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

BY: RONALD A. HEIFETZ AND MARTY LINSKY
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One of hot topics in organizational life today is leadership. In this foundational volume, *Leadership on the Line*, Heifetz and Linsky map the important territory of how leadership functions in the everyday world. The authors, both of whom teach in the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, each draw from their several decades of teaching and consulting to share their practical wisdom regarding leadership. The content of this book is related to an earlier volume by Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, in which he developed "a theoretical framework for understanding leadership and authority in the context of adaptive change" (5). The relationship of this earlier volume to this present one is that this one focuses on the practical and personal side of the actual functioning of leadership.

The authors' thesis is that daily life is filled for most people with opportunities to lead. The challenge to be met is whether persons have both the perspective and courage to take advantage of these opportunities. Perspective provides understanding about what actually needs to be done, something which is not always easy to achieve. Courage addresses the primary challenges associated with leadership the exercise of which is usually messy, often dangerous, and regularly filled with risk and uncertainty. But the driver that keeps people engaged in trying to lead, the authors contend, is that the exercise of leadership creates purpose and brings meaning to life. So clarifying the dynamics of how the art of leadership is exercised is the goal of the authors.

The argument of the book is presented in three sections: (a) dealing with the challenges associated with leading, (b) addressing various responses in the midst of leading, and (c) staying personally centered and focused in the process. The authors develop their argument in a very readable style by stating a basic premise, and then drawing on a wide-range of examples from all walks of life to illustrate each point. What

I found most helpful is the simplicity with which they present a very complex and sophisticated understanding of the dynamics of the art of leading in the midst of the messiness of everyday life.

There were two chapters in the section which deals with challenges associated with leading. In "The Heart of the Danger" they make the critical distinction between solving technical problems and engaging in adaptive changes. The former take place within the rationality of the current system, while the latter require the system to change. Such systemic change is usually dangerous to the person who would lead, because authorization for leading is not usually given. Thus a person is often required to function outside the bounds of his or her formal role. In "The Faces of Danger" the authors note the four strategies which organizational systems often use to challenge the danger presented by the unauthorized person who is stepping out to lead toward systemic change. These include the organization's efforts to marginalize, divert, attack, or seduce. Helpful suggestions are provided on how to recognize and avoid being sidelined by such organizational behaviors.

There are five chapters in the section dealing with how to address various responses in the midst of leading. To become effective in leading, the authors note the necessity of learning the critical skill of "getting on the balcony" (51). This involves developing capacity for critical reflection on what is happening while distancing one's personal identity from these dynamics. It also involves being able to sort through which issues are technical and which are adaptive in nature. Leading requires staying engaged in the midst of people and issues, which means that one must learn to think politically. This requires skills in learning to compromise, staying engaged with one's opponents, and knowing the limits of support of those for whom you work.

These skills require leaders to learn how to orchestrate the dynamics of an issue within the life of the organization, which especially involves learning the skill of pacing the amount of change a system can handle. In the midst of pacing systemic change, one has to be careful not to allow the organization to make you the problem, or to identify you with the change, and thereby dismiss both you and the necessary

change. One must learn to empower others in the system to join in the change process. Being able to do this also involves developing the capacity to hold steady in the midst of the inevitable firestorm that will typically occur at some point. The biggest default on leading at this moment in the process comes from leaders who begin to take attacks personally and thereby give away the issue to be addressed.

There are four chapters in the third section which deals with staying personally centered and focused. I found the chapter on "Manage Your Hungers" to be particularly insightful and helpful. It is essential for leaders to know their own needs well enough to be able to maintain good boundaries in the midst of the pressures and challenges associated with leading. Also critical to staying centered is being able to clearly distinguish one's role from one's self. This allows leaders to deflect personal attacks and stay focused on the issue. Also helpful in the authors' discussion was the distinction between confidants and allies. A leader learns, while networking with both, that the former can be shared with openly while the latter can be shared with only selectively. The authors end with the interesting question, "Why lead"? They suggest that a theological move is necessary at this point by noting that this can only be answered "by discovering what gives meaning in your life" (207).

This book, I believe, will clearly become a standard reference in the literature on leadership. It draws from established theory while offering some new understandings about leading. It frames a coherent argument and offers some fresh ways of thinking about the dynamics of leadership within the day-to-day situations of everyday life. Students of leadership from across a wide range of disciplines will find this volume to be an essential read. Persons interesting in learning more about how to improve their own abilities to lead will find this volume to be a most helpful read. The authors have made a unique contribution to this subject.

Craig Van Gelder
Professor of Congregational Mission
Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, MN

