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

An Executive Book Summary by Debora Senger

“Chock-full of political wisdom as well as wisdom for the soul. Anyone with passion to make a difference in public life ought to read this book before taking another step.”

Doris Kearns Goodwin, historian and author of No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt – The Home Front in World War II

INTRODUCTION

Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading is about recognizing and taking opportunities to lead, and surviving.

Authors Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky ask three critical questions:

1 - Why and how is leadership dangerous?

2 - How can you respond to these dangers?

3 - How can you keep you spirit alive when the going gets tough?

Every day presents us with opportunities to lead. At work, at home, and in our communities. But, more often than not, we hold back. We wait for others to take the lead, for good reason.

Real leadership is dangerous, as it requires guiding people through difficult transitions, thereby challenging their daily habits, loyalties, beliefs and ways of thinking. All that is offered in return is the possibility of change. In response to the uncertainty and pain, people blame those pushing for change.

The authors offer nearly 40 years of combined consulting and teaching experience as evidence that putting ourselves on the line can yield positive results. They share compelling examples to illustrate effective strategies for “surviving and thriving” amidst the perils of leading. Examples include presidents of countries, presidents of organization, politicians, high ranking officials, managers and parents.

“Real leadership is dangerous, as it requires guiding people through difficult transitions, thereby challenging their daily habits, loyalties, beliefs and ways of thinking.”
PART I - THE CHALLENGE

Leadership is Dangerous

In part one, the authors discuss the dangers of leadership and how people get forced out of the game.

If leadership was simply about providing people with good news, it would be easy. But, the reality is that people do not resist change, rather they resist loss or pain.

Leaders put themselves on the line when they question peoples values, ideas, beliefs, cultural norms, and lifelong habits. Those in authority positions are then endangered when they confront other with loss.

The hope of leadership is found in the capacity to effectively deliver controversial news and raise difficult questions.

The Perils of Adaptive Change

Leadership would be straight forward if organizations only had to manage problems for which they already had the solutions, most often found in standard operating manuals and authoritative expertise.

The authors refer to these as “technical problems.” This book however, sets out to provide strategies for dealing with a host of problems that cannot be solved in this manner. The authors refer to these as “adaptive problems,” that is, issues that require new experiments, new methods of undertaking, and adjustments from a variety of departments in the workplace.
(continued)

The most common type of leadership failure occurs when those in authority treat adaptive problems like technical problems.

**Technical versus Adaptive Challenges**

Distinguishing Technical from Adaptive Challenges

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<th>What’s the Work?</th>
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<td>Technical</td>
<td>Apply current know-how Authorities</td>
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<td>Adaptive</td>
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Mobilizing adaptive work requires an adjustment of unrealistic expectations and exaggerated dependency.

Focus on technical aspects of an issue results in short-term rewards. The test of effective leadership is “the capacity to stomach hostility” so that those in authority positions can stay connected to people to deal with the adaptive elements.

Going Beyond your Authority

Acting outside the confines of your job description to move your organization forward “lies close to the heart of leadership, and to its danger.”

The toughest issue organizations and communities grapple with to this end, is that rules, organizational norms and standard operating practices, and economic incentives discourage difficult questions and difficult choices from being raised.

At the Heart of Danger is Loss

Persuading people to give up what they know for something they’ve never experienced requires a leap of faith. Habits, values, beliefs and attitudes are hard to give up, as they provide stability.
2 - Diversion

By overwhelming your agenda, organizations seek to push you aside under the guise of a “seemingly logical reason for disrupting your game plan.” Promotion or delegation of new responsibilities may be used as a way to side track your agenda.

Leaders get diverted by succumbing to other peoples demands and/or programmatic details. For example, leaders get “...seduced to do the right thing” in order to feel significant in their roles. However, being the carriers of unpopular causes, may result in their own demise.

Leaders also get diverted by being overwhelmed with details and demands, referred to as an “Unconscious Conspiracy to throw you off your game plan” by Warren Bennis.

3 - Attack

Regardless of the form of the attack, if attackers are successful in steering the subject of the conversation from the issue, the issue will be submerged. Attacks can take the following forms:

Physical Attack

Whether it takes the form of physical contact between police and protestors, an assassination, or another form of confrontation, it diverts attention and silences the realities of the issue.

Personal Attack

Making an issue personal in a public arena, can result in a diminished capacity for the real issue to be brought to light. The attacks may go after your character, competence, or they may distort your viewpoints, such as finger pointing in politics.

4 - Seduction

The authors use the word seduction as a way of “naming the process” that compromises your sense of purpose, and therefore takes you “out of the action” by an initiative likely to move forward because it has special appeal to you. Seduction can take many forms including:

- An inner desire for approval from your own supporters
- Loyalty to your own people, which also presents risk
- “The Constituency Problem”

Regardless of the manner in which organizations set out to restore the equilibrium when the balance is upset, the goal is the same - to shut down those exercising leadership to preserve the familiar.
The hard reality is that adaptive work requires transition, adjustment, and at times loss for people. Hence, it produces resistance. Being aware that opposition is inevitable will assist those responsible for managing it when it occurs.

“Often, the toughest part of your job is managing their disappointed expectations.”

PART II - THE RESPONSE

Get on the Balcony

Maintaining the capacity for reflection has been expressed in the following ways:

- “Fog of war” – *By military officers*
- “Being both in and out of the game” – *By great athletes*
- “Contemplation in Action” – *By Jesuits*
- “Karma yoga” or mindfulness – *By Hindus and Buddhists*

The authors refer to it as “getting off the dance floor and going to the balcony,” as it is the only way you can gain a clearer view of reality and perspective on the bigger picture.

The risk in not doing so would likely result in misperceptions, the wrong diagnosis and misguided decisions on actions to resolve the situation.

Four Questions to help you get on the balcony:

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.

Distinguish Technical from Adaptive Challenges

How do you know whether the challenge is technical, adaptive or both?

When peoples hearts and minds must be changed, not just their preferences or behaviors, it’s an adaptive and technical issue.

By a process of exclusion – If you try to resolve a problem with all the technical fixes available and it does not go away, an adaptive challenge underlies the problem.

Persistence of conflict is a sign that people have not yet adjusted or accept losses, and thus signifies an adaptive challenge.

Crisis is a strong indicator of adaptive issues. Sudden crisis includes both technical and adaptive components.

Find out where people are at

Don’t assume you know or move forward from where you’re at, or you may be dismissed as insensitive, irrelevant, or presumptuous.

Listen to the song beneath the words

Beware of making immediate interpretations and voicing them aloud.
Read the authority figures for clues
Focus and interpret the words and behaviors of authority figures, as they will reflect the impact of your actions on the organization.

Think Politically
There are six essential aspects to political thinking required for successful leadership: one for managing opposing factions; one for working with those who are on side with the issue; and, four for dealing with those who are uncommitted.

Finding partners
Partners provide protection, by creating alliances for you with factions outside of your own. They strengthen your leadership and Initiatives, and build political power.

Before setting your next meeting, make advance phone calls, test out approaches, and identify supporters. This will allow you to minimize internal conflict and isolation, while allowing you to present a united front at the real meeting.

Keep the opposition close
Your opposition are most often those who have the most to lose. Opponents are not easily swayed to come on side, as to do so would result in perceived “disloyalty” by their own constituents. Those in the middle, often determine your success.

Accept responsibility for your piece of the mess.

Finger pointing and denial of your own role in the problem will turn into a them versus you dynamic. The easiest option for them is to get rid of you.

Accepting your role will allow those you manage to see you are on their side, taking responsibility, facing difficult choices and uncertainties.

Acknowledge their loss.

Remember that you may be asking for a choice to be made between two values. Help organizations to decide what, and whom, they can let go of for progress to be realized.
Model the behavior

People need to have the risks they are being asked to take and the losses they are being asked to occur acknowledged.

Personal economic and/or physical sacrifices and symbolic sacrifices may be required by leaders in some cases.

Accept Casualties

Those who cannot adapt will be left behind.

“The lone warrior myth of leadership is a sure route to heroic suicide.”

Orchestrate the Conflict

Work with passions, differences and conflicts to minimize harm and harness opportunity.

To do so, create a holding environment. This is a space where people can tackle tough, controversial issues without lashing out at one another. It may require taking employees off-site or hiring a facilitator, and/or rules and processes that allow minority groups to be heard.

Control the temperature. This requires two tasks: raising the heat enough to attract attention to the threats and challenges; and, lowering the temperature as required to reduce counterproductive tension levels

Pace the Work

Challenges of pacing the work include being pushed forward to quickly by your enthusiasts and ethical complications which may include withholding of information, and at times, outward deception.

When setting agendas, it may be wise to postpone the most threatening or controversial issues, either by not including them in the agenda or by excluding advocates from early meetings.

Show them the Future

To sustain momentum during periods of challenge and uncertainty, it is critical to remind people of the vision behind the angst. By doing this, you embody hope rather than uncertainty or fear.

Martin Luther Kin, Jr. did exactly this in his famous 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech, wherein he pointed to a future where “little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers.” P. 121

If people can envision even a glimpse of the future, they will be more willing to make the changes required.

Give the Work Back

Take the work off your shoulders and place it where it belongs.

Put it back with the issue, allowing those going through the challenge to solve it. To achieve lasting progress and allow learnings to take place, it is necessary for relevant parties to internalize, own and resolve issues.

Keep your Interventions Short and Simple

Four types of interventions can be used. These are:

1. Making observations – statements that reflect people’s behavior back to them, or describe a condition.

2. Asking questions – after making an observation, you can either leave it, or follow with a question.

3. Offering interpretation – a bolder approach to the question, is to offer an interpretation, which in turn raises the heat.

4. Taking action – sends a message, but needs to be clear
Hold Steady

Holding steady and receiving people’s anger without becoming defensive generates trust. In addition, remaining respectful and ensuring you defend your perspective rather than yourself, generates trust.

Let the Issues Ripen

Four questions should be asked to determine when or whether an issue will become ripe. These are:

1. What other concerns occupy those who need to be engaged?
2. How deeply affected are those inflicted with the problem?
3. How much learning is required?
4. What are authority figures saying about the problem?

Focus Attention on the Issue

Focusing attention on the issue requires identifying work avoidance mechanisms such as denial.

Other work avoidance tactics include: scapegoating, reorganizing, blaming, character assassination and passing off responsibility. Effective leadership requires holding steady, counteracting these tactics and redirecting attention to the problem. When doing so, simply reporting observed data, rather than making interpretations will reduce risk.

PART III - BODY AND SOUL

Manage Your Hunger

Every one needs some level of power and control, affirmation and recognition, intimacy and satisfaction. Managing these hungers is an individual responsibility.

In addition, those in authority must ensure they do not carry issues or agendas belonging to others.

Power and Control

Those who harbor a disproportionate need for control, risk losing sight of the issues.
Affirmation and Importance

It is critical to keep a check on the positive feedback you receive, while keeping the opposition close.

Intimacy and Delight

Human beings require intimacy and delight. But, temptations that test discipline must be managed. The inner discipline required is the “responsibility of leadership and authority” (P. 181.)

Anchor Yourself

It is imperative to distinguish your role from yourself in order to have control over your own self-worth. Recognizing that “you are a jerk” is not necessarily a personal attack in a work context.

Finding the strength from within to maintain “gentle, focused and persistent” takes decades. But, it is the key to sustaining leadership. You must accept that your ideas will be challenged and respond with grace. Doing so will liberate you and allow you to push forward without withdrawing or becoming defensive.

In addition, remember that allies are necessary, as they can help you understand competing views or stakes. Don’t confuse them with confidants however, as they may have other connections to honor.

Finally, be sure to have a safe place for reflection readily available. It is different than the balcony, in that you are listening to yourself, rather than gaining a wider perspective on organizational issues.

What’s on the Line

So far, focus has been given to practical solutions to lead and stay alive. The answer to the question “why lead” has not been explored. The authors suggest the answer lies in what gives you meaning in life.

Further, it is noted that civilization is reliant upon forming attachments to one another, and the ensuing loyalties are reliant upon the ability to love, take interest in or care for other people. The meaning in doing so however, cannot be measured. Equally, the form of your contribution holds far less weight than the content.

“Exercising leadership is a way of giving meaning to your life by contributing to the lives of others.”

Sacred Heart

In an effort to protect themselves from the dangers of stepping out, too many people give up “innocence, curiosity and passion.” They replace these qualities of the heart with cynicism, arrogance and callousness. Of course, they don’t regard it as such, rather they give these qualities virtuous names – realism, authoritative knowledge and the thick-skin of experience.

Maintaining qualities of the heart allows those in authority positions to “feel, hear, and diagnose” while pushing forward to accurately gauge situations and respond accordingly.
Leadership on the Line abounds with examples of leadership successes and failures from the public and private sectors and personal relationships. The authors provide an uplifting and practical account of leadership, which can be applied to a wide variety of situations. As such, it would be a useful framework for analyzing organizational behavior.

The inherent weakness with the theory of adaptive leadership however, is that it assumes each issue has its own right answer, which will be discovered by those who apply the framework. The authors take the approach that all problems have an inherent truth. The problem with this assumption is that many issues have no “right” answer. Rather, the solution is directly connected to values and therefore will vary accordingly.

Secondly, some of the examples in the book could be tightened up. The reader loses sight of the learnings, when presented with unnecessary detail.

Finally, the adaptive leadership theory at times takes a self-help approach. However, it would benefit from taking a more rigorous approach given its versatility.