leadership; making observations, asking questions, offering interpretations, and taking actions.

Observations

Observations are simply statements that reflect back to people their behavior or attempt to describe current conditions. They shift the group momentarily onto the balcony so that they can get a little distance from and perspective on what they are doing.

Questions

A question such as "What's going on here?" or "Was there something in what Bob said that was disturbing?' may have the effect of giving the work back to the group.

Interpretations

Follow an observation with an interpretation. Interpretations are inherently provocative and raise the heat. People by and large do not like to have their statements or actions interpreted (unless they like your assessment).

Actions

Actions communicate. Actions as interventions can complicate situations because they frequently are susceptible to more than one interpretation. Actions draw attention, but the message and the context must be crystal clear. If not, they are likely to distract people and displace responsibility.

You stay alive in the practice of leadership by reducing the extent to which you become the target of people's frustrations. The best way to stay out of range is to think constantly about giving the work back to the people who need to take responsibility. Place the work within and between the factions who are faced with the challenge, and tailor your interventions so they are unambiguous and have a context. In the ongoing improvisation of leadership—in which you act, assess, take corrective action, reassess, and intervene again—you can never know with certainty how an intervention is received unless you listen over time. Therefore, just as critical as the quality of your actions will be your ability to hold steady in the aftermath in order to evaluate how to move next.

Hold Steady

Holding steady in the heat of action is an essential skill for staying alive and keeping people focused on the work.

Take the Heat

Learning to take the heat and receive people's anger in a way that when you ask people to make changes and even sacrifices, it's almost inevitable that you will frustrate some of your closest colleagues and supporters, not to mention those outside our faction. Your allies want you to calm things down, at least for them, rather than stir things up.

In this sense, exercising leadership might be understood as disappointing people at a rate they can absorb. Thus, the more heat you can take, the better off you will be in keeping your issue alive and keeping yourself in the game. Again and again, you must train yourself to be deliberate and keep your cool when the world around you is boiling. Silence is a form of action.

By holding steady, however, she retained access to everyone and eventually found a way to get the two sides to face each other and to accept the legitimacy of each other's concern. The people you challenge will test your steadiness and judge your worthiness by your response to their anger, not unlike receiving people's anger without becoming personally defensive generate trust.

If you can hold steady long enough, remaining respectful of their pains and defending your perspective without feeling you must defend yourself, you may find that in the ensuing calm, relationships become stronger.

It demands that we remain true to a purpose beyond ourselves and stand by people compassionately, even when they unleash demons.

Let the Issues Ripen

You need to wait until the issue is ripe, or ripen it yourself. An issue becomes ripe when there is widespread urgency to deal with it. What determines when, or whether, an issue becomes ripe? Four key questions; What other concerns occupy the people who need to be engaged? How deeply are people affected by the problem? How much do people need to learn? What are the senior authority figures saying about the issue?

First, what else is on people's minds? If most of the people in your organization are handling a crisis, you may have greater difficulty getting them to shift their attention to the issue you think is most important. Sometimes you can get a better hearing by postponing your issue to a later time.

However, if you notice that there is never a time for our issue, you may have to create the opportunity by developing a strategy for generating urgency.

Second how deeply are people affected by the problem? If people do not feel the pinch of reality, they are unlikely to feel the need to change.

Third, how much must people learn in order to make judgments? The lack of knowledge on an issue is almost always in direct proportion to its lack of ripeness.

If you do not take into consideration how difficult the learning will be, the organizations or community will box you off as an outcast, impractical visionary, or worse. You may have to take baby steps.

Fourth what are the people in authority saying and doing? Although the rhetoric and even the commitment of authorities often are not enough by themselves to ripen an issue they always figure significantly. Formal authority confers license and leverage to direct people's attention.

Focus Attention on the Issue

Ways of avoiding painful issues—work avoidance mechanisms—have developed over many years. The most obvious example of work avoidance is denial. Scapegoating, reorganizing (yet again), passing the buck (setting up another committee), finding an external enemy, blaming authority and character assassination. In an important sense, this book is about being sensitive to and counteracting, work avoidance mechanisms that might be dangerous to you or your position. So even with authority, you need to find creative ways to signal that the new situation is different.

Getting a group to focus on a tough issue from a position without authority is always risky business. But you can lower the danger by speaking in as neutral a way as possible, simply reporting observable and shared data rather than making more provocative interpretations. It may be more than enough simply to ask a straightforward question in order to bring the underlying issue to the surface.

Undoubtedly, you have experienced and observed the pressure on you to back off when you point to difficult, conflict, value-laden issues in an organization or community. Although hard to do, holding steady allows you to accomplish several things at once. By taking the heat, you can maintain a productive level of disequilibrium or creative tension, as people hear the weight of responsibility for working their conflicts. By holding steady, you also give yourself time to let issues ripen, or conversely to construct a strategy to ripen an issue for which there is not yet any generalized urgency. Moreover, you give yourself time to find out where people are at so that you can refocus attention on the key issues.

Part Three
Body and Soul

Mange Your Hungers

The cleanest way for an organization to bring you down is to let you bring yourself down. We can work ourselves into believing we are somehow different, and therefore not subject to the normal human frailties that can defeat more ordinary mortals on ordinary missions. We begin to act as if we were physically and emotionally indestructible.

We are, all of us, vulnerable to falling prey to our own hungers. Self-knowledge and self-discipline form the foundation for staying alive.

In leading people, you will tune into their needs as well as your own. In connecting with their hopes and frustrations, it is easy to become the storehouse of their yearnings. However, the desire to fulfill the needs of others can become a vulnerability if it feeds into your own normal hungers for power, importance, and intimacy. Thus, too frequently, people end up bringing themselves down. They get so caught up in the action and energy that they lose their wisdom and self-discipline, and slip out of control.

But connecting to those emotions is different from giving in to them. Yielding to them destroys your capacity to lead. Power can become an end in itself, displacing your attention to organizational proposes.

Power and Control

The person who has a disproportionate need for control, who is too hungry for power, is susceptible to losing sight of the work. Containing conflict and imposing order may create some of the conditions for progress, but they are not progress itself.

Containing conflict and imposing order may create some of the conditions for progress, but they are not progress itself. If you find yourself heroically stepping into the breach to restore order, it is important to remember that the authority you gain is a product of social expectations. To believe it comes from you is an illusion. Don't let it get to your head.

Affirmation and Importance

There are many good reasons to keep the opposition close. You need to comprehend them, learn from them, challenge them productively, and certainly, be alert to attack. But it is just as important to keep a critical check on the positive feedback you receive. We all need affirmation, but accepting accolades in an undisciplined way can lead to grandiosity, an inflated view of yourself and your cause.

As quickly as possible, people need to know the truth so that they can wrestle with the issues and the changes they may need to make. Indeed, a hunger for importance can make you discount obvious warnings that you are in danger. Managing one's grandiosity means giving up the idea of being the heroic lone warrior who saves the day. People may beg you to play that role; don't let them seduce you.

Indeed, it's in the nature of adaptive work to be on the frontier of new and complex realities. If all were within your competence, life would be a string of mere technical challenges. But boldness is not the same as bravado.

You can move courageously into new terrain even if you're not convinced that you know what you're doing. Acknowledging the limits of your competence is a way to stay open to learning as you blaze a trail.

The "Zone of Insatiability," that place in him where no matter how much he does and how good it is, it's never enough. To someone with an exaggerated need to be needed, it was just awful for him to answer the question, "What's precious and what's expendable?"

Intimacy and Delight

But who's holding you; who's holding the holder? When you are completely exhausted from being the containing vessel, who will provide you with a place to meet your need for intimacy and release?

For now, the point is simply to understand more compassionately our hungers and vulnerabilities. But giving in to the hunger is as sure an indication as any that you are out of control, taking advantage of people, and abusing your position.

What Can You Do about It?

How do you learn to manage such visceral hungers? First, know yourself, tell yourself the truth about what you need, and then appropriately honor those human needs. Every human being needs power and control, affirmation and importance, intimacy and delight. You cannot lead and stay alive by simply putting a silencer on yourself.

Two ideas:
Transitional Rituals
Rekindle the Sparks

All of us have the human need to be touched physically, as well as in our soul and heart.

Anchor Yourself

We have found it profoundly important to distinguish between the self, which we can anchor, and our roles, which we cannot.

Distinguish Role from Self

It is easy to confuse your self with the roles you take on in your organization and community. The world colludes in the confusion by reinforcing your professional persona. Colleagues, subordinates and bosses treat you as if the role you play is the essence of you, the real you. Confusing the role with self is a trap.

Thus, you have control over whether your self-worth is at stake. If you take what is said personally, your self-esteem becomes an issue.

Anchoring yourself may enable you to sustain the furious opposition even of your own friends and former collaborators, who may remake your role overnight from a darling to an outcast. But if you can anchor yourself, you may find the stamina to remain gentle, focused, and persistent.

You are to be authentic and effective you must play your role in accordance with what you believe so that your passions infuse your work. You cannot expect people to seriously consider your idea without accepting the possibility that they will challenge it. Accepting that process of engagement as the terrain of leadership liberates you personally.

We all find it exceedingly difficult in the midst of a personal attack to get to the balcony, maintain an interpretive stance, and identify the way our messages generate distress in other people. But being criticized by people you care about is almost always a part of exercising leadership.

When you take "personal" attacks personally, you unwittingly conspire in one of the common ways you can be taken out of action—you make yourself the issue.

As we've asked before, does anyone ever critique your personality or style when you hand out big checks or deliver good news? We don't think so. People attack your style when they don't like the message.

It's the easy way out to attack the person rather than the message itself. Your management of an attack, more than the substance of the accusation, determines your fate.

There is also a long-term value to distinguishing role from self. Roles end. If you are too caught up in your role, if you come to believe that you and your role are identical, what will happen to you when your role ends?

We use the word distinguish because we want you to differentiate self from role, not distance or withhold yourself. Indeed, we hope you can find ways to put all of your heart and soul into many of the roles you take in relationship to the people and institutions in your lives.

Remember, when you lead, people don't love you or hate you. Mostly they don't even know you. They love or hate the positions you represent.

Keep Confidants, and Don't Confuse Them with Allies

Allies are people who share many of your values, or at least your strategy, and operate across some organizational or factional boundary. Because they cross a boundary, they cannot always be loyal to you; they have other ties to honor. In fact, a key aspect of what makes allies extremely helpful is precisely that they do have other loyalties.

Sometimes however, we make the mistake of treating an ally like a confidant. Confidants have few, if any, conflicting loyalties. The usually operate outside your organization's boundary, although occasionally someone very close in, whose interests are perfectly aligned with yours, can also play that role. You really need both allies and confidents.

Confidents can do something that allies can't do. They can provide you with a place where you can say everything that's in your heart, everything that is on your mind without being predigested or well packaged. The emotions and the words can come out topsy-turvy, without order. Then once the whole mess is on the table, you can begin to pull the pieces back in and separate what is worthwhile from what is simply ventilation.

Confidants must be people who will tell you what you do not want to hear and cannot hear from anyone else, people in whom you can confide without having your revelations spill back into the work arena. You can reveal your emotions to them without worrying that it will affect your reputation or undermine your work. You do not have to manage information. You can speak spontaneously.

Almost every person we know with difficult experience of leadership has relied on a confidant to help them get through.

When building loneliness, insecurity, stress or other pressures, the need to open up to someone can be almost overwhelming, In this frame of mind, it's very easy to mistake allies for confidants.

In our experience, when you try to turn allies into confidants, you put them in a bind, place a valuable relationship at risk, and usually end up losing on both counts. They fail you as a confidant, and they begin to slip away even as reliable allies.

Seek Sanctuary

Like a loyal confidant, having a readily available sanctuary provides an indispensable physical anchor and source of sustenance. You would never attempt a difficult mountain journey without food or water, yet countless people go into the practice of leadership without reserving and conserving a place where they can and restore themselves.

It is not a place to hide, but a haven where you can cool down, capture lessons from the painful moments, and put yourself back together.

Too often, under stress and pressed for time, our sources of sanctuary are the first places we give up. We consider them a luxury. Just when you need it most, you cut out going to the gym or taking our daily walk through the neighborhood, just to grab a few more minutes at the office. What matters is that it fits you as a structure that promotes reflection and that you protect it daily. Once a week is not enough.

But we have not yet explored the root question: Why lead? But we believe, plain and simple, that the only way you can answer these questions is by discovering what gives meaning in your life. People find meaning by connecting with others in a way that makes life better.

Soldiers crawl forth from the trenches into battle because they care about their buddies in the platoon. If they don't go, they will put their pals in jeopardy. Loyalty and feelings for their fellows impel them forward.

In the words of Phil Jackson, "The most effective way to forge a winning team is to call on the players' need to connect with something larger than themselves."

So the answer to the question, "Why lead?" is both simple and profound.

The word we use for that kind of connection is love. To some, talking about love in this contest may seem soft and unprofessional, but the fact that love lies at the core of what makes life worth living is undeniable.

Love gives meaning to what you do. We take risks for good reason: We hope to make a difference in people's lives. Every day, opportunities for leadership present themselves to us, and we refuse most of them. Why?

Two final reasons for hesitation appear again and again.

People get stuck in the myth of measurement

People forget that the form of the contribution does not matter.

The Myth of Measurement

Meaning cannot be measured. We even witness religious organizations distorting their mission to mean "reaching more people."

Of course, measurement is a profoundly useful device, but it cannot tell us what makes life worth living knowing all the while that we cannot measure that, which is of essential value.

Do many believe that when it is their turn to pass on the Angels of Judgment will ask them, "Why did you teach 5 children to read, and not 16? Why did you create 803 jobs, and not 23, 421? Why did you save 433 lives, and not 718?"

We have rarely met a human being who, after years of professional life, has not bought into the myth of measurement and been debilitated by it. After all, there is powerful pressure in our culture to measure the fruits of our labors, and we feel enormous pride as we take on "greater" responsibility and gain "greater" authority, wealth, and prestige. And well we should, to a degree. You cannot measure the good that you do.

The Form Doesn't Matter

Just as measurement will distract you from truer appreciations of life, the form of your contribution is far less important than the content.

People experience disorientation at those times because they've mistaken form for essence. They've come to believe that the form of the work is what is important. Then part of the magic of life in our organizations and communities lies in the human capacity to generate many forms for its expression. Meaning derives from finding ways, rather than any one particular way, to love, to contribute to the worldly enterprise, to enhance the quality of life for people around you.

Fundamentally, the form doesn't matter. Any form of service to others is an expression, essentially, of love.

Sacred Heart

We have seen good people take on a cloak of self-protection to insulate themselves from the dangers of stepping out.

But when you cover yourself up, you risk losing something as well. In the struggle to save yourself, you can give up too many of those qualities that are the essence of being alive, like innocence, curiosity and compassion.

No one looks in a mirror and sees a cynical, arrogant, and callous self-image. We dress up these defenses; give them principled and virtuous names. Cynicism is called

realism, arrogance masquerades as authoritative knowledge, and callousness becomes the thick skin of wisdom and experience.

The hard truth is that it is not possible to experience the rewards and joy of leadership without experiencing the pain as well.

A Reflection on Sacred Heart

The virtue of a sacred heart lies in the courage to maintain your innocence and wonder, your doubt and curiosity, and your compassion and love even through your darkest, most difficult moments.

A sacred heart allows you to feel, hear, and diagnose, even in the midst of your mission, so that you can accurately gauge different situations and respond appropriately.

Sacred heart was explained as a reflection of God's promise, not to keep you out of the fire and the water, but to be with you in the fire and the water.

A sacred heart means you may feel tortured and betrayed, powerless and hopeless, and yet stay open.

Innocence, Curiosity, and Compassion: Virtues of an Open Heart

Innocence:
We use the term in the sense of childlike innocence, naiveté'—the capacity to entertain silly ideas, think unusual and perhaps ingenious thoughts, be playful in your life and work, even to be strange to your organization or community.

Curiosity:
In the short run, your people may trust you less when you share your doubts, as they worry about your competence; but in the long run, they may trust you more for telling the truth.

To succeed in leading adaptive change, you will need to nurture the capacity to listen with open ears, and to embrace new and disturbing ideas. This will be hard because, the pressures on you will be to know the answers. And in your inspired moments, you will.

The practice of leadership requires the capacity to keep asking basic questions of yourself and of the people in your organization and community. The assumptions that hold you constrain you from seeing any other point of view. But we have a special an righteous name for them: We call them truths. Truths are assumptions for which doubt is an unwelcome intruder. And truths are held in place by a lack of heart to refashion loyalties.

Compassion

If God is moved, shouldn't we allow ourselves to be moved, too, by the triumphs, the failings, and the struggle? At root, compassion means, to be together with someone's pain. Compassion enables you to pay attention to other people's pain and loss even when it seems that you have no resources left.