

# LEADERSHIP ON THE LINE BOOK SUMMARY

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?

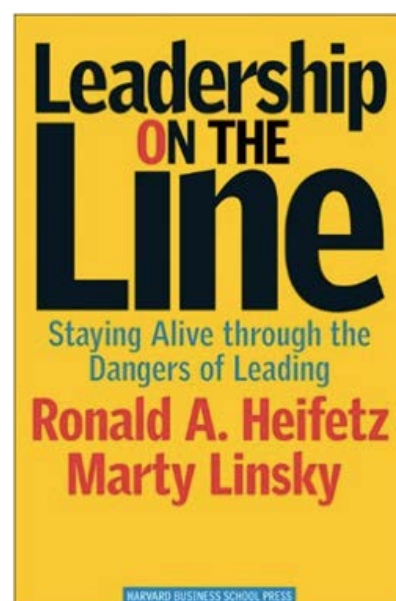
Leadership on the Line is for serious leaders and significant change. It's a rare book with depth on the true challenges of great change, including dealing with "sacred cows."

Leadership on the Line is a significant book that grows your leadership depth well beyond the fluff stuff. Leadership on the Line is truly a book for leaders who want to take their game to the next level. It's hard-core leadership in action – driving the big, hairy changes and challenges. And, it's probably THE best book on how to actually balance connection and conviction, while doing so.

It's also a very different book. It's prose is powerful. **You'll feel it in your bones.** I found it strangely moving as it identified some of the key dilemma's and struggles I have faced as a leader in a respectful and poignant way.

Interestingly, very few people I mention this book to have ever heard of it. It's like the unsung heroes of leadership books.

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 author's 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.



# 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 people's 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.

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

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

# Technical v. Complex Challenges

## TECHNICAL PROBLEMS VS. ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES

*The single biggest failure of leadership is to treat adaptive challenges like technical problems.*

### TECHNICAL PROBLEMS

1. Easy to identify
2. Often lend themselves to quick and easy (cut-and-dried) solutions
3. Often can be solved by an authority or expert
4. Require change in just one or a few places; often contained within organizational boundaries
5. People are generally receptive to technical solutions
6. Solutions can often be implemented quickly—even by edict

### ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES

1. Difficult to identify (easy to deny)
2. Require changes in values, beliefs, roles, relationships, & approaches to work
3. People with the problem do the work of solving it
4. Require change in numerous places; usually cross organizational boundaries
5. People often resist even acknowledging adaptive challenges.
6. "Solutions" require experiments and new discoveries; they can take a long time to implement and cannot be implemented by edict

Source: GroupSmith, adaptive from the Practice of Adaptive Leadership, Heifetz et. al., 2009

## 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.

# THE FOUR BASIC FORMS OF DANGER

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.

## 1. MARGINALIZATION

This may take the following forms: Tokenism - When a person, or small group embody an issue Role of the "special person" - prevents you from playing a meaningful role in other areas of the organization, devalues your input on your "own issue", and allows the organization to not take the issue on. Personalization - embodying an issue is risky, particularly for those in senior authority positions who must represent a variety of constituents and issues.

## 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:

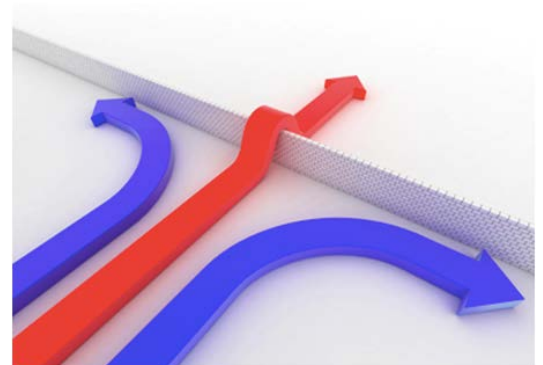
- Physical Attack - Whether it takes the form of physical contact between police and protestors, an assassination, or another form of confrontation, it diverts attention and silences the realities of the issue.
- Personal Attack - Making an issue personal in a public arena, can result in a diminished 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.

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 is referred to by the authors 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. Read the behaviour of authority figures.

4. Think Politically





## 1. DISTINGUISH TECHNICAL FROM ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES

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

When people's hearts and minds must be changed, not just their preferences or behaviours, 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.

*"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.' For Maggie Brooke, it was saving her Native American community by helping her friends and neighbours give up alcohol. For Itzhak Rabin, it was mobilizing the Israeli community to adjust to the reality that they could not have both all the land of their biblical roots and the peaceful existence they so deeply desired. For John Patrick and David Grossman at IBM, it was helping a once-great company — a community in which they worked and for which they cared deeply — adapt to a changing world so that it might thrive anew."*

## 2. 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.

## 3. READ THE AUTHORITY FIGURES FOR CLUES

Focus and interpret the words and behaviours of authority figures, as they will reflect the impact of your actions on the organization.

## 4. 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 uncom-

### 1. 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.

*"The lone warrior myth of leadership is a sure route to heroic suicide."*

## **2. 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.

## **3. 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.

## **4. 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.

## **5. Model the behaviour**

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.

## **6. Accept Casualties**

Those who cannot adapt will be left behind.

# 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:



### Raise the Temperature

- Draw attention to tough questions.
- Give people more responsibility than they are comfortable with.
- Bring conflicts to the surface.
- Protect gadflies and oddballs.

### Lower the Temperature

- Address the technical aspects of the problem.
- Establish a structure for the problem solving process by breaking the problem into parts and creating time frames, decision rules, and clear role assignments.
- Temporarily reclaim responsibility for the tough issues.
- Employ work avoidance mechanisms.
- Slow down the process of challenging norms and expectations.



# HOW TO CONTROL THE TEMPERATURE

## 1. Pace the Work

Challenges of pacing the work include being pushed forward too 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.

## 2. 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 King, 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.

## 3. 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.

*"... when you take on an issue, you become that issue in the eyes of many, and will be held responsible."*

*"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 behaviour." p. 127.*

## 4. Keep your Interventions short and simple

Four types of interventions can be used. These are:

- a. **Making observations** – statements that reflect people's behaviour back to them, or describe a condition.
- b. **Asking questions** – after making an observation, you can either leave it, or follow with a question.
- c. **Offering interpretation** – a bolder approach to the question, is to offer an interpretation, which in turn raises the heat.
- d. **Taking action** – sends a message, but needs to be clear

## 5. 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.

## 6. Let the Issues Ripen

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

- a. What other concerns occupy those who need to be engaged?
- b. How deeply affected are those inflicted with the problem?
- c. How much learning is required?
- d. What are authority figures saying about the problem?

## 7. 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 harbour a disproportionate need for control, risk losing sight of the issues.

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.



## AFFIRMATION AND IMPORTANCE

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

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.

## 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

I remember the main points of this chapter by my shorthand summary: "It's the role, Stupid!" 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, rather than on the person of the leader. 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.*

The authors suggest several anchoring techniques:

### **Keep Confidants, and Don't Confuse Them with Allies**

Allies are in the struggle with the leader. They share values, strategies, but they also cross boundaries as parts of various groups. They are not totally loyal. Confidants, 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, a close friend's kitchen table, or whatever restores and protects the leader. But, it has to be daily. Once a week is not enough.

# 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.”*

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. Hank Greenberg's career as a baseball player can be measured through his statistics, but the meaning may well have been more in the moment when he helped Jackie Robinson up and spoke to him as a player.

By “form”, the authors actually seem to 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.

*“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. Indeed, we all know how quickly idealization turns into contempt when suddenly you disappoint someone ... By knowing and valuing yourself, distinct from the roles you play, you gain the freedom to take risks within those roles. Your self-worth is not so tightly tied to the reactions of other people as they content with your positions on issues. Moreover, you gain the freedom to take on a new role once the current one concludes or you hit a dead end.”*

*No role is big enough to express all of who you are. Each role you take on — parent, spouse, child; professional, friend, and neighbor — is a vehicle for expressing a different facet of yourself. Anchored in yourself, and recognizing and respecting your distinct roles, you are much less vulnerable to the pains of leadership.”*

## 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.