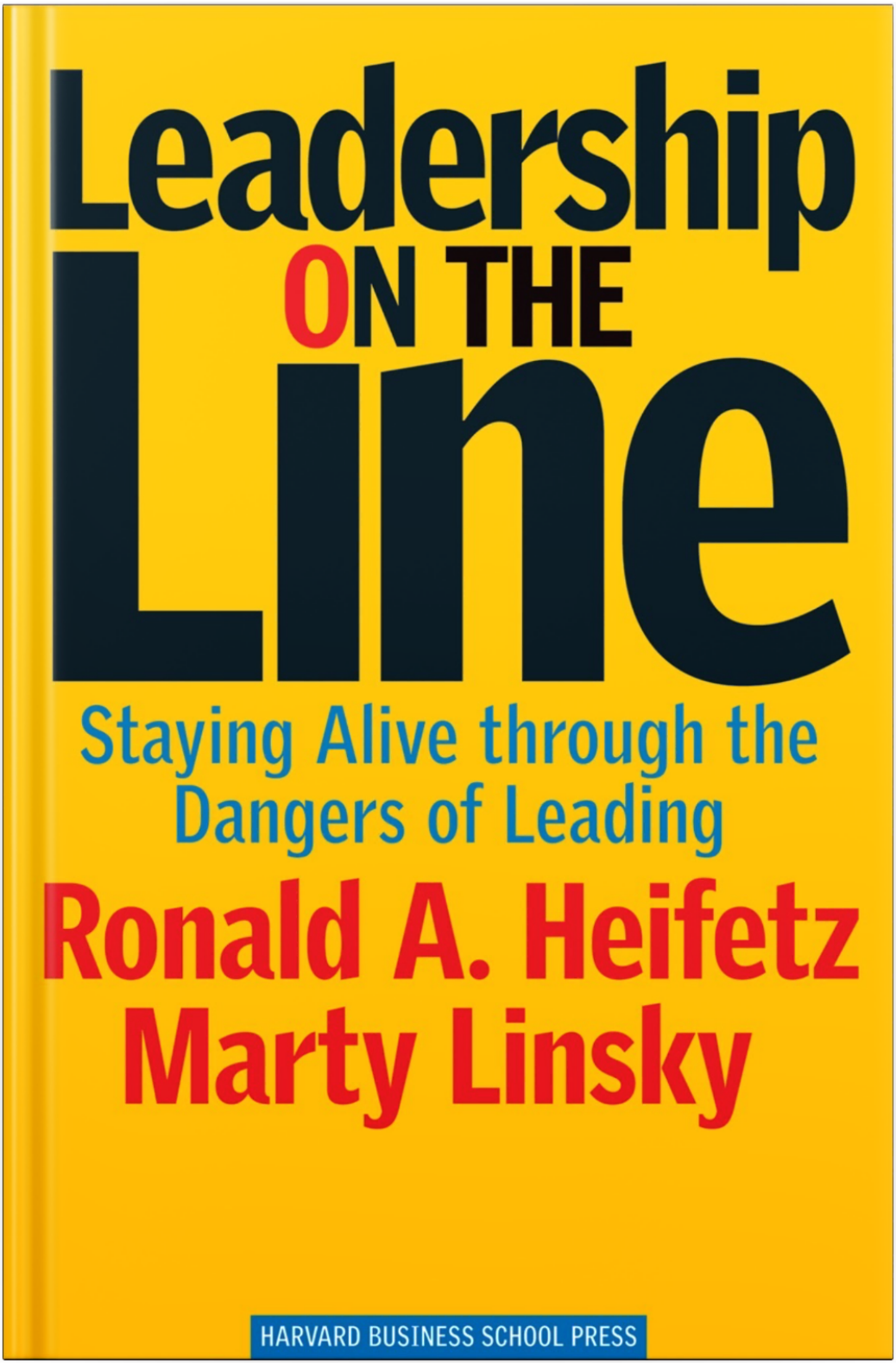

Leadership
ON THE
Line
Staying Alive through the
Dangers of Leading
Ronald A. Heifetz
Marty Linsky
HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL PRESS

Introduction

Each day brings you opportunities to raise important questions, speak to higher values, and surface unresolved conflicts. Every day you have the chance to make a difference in the lives of people around you.

And every day you must decide whether to put your contribution out there, or keep it to yourself to avoid upsetting anyone, and get through another day. You are right to be cautious. Prudence is a virtue. You disturb people when you take unpopular initiatives in your company, put provocative new ideas on the table in your organization, question the gap between colleagues' values and behavior, or ask coworkers to face up to tough realities. You risk people's ire and make yourself vulnerable. Exercising leadership can get you into a lot of trouble.

"Exercising leadership can get you into a lot of trouble"

To lead is to live dangerously because when leadership counts, when you lead people through difficult change, you challenge what people hold dear—their daily habits, tools, loyalties, and ways of thinking—with nothing more to offer perhaps than a possibility. Moreover, leadership often means exceeding the authority you are given to tackle the challenge at hand. People push back when you disturb the personal and institutional equilibrium they know. And people resist in all kinds of creative and unexpected ways that can get you taken out of the game: pushed aside, undermined, or eliminated.

It is no wonder that when the myriad opportunities to exercise leadership call, you often hesitate. Anyone who has stepped out on the line, leading part or all of an organization, knows the personal and professional vulnerabilities. However gentle your style, however careful your strategy, however sure you may be that you are on the right track, leading is risky business.

This book is about taking opportunities to lead, and staying alive. We ask these fundamental questions:

1. Why and how is leadership dangerous?
2. How can you respond to these dangers?
3. How can you keep your spirit alive when the going gets very tough?

We are both straightforward about the hazards of leadership and idealistic about the importance of taking these risks. Many leadership books are all about inspiration, but downplay the perspiration. We respect how tough this work is. We know too many people with scars to show for their efforts. We have scars ourselves and harbor no illusions. Yet we believe that leadership, while perilous, is an enterprise worthy of the costs. Our organizations need people, from wherever they work and live, to take up the challenges within reach rather than complain about the lack of leadership from on high, hold off until they receive a "call" to action, or wait for their turn in the top job.

"Many leadership books are all about inspiration, but downplay the perspiration. We respect how tough this work is. We know too many people with scars to show for their efforts. We have scars ourselves and harbor no illusions."

Leadership is worth the risk because the goals extend beyond material gain or personal advancement. By making the lives of people around you better, leadership provides meaning in life. It creates purpose. We believe that every human being has something unique to offer, and that a larger sense of purpose comes from using that gift to help your organizations and families thrive. The gift might be your knowledge, your experience, your values, your presence, your heart, or your wisdom. Perhaps it's simply your basic curiosity and your willingness to raise unsettling questions.

So, first and foremost, this book is about you, about how to survive and thrive amidst the dangers of leadership. It's also about getting more out of life by putting more into it.

This book is about putting yourself and your ideas on the line, responding effectively to the risks, and living to celebrate the meaning of your efforts.

PART I - THE CHALLENGE

Chapter 1 - The Heart of Danger

If leadership were about giving people good news, the job would be easy. Pushing people through change isn't bad news, it is just change. And it isn't change people resist, per se, people resist loss due to change.

People must face the challenge of adapting to a tough reality, and the adaptation requires giving up an important value or a current way of life. Leadership becomes dangerous, then, when it must confront people with loss and the best method for mobilizing change is by challenging people to answer a core but painful question: Of all that we value, what's really most precious and what's expendable?

The Perils of Adaptive Change

Leadership would be a safe undertaking if your organization only faced problems for which they already knew the solutions. 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 amenable 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. Without learning new ways—changing attitudes, values, and behaviors—people cannot make the adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the new environment. The sustainability of change depends on having the people with the problem internalize the change itself.

People cannot see at the beginning of the adaptive process that the new situation will be any better than the current condition. What they do see clearly is the potential for loss. People frequently avoid painful adjustments in their lives if they can postpone them, place the burden on somebody else, or call someone to the rescue. When fears and passions run high, people can become desperate as they look to authorities for the answers. This dynamic renders adaptive contexts inherently dangerous.

When people look to authorities for easy answers to adaptive challenges, they end up with dysfunction. They expect the person in charge to know what to do, and under the weight of that responsibility, those in authority frequently end up faking it or disappointing people, or they get spit out of the system in the belief that a new "leader"

will solve the problem. In fact, there's a proportionate relationship between risk and adaptive change: The deeper the change and the greater the amount of new learning required, the more resistance there will be and, thus, the greater the danger to those who lead. For this reason, people often try to avoid the dangers, either consciously or subconsciously, by treating an adaptive challenge as if it were a technical one. This is why we see so much more routine management than leadership in our society.

"…there's a proportionate relationship between risk and adaptive change: The deeper the change and the greater the amount of new learning required, the more resistance there will be"

Indeed, the single most common source of leadership failure we've been able to identify—in business—is that people, especially those in positions of authority, treat adaptive challenges like technical problems (Table 1).

In times of distress, when everyone looks to authorities to provide direction, protection, and order, this is an easy diagnostic mistake to make. In the face of adaptive pressures, people don't want questions; they want answers. They don't want to be told that they will have to sustain losses; rather, they want to know how you're going to protect them from the pains of change. And of course you want to fulfill their needs and expectations, not bear the brunt of their frustration and anger at the bad news you're giving.

Table 1 - Distinguishing Adaptive from Technical Challenges

	What's the Work?	Who Does the Work?
Technical	Apply current know-how	Authorities
Adaptive	Learn new ways	The people with the problem

In mobilizing adaptive work, you have to engage people in adjusting their unrealistic expectations, rather than try to satisfy them as if the situation were amenable primarily to a technical remedy. You have to counteract their exaggerated dependency and

promote their resourcefulness. This takes an extraordinary level of presence, time, and artful communication, but it may also take more time and trust than you have.

When you focus your energy primarily on the technical aspects of complex challenges, you do opt for short-term rewards. Sometimes by doing so you might strategically buy some time to deal with the adaptive elements. But you might use up precious time and find yourself running out of it anyway. In a far less demanding crisis, you may make people happy for a while, but over time you risk your credibility and perhaps your job. Reality may catch up with you as people discover that they are unprepared for the world in which they now live. And though they ought to blame themselves for sticking their heads in the sand and pressuring you to sanction their behavior, it's much more likely they'll blame you.

When you are in a position of authority, there are also strong internal pressures to focus on the technical aspects of problems. Most of us take pride in our ability to answer the tough questions that are thrown our way. We get rewarded for bearing people's uncertainty and want to be seen in a competent, heroic light. We like the feeling of stepping up to the plate and having the crowds cheer us on. Yet raising questions that go to the core of people's habits goes unrewarded, at least for a while. You get booed instead of cheered. In fact, it may be a long time before you hear any applause—if ever. Leadership takes the capacity to stomach hostility so that you can stay connected to people, lest you disengage from them and exacerbate the danger.

"Leadership takes the capacity to stomach hostility so that you can stay connected to people…"

There is nothing trivial about solving technical problems. Through our managerial know-how, we produce an economy full of products and services, many of them crucial to our daily lives. What makes a problem technical is not that it is trivial; but simply that its solution already lies within the organization's repertoire. In contrast, adaptive pressures force the organization to change, lest it decline.

Going Beyond Your Authority

People rarely hire anyone to disturb their jobs or their lives. People expect managers to use their authority to provide them with the right answers, not to confront them with disturbing questions and difficult choices. That's why the initial challenge, and risk, of exercising leadership is to go beyond your authority—to put your credibility and

position on the line in order to get people to tackle the problems at hand. Without the willingness to challenge people's expectations of you, there is no way you can escape being dominated by the business system and its inherent limits.

"…leadership requires disturbing people—but at a rate they can absorb."

Generally, people will not authorize someone to make them face what they do not want to face. Instead, people hire someone to provide protection and ensure stability, someone with solutions that require a minimum of disruption. But adaptive work creates risk, conflict, and instability because addressing the issues underlying adaptive problems may involve upending deep and entrenched norms. Thus, leadership requires disturbing people—but at a rate they can absorb.

At the Heart of Danger Is Loss

Frequently, people who seek to exercise leadership are amazed that their organizations resist. Why should people oppose you when you are helping them change habits, attitudes, and values that only hold them back, when you are doing something good for them?

"Adaptive change stimulates resistance because it challenges people's habits, beliefs, and values."

The dangers of exercising leadership derive from the nature of the problems for which leadership is necessary. Adaptive change stimulates resistance because it challenges people's habits, beliefs, and values. It asks them to take a loss, experience uncertainty, and even express disloyalty to people and cultures. Because adaptive change forces people to question and perhaps redefine aspects of their identity, it also challenges their sense of competence. Loss, disloyalty, and feeling incompetent: That's a lot to ask. No wonder people resist.

Since the resistance is designed to get you to back away, the various forms may be hard to recognize. You may not see the trap until it is too late. Recognizing these dangers, then, becomes of paramount importance.

Chapter 2 - The Faces of Danger

The dangers of leadership take many forms. Although each company has its preferred ways to restore equilibrium when someone upsets the balance, we've noticed four basic forms, with countless ingenious variations. When exercising leadership, you risk getting marginalized, diverted, attacked, or seduced. Regardless of the form, however, the point is the same. When people resist adaptive work, their goal is to shut down those who exercise leadership in order to preserve what they have.

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

Companies are clever about this. Each of these forms has its subtleties. What makes them effective is that they are not obvious. So, people trying to exercise leadership are often pushed aside by surprise. For example, betrayal often comes from places and people you don't expect. Some individuals may not even realize that they are being used to betray you. We know from personal experience that when you are caught up in the action, carrying a cause you believe in, it can be difficult to see the patterns. Over and over again we have heard stories of people exercising leadership who never saw the danger coming until it was too late to respond.

Marginalization

Most of the time organizations marginalize people less directly. An African-American man tells of his frustration at being part of a management team but finding his input limited on any issue other than race. A woman, promoted through the civilian side into a senior management role in an organization dominated by military personnel, notices that her colleagues listen to her only when the topic of discussion concerns information technology, her particular field of expertise. Unlike the rest of the senior managers—all men—her views are not taken seriously when she strays beyond her defined field of competence.

Many women have told us that in male-dominated companies they were encouraged, and even told they were hired, to carry the gender issue for the whole company. But they learned painfully that "tokenism" is a very tricky role to play effectively, and costs dearly. When a person or a small group of people embodies an issue and carries it

prominently within the organization as a token, then the organization as a whole never has to take on the issue. It can feign the virtue of diversity, but avoid the challenge diverse views pose to its way of doing business. The women therefore were unable to move the issue into the heart of the organization. Moreover, when they raised a different perspective on whatever task was at hand, people would roll their eyes and say to themselves, “There she goes again.” Singing the gender song so regularly gave the other members of the group an excuse not to listen on any other subject.

Marginalization often comes in more seductive forms. 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. You are kept from being a generalist. Second, after a while you are devalued even on your own issue, because it’s all people hear you talking about. Third, as with other forms of marginalization like tokenism, the organization can sing its own praises for welcoming unusual people without investigating the relevance and implications of their work to the central mission of the enterprise. If only you can do what you do, then the organization doesn’t have to develop and institutionalize your innovation.

In several of these examples, the people exercising leadership and getting marginalized did not hold senior positions of authority in their organizations. Marginalization, however, can happen to anybody, including those on top. Authority figures can be sidelined, particularly when they allow themselves to become so identified with an issue that they become the issue.

Diversion

Another time-honored way to push people aside is to divert them. There are many ways in which 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. Whenever you get an unexpected promotion, or when some fun or important tasks are added to your current role, pause and ask yourself: Do I represent some disquieting issue from which the organization is moving to divert me, and itself, from addressing? We know a cantankerous newspaper columnist who found

herself promoted to an editor's position as much to silence her provocative writing as to make use of her editing skills.

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. Attention, the currency of leadership, gets wasted. If you can't draw people's attention to the issues that matter, then how can you lead them in the right direction or mobilize any progress?

You have probably been attacked in one form or another. Perhaps you've been criticized for your style of communication: too abrasive or too gentle, too aggressive or too quiet, too conflictive or too conciliatory, too cold or too warm. In any case, we doubt that anyone ever criticizes your character or your style when you're giving them good news or passing out big checks. For the most part, people criticize you when they don't like the message. But rather than focus on the content of your message, taking issue with its merits, they frequently find it more effective to discredit you. Of course, you may be giving them opportunities to do so; surely every one of us can continue to improve our style and our self-discipline. The point is not that you are blameless, but that the blame is largely misplaced in order to draw attention away from the message itself.

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's been there knows that pain. Exercising leadership often risks having to bear such scars.

Later, we explore many ways to respond to misrepresentation and attack. But first you have to recognize the effort for what it often is, a way to divert your attention from an issue that is more troubling to people.

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. In general, people

are seduced when their guard is down, when their defense mechanisms have been lowered by the nature of the approach.

We are not talking about neurotic needs only. People are diverted by initiatives that meet normal, human interests, too. One of the everyday forms of seduction, for example, is the desire for the approval of your own company, your own supporters.

When you are trying to create significant change, to move a community, the people in your own group in that community will have to compromise along the way. Often, the toughest part of your job is managing their disappointed expectations. They may well support change, but they also want you to ensure that the change will come with minimal sacrifice on their part. Tacitly, or perhaps explicitly, your own people will instruct you to get the job done by having the people from the other groups make the tough trade-offs.

Disappointing your own core supporters, your deepest allies on your issue, creates hardships for you and for them. Yet you make yourself vulnerable when you too strongly give in to the understandable desire to enjoy their continuing approval, rather than disappoint them. Over and over again we have seen people take on difficult issues, only to be pushed by their own group so far out on a limb that they lose credibility in the larger community.

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 to managing it when it arrives. Leadership, then, requires not only reverence for the pains of change and recognition of the manifestations of danger, but also the skill to respond.

PART 2 - THE RESPONSE

Chapter 3 - Get on the Balcony

Few practical ideas are more obvious or more critical than the need to get perspective in the midst of action. Any military officer, for example, knows the importance of maintaining the capacity for reflection, even in the "fog of war." Great athletes can at once play the game and observe it as a whole—as Walt Whitman described it, "being both in and out of the game." Jesuits call it "contemplation in action." Hindus and Buddhists call it "karma yoga," or mindfulness. We call this skill "getting off the dance floor and going to the balcony," an image that captures 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. We all get swept up in the action, particularly when it becomes intense or personal and we need most to pause. Self-reflection does not come naturally. It's much easier to adopt an established belief than create one's own. Most people instinctively follow a dominant trend in an organization without critical evaluation of its merits. The herd instinct is strong. And a stampede not only tramples those who don't keep pace, it also makes it hard to see another direction—until the dust settles.

Groups often devalue someone by ignoring them, by rendering them invisible—a form of marginalization. Surely this has happened to you at least once or twice. Women tell us this happens often to them.

Typically only a few people see these dynamics as they happen, most never notice. They simply play their parts. 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.

The balcony metaphor captures this idea. You might imagine looking down on the room from a sky camera and seeing yourself as merely another player in the game. Let's say you are dancing in a big ballroom with a balcony up above. A band plays and people swirl all around you to the music, filling up your view. Most of your attention focuses on your dance partner, and you reserve whatever is left to make sure that you don't collide with dancers close by. You let yourself get carried away by the music,

your partner, and the moment. When someone later asks you about the dance, you exclaim, “The band played great, and the place surged with dancers.”

But if you had gone up to the balcony and looked down on the dance floor, you might have seen a very different picture. You would have noticed all sorts of patterns. For example, you might have observed that when slow music played, only some people danced; when the tempo increased, others stepped onto the floor; and some people never seemed to dance at all. Indeed, the dancers all clustered at one end of the floor, as far away from the band as possible. On returning home, you might have reported that participation was sporadic, the band played too loud, and you only danced to fast music.

Achieving a balcony perspective means taking yourself out of the dance, in your 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. Otherwise, you are likely to misperceive the situation and make the wrong diagnosis, leading you to misguided decisions about whether and how to intervene.

If you want to affect what is happening, you must return to the dance floor. Staying on the balcony in a safe observer role is as much a prescription for ineffectuality as never achieving that perspective in the first place. The process must be iterative, not static. The challenge is to move 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 goal is to come as close as you can to being in both places simultaneously, as if you had one eye looking from the dance floor and one eye looking down from the balcony, watching all the action, including your own. This is a critical point: When you observe from the balcony you must see yourself as well as the other participants. Perhaps this is the hardest task of all—to see yourself objectively.

Moving from participant to observer and back again is a skill you can learn. When you are sitting in a meeting, practice switching roles, watching what is happening while it is happening, even as you are part of what’s happening. When you make an intervention, resist the instinct to stay perched on the edge of your seat waiting to defend or explain what you said. Simple techniques, such as pushing your chair a few inches away from the meeting table after you speak, may provide some literal as well as metaphorical distance to help you detach just enough to become an observer. Don’t jump to a familiar conclusion. Open yourself up to other possibilities. See who says what; watch the body language. Watch the relationships and see how people’s attention to one another varies: supporting, thwarting, or listening.

Any one of a number of questions will help you get beyond your own blind spots. 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

Distinguish Technical from Adaptive Challenges

There are many possible reasons why some people are rendered invisible while others are not:

Style

- Perhaps a person spoke in a manner different from the style preferred by the group. For example, they might have spoke with such unexpected conviction and power that everyone tuned out.
- Demonstrating too much aggressive self-assurance with people who have a high regard for humility could have reduced their credibility.

Track Record

- Roles and reputations might have influenced the way a person was heard.
- Others may have demonstrated more consistent insight and competence over time, they might have a proven track record on the subject.

Ripeness

- Possibly, the issue had not "ripened".
- A group lacked enough familiarity with an issue to deal with it.

Status

- Within a group, peers with slightly more formal authority in an organization tend to be more widely listened to on a wide range of subjects.
- In most cultures, people pay more attention to those at the top of the hierarchy, whether or not that attention is warranted.

Prejudice

- Some incidents cut directly to deeply held values and norms within the group, the group may not take women's views as seriously as those of men
- If prejudice is a group phenomenon, you may see it only from the balcony and not observe bias by any individual.

Some of these interpretations—style, track record, and ripeness—suggest problems that a person can correct themselves. A modest adjustment to a persons intervention style, greater selectivity in choosing when to speak up, or laying a better foundation for their perspective would be enough to forestall a recurrence. With these interpretations, their invisibility represents a technical problem on which they can take corrective action without disturbing anyone.

But the last two interpretations—status and prejudice—go to the heart of how the group, and the individuals within it, see themselves. Speaking to these issues will threaten the group's stability and civility and disrupt the agenda. The group will likely resist if the individual suggests that it discounts the views of people with lower status, rather than weigh everyone's views on the merits, or that its behavior is racist, sexist, ageist, or prejudicial in any way.

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.

Of course, being rendered invisible doesn't feel like being chased down the field with the fans cheering. On the contrary, you feel ignored, diminished, or worse, stupid. That's the point! After investigating the personal, technical reasons for being neutralized and correcting for them, you may well find that you are continuing to be ignored precisely because you have so much to say.

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.

How do you know whether the challenge is primarily technical or primarily adaptive? You can never be certain, but there are some useful diagnostic clues.

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. In an adaptive challenge, people have to learn new ways and choose

between what appear to be contradictory values. 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. Crises represent 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.

When facing a budget crisis, for example, many organizations opt for the salami cutter as a way to cut expenses (take an equal 10 percent from each division), rather than face the more difficult strategic questions.

Find Out Where People Are At

Getting people in a 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 groups. Learn from them their stakes and fears.

"Start where people are at." Beyond the capacity to listen, this requires curiosity, especially when you think you already know someone's problem and what needs to be done. Their view is likely to be different from yours, and if you don't take their perspective as the starting point, you are liable to be dismissed as irrelevant, insensitive, or presumptuous.

Listen to the Song Beneath the Words

Observing from the balcony is the critical first step in exercising—and safeguarding—leadership. Despite a detached perspective, though, the observation itself must be close and careful. Once you find out where people are coming from, you can connect with them and engage them in change. But hearing their stories is not the same as taking what they say at face value. People naturally, even unconsciously, defend their

habits and ways of thinking and attempt to avoid difficult value choices. 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 small ways, we do this every day. For example, if you ask someone how he is doing, and he says “OK,” you can hear a big difference between a bright accent on the “K” and a sad emphasis on the “O.”

Leaders are rarely neutralized for personal reasons, even though an attack may be framed in personal terms. The role you play or the issue you carry generates the reaction. When the players chase you down the field in a soccer match, they are not after you personally. They want you because you control the ball. Even though people yell her name and block her way, a fine soccer player would never think of taking it personally. Taking a “balcony” perspective, she sees the game on the field as a whole and immediately adjusts her behavior to take account of the patterns she sees. Great players in any sport can do this.

When the game is highly structured and the goal is clear, interpreting events on the playing field is a matter of technical expertise. But in organizational life, the various players compete by different rules and hold different visions of what it means to score a goal.

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, or with a trusted confidant. Interpreting behavior means looking at more than just the way people present themselves. Understandably, then, if you propose alternative explanations for people’s behavior—alternatives to the messages they want you to adopt—they may get upset. Making an interpretation is a necessary step. Whether and how you voice it, however, must depend on the culture and adaptability of your audience.

Read the Authority Figure for Clues

When you seek to instigate significant change within an organization, 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. They will consider and react to the responses of the groups 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 fact, that person is trying to manage all the various groups, and what you observe is a response to the pressures he or she is experiencing.

“In reading an authority figure, you look for shifts of view on relevant issues and assess where the authority stands on the ruckus you have created.”

In reading an authority figure, you look for shifts of view on relevant issues and assess where the authority stands on the ruckus you have created. 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 other words, authority figures sit at the nodes of a social system and are sensitive to any disturbances. They not only act as indicators of organizational stability, but will act to restore equilibrium if change efforts go too far.

Leadership is an improvisational art. You may have an overarching vision, clear, orienting values, and even a strategic plan, but what you actually do from moment to moment cannot be scripted. To be effective, you must respond to what is happening. Going back to our metaphor, you have to move back and forth from the balcony to the dance floor, over and over again throughout the day, week, month, and year. 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.

As General Dwight D. Eisenhower described after leading the successful D-Day invasion on the beaches of Normandy, the first thing he had to do when the troops hit the beach was throw out the plan. On the other hand, he said they never would have gotten onto the beach without a plan. 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.

Sustaining your leadership, then, requires first and foremost the capacity to see what is happening to you and your initiative, as it is happening. This takes discipline and flexibility, and it is hard to do. You are immersed in the action, responding to what is right there in front of you. And when you do get some distance, you still have the challenge of accurately reading and interpreting what you now observe. You need to

hear what people are saying, but not accept their words at face value. Groups want you to take their viewpoint. People want you to understand their motivation and the explanation of their behavior in their own terms. Creating alternative interpretations, listening to the song beneath the words, is inherently provocative, but necessary if you are going to address the real stakes, fears, and conflicts.

Pay very close attention to senior authority figures. Read their words and behaviors as signals for the effects you are stimulating in the group as a whole. See through them to the constituencies pulling them in a variety of directions. Don't just personalize what you see. Read authorities to gauge the pace and manner to push forward.

Chapter 4 - Think Politically

Able politicians know well, from hard experience, that in everyday personal and professional life, the nature and quality of the connections human beings have with each other is more important than almost any other factor in determining results.

There are six essential aspects of thinking politically in the exercise of leadership: one for dealing with people who are with you on the issue; one for managing those who are in opposition; and four for working with those who are uncommitted but wary—the people you are trying to move.

Find Partners

Finding partners is sometimes easier said than done. Both your own group and other camps will happily watch you take on the challenge alone. Your own group wants to see how secure the footing is before they follow. Why should they risk their necks? And if you disrupt the status quo too much, other groups can push you aside more easily if you are by yourself.

Indeed, there can be internal pressures, inside of you, that resist joining forces. Partners might push their own ideas, compromising your own; connecting with them takes time, slowing you down; and working with a group might dilute your leadership—a drawback if it is important that you get credit, or if you want to reassure yourself and others of your competence.

Have you ever gone to a meeting and realized that there was a “pre-meeting” that did not include you? The pre-meeting allowed those attending to minimize their internal conflict at the real meeting, present a united front, and isolate you.

It’s a mistake to go it alone. By doing the same kind of homework, you can increase the possibility that both you and your ideas stay alive. Make the next meeting one for which it is you who have made the advance phone calls, tested the waters, refined your approach, and lined up supporters. But in the process, find out what you are asking of your potential partners. Know their existing alliances and loyalties so that you realize how far you are asking them to stretch if they are to collaborate with you.

Keep the Opposition Close

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; 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 your 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. As you attend to your allies and opposition in advancing your issue, do not forget the uncommitted and wary people in the middle—the people you want to move. You need to ensure that their general resistance to change doesn't morph into a mobilization to push you aside. What follows are four steps you can take that are specifically focused on them.

Accept Responsibility for Your Piece of the Mess

When you belong to the organization that you are trying to lead, you are part of the problem. This is particularly true when you have been a member of the group for some time. Taking the initiative to address the issue does not relieve you of your share of responsibility. If you have been in a senior role for a while and there's a problem, it is almost certain that you had some part in creating it and are part of the reason it has not yet been addressed. Even if you are new, or outside the organization, you need to identify those behaviors you practice or values you embody that could stifle the very change you want to advance. 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.

"When you belong to the organization that you are trying to lead, you are part of the problem."

In our teaching, training, and consulting, we often ask people to write or deliver orally a short version of a leadership challenge they are currently facing in their professional, personal. Over the years, we have read and heard literally thousands of such challenges. Most often in the first iteration of the story the author is nowhere to be

found. The storyteller implicitly says, “I have no options. If only other people would shape up, I could make progress here.

When you are too quick to lay blame on others, whether inside or outside the community, you create risks for yourself. Obviously, you risk misdiagnosing the situation. But you also risk making yourself a target by denying that you are part of the problem and that you, too, need to change. After all, if you are pointing your finger at them, pushing them to do something they don’t want to do, the easiest option for them is to get rid of you. The dynamic becomes you versus them. 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.

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 tell someone that he should stop being prejudiced is really to tell him that some of the lessons of his loving grandfather were wrong.

Asking people to leave behind something they have lived with for years or for generations practically invites them to get rid of you. Sometimes leaders are taken out simply because they do not appreciate the sacrifice they are asking from others. To them, the change does not seem like much of a sacrifice, so they have difficulty imagining that it seems that way to others. Yet the status quo may not look so terrible to those immersed in it, and may look pretty good when compared to a future that is unknown. 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. Indeed, boys go to war with the blessings of their parents to protect values even more precious than life itself. So it becomes critically important to communicate, in every way possible, the reason to sacrifice—why people need to sustain losses and reconstruct their loyalties. People need to know that the stakes are worth it.

But beyond clarifying the values at stake and the greater purposes worth the pain, you also need to name and acknowledge the loss itself. It's not enough to point to a hopeful future. 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. Grieve with them, and memorialize the loss. This might be done with a series of simple statements, but often requires something more tangible and public to convince people that you truly understand.

Model the Behavior

With change, you have to model the behavior that you are seeking of others. Modeling is more than symbolic. When Lee Iacocca reduced his own salary to $1 during Chrysler's troubles, no one worried that Iacocca would go without dinner. But the fact that he was willing to make a personal economic sacrifice helped motivate employees to do likewise as part of the company's turnaround plan.

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.

If people simply cannot adapt, the reality is that they will be left behind. They become casualties. This is virtually inevitable when organizations and communities go through significant change. Some people simply cannot or will not go along. You have to choose between keeping them and making progress. For people who find taking casualties extremely painful, almost too painful to endure, this part of leadership presents a special dilemma. But it often goes with the territory.

"If people simply cannot adapt, the reality is that they will be left behind. They become casualties."

Accepting casualties signals your commitment. If you signal that you are unwilling to take casualties, you present an invitation to the people who are uncommitted to push your perspectives aside. Without the pinch of reality, why should they make sacrifices and change their ways of doing business? Your ability to accept the harsh reality of

losses sends a clear message about your courage and commitment to seeing the adaptive challenge through.

People seeking to exercise leadership can be thwarted because, in their unwillingness to take casualties, they give people mixed signals. Surely we would all prefer to bring everyone along, and we admirably hold up this ideal. Unfortunately, casualties are often a necessary by-product of adaptive work.

The lone warrior myth of leadership is a sure route to heroic suicide. Though you may feel alone at times with either creative ideas or the burden of final decision-making authority, psychological attachments to operating solo will get you into trouble. You need partners. Nobody is smart enough or fast enough to engage alone the political complexity of an organization when it is facing and reacting to adaptive pressures.

Relating to people is central to leading and staying alive. If you are not naturally a political person, then find partners who have that ability to be intensely conscious of the importance of relationships in getting challenging work done. Let them help you develop allies. Then, beyond developing your base of support, let them help you relate to your opposition, those people who feel that they have the most to lose with your initiative. You need to be close to them to know what they are thinking and feeling, and to demonstrate that you are aware of their difficulty. Moreover, your efforts to gain trust must extend beyond your allies and opposition, to those folks who are uncommitted. You will have to find appropriate ways to own up to your piece of the mess and acknowledge the risks and losses people may have to sustain. Sometimes you can demonstrate your awareness by modeling the risk or the loss itself. But sometimes your commitments will be tested by your willingness to let people go. Without the heart to engage in sometimes costly conflict you can lose the whole organization.

Chapter 5 - Orchestrate the Conflict

When you tackle a tough issue in any group, rest assured there will be conflict, either palpable or latent. That's what makes a tough issue tough. For good reason, most people have a natural aversion to conflict in their organizations. You may need to put up with it on occasion, but your default mindset, like ours, is probably to limit conflict as much as possible. Indeed, many organizations are downright allergic to conflict, seeing it primarily as a source of danger, which it certainly can be. Conflicts can generate casualties. But deep conflicts, at their root, consist of differences in fervently held beliefs, and differences in perspective are the engine of human progress.

No one learns only by staring in the mirror. We all learn—and are sometimes transformed—by encountering differences that challenge our own experience and assumptions. Adaptive work, from biology to human culture, requires engagement with something in the environment lying outside our perceived boundaries. Yet, people are passionate about their own values and perspectives, which means they often view outsiders as a threat to those values. When that is the case, the texture of the engagement can move quickly from polite exchange to intense argument and disruptive conflict.

"Adaptive work… requires engagement with something in the environment lying outside our perceived boundaries."

Thus, the challenge of leadership when trying to generate adaptive change is to work with differences, passions, and conflicts in a way that diminishes their destructive potential and constructively harnesses their energy.

Orchestrating the conflict may be easier to do when you are in an authority role because people expect those in authority to manage the process. However, the four ideas we suggest in this chapter are also options for people who seek to enact change but are not in senior positions of authority:

1. Create a holding environment for the work
2. Control the temperature
3. Set the pace
4. Show them the future

Create a Holding Environment

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. Creating a holding environment enables you to direct creative energy toward working the conflicts and containing passions that could easily boil over.

A holding environment will look and feel quite different in different contexts. It may be a protected physical space you create by hiring an outside facilitator and taking a work group off-site to work through a particularly volatile and sensitive conflict. It may be the shared language and common history of a community that binds people together through trying times.

It can be characterized in some settings by deep trust in an institution and its authority structure, like the military or the Catholic Church. It may be characterized by a clear set of rules and processes that give minority voices the confidence that they will be heard without having to disrupt the proceedings to gain attention. A holding environment is a place where there is enough cohesion to offset the centrifugal forces that arise when people do adaptive work. 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.

But no matter how strong the bonds of trust and the history of collaboration, no holding environment can withstand endless strain before it buckles. All relationships have limits; therefore, one of the great challenges of leadership in any organization is keeping stress at a productive level. Managing conflict (and your own safety) requires you to monitor your group's tolerance for taking heat.

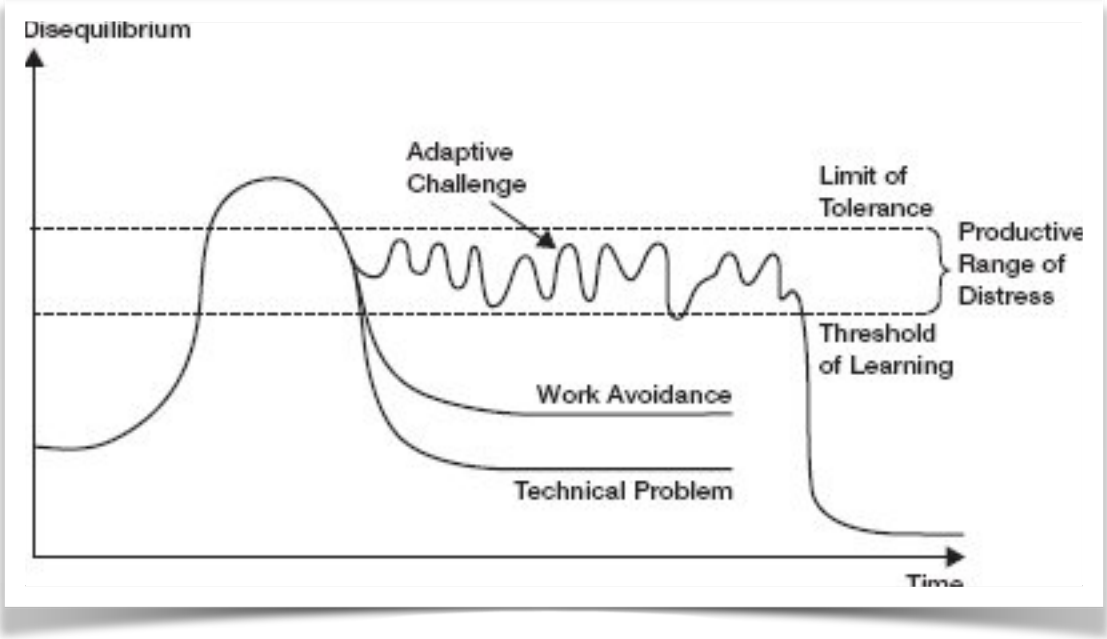
Control the Temperature

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.

If you try to stimulate deep change within an organization, you have to control the temperature. 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. Without some distress, there is no incentive for them to change anything. The second is to lower the temperature when necessary to reduce a counterproductive level of tension. Any community can take only so much pressure before it becomes either immobilized or spins out of control. 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 (Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Technical Problem or Adaptive Challenge



Of course, you can't expect the group to tolerate more distress than you can stand yourself. When you develop your own capacity for taking heat, you raise the tolerance level of the organization. But if you lose your poise and turn down the flame, people will take that as a cue that the passions generated cannot be contained. The distress will appear intolerable. In organizations, people often look to the leader to set the standard for the tolerance of stress. If the leader blows, it's unlikely that anyone else on the staff will be able to focus the organization. The same is true when you are in an authority role in any realm: as project manager, coach or captain of a team, or lead investor in a high-risk venture. There is tremendous pressure on you to control your own natural emotional responses, which may be entirely appropriate and normal to express, except within the role you are trying to play.

People expect the boss to control the temperature, but those without formal authority can do some of this work as well. If you are leading without or beyond your authority, you must assess how far ahead of people you are and then adjust how hard and fast to push for change. One way you make that assessment is to carefully monitor the response of the authority figure to your actions. If the authority figure starts to act precipitously to calm things down—for example, by firing “the troublemakers” or taking action to squelch deviant voices—it probably indicates that you have pushed too hard. The level of organizational disequilibrium is too high.

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 within the relevant group as contrary points of view are heard.

By contrast, there are many ways to reduce the heat, since organizations are more practiced at cooling things down than intentionally heating them up. Any method for reducing the heat may also be used as an indirect way of increasing the upper limits of tolerance for it within the organization. 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. Negotiators commonly use this tactic: Strengthen the relationships—the holding environment—by creating shared successes. You can provide structure to the problem-solving process, by breaking down the problem into its parts, creating working groups with clear role assignments, setting time parameters, establishing decision rules, and structuring reporting relationships. You can frame the problem in a less threatening way, or speak to people’s fears. You can temporarily bear more of the responsibility yourself. You can use humor or find an excuse for a break, even a party, to provide a temporary release. People may then be able to return to the tough questions. You can separate the conflicting parties and issues, pacing and sequencing the rate at which people challenge one another. Finally, you can speak to transcendent values so that people can be reminded of the import of their efforts and sacrifices.

Be mindful that the organization will almost always, reflexively, want you to turn down the heat. Therefore, you need to take the temperature of the group constantly, trying to keep it high enough to motivate people, but not so high that it paralyzes them. When people come to you to describe the distress you are causing, it might be a sign that you have touched a nerve and are doing good work.

“When the heat hits the ceiling and the system appears on the verge of melting down, you need to cool things off.”

When the heat hits the ceiling and the system appears on the verge of melting down, you need to cool things off. History provides some striking examples in which people in authority believed that the level of chaos, tension, and anxiety in the community had risen too high to constructively mobilize people to act on difficult issues. As a result, they first acted to reduce the anxiety to a tolerable level, and then made sure enough urgency remained to stimulate engagement and change.

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 conflicts to the surface
4. Protect gadflies and oddballs

Lower the Temperature

1. Address the technical aspects of the problem
2. Establish a structure for the problem-solving process by breaking the problem into parts and creating time frames, decisions 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

You must use the resources at your disposal to regulate the distress of your colleagues so that they can deal creatively with the underlying challenge causing the distress. In our experience, most people and organizations find it more difficult to raise the temperature than to lower it. We often encounter people in our work who resist making their communities uncomfortable, expressing something close to a moral revulsion against doing so. This is quite natural—we often create a moral justification for doing what we want to do, and most people want to maintain the status quo, avoiding the tough issues. In an effort to maintain equilibrium, they keep the tough issues off the table altogether, "so as not to upset anyone."

To exercise leadership, you may have to challenge the assumption 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. This may mean raising the temperature to a point where addressing the problem becomes imperative in order to move forward, or at least seems as likely a way to restore calm as continued avoidance.

"To exercise leadership… You'll need to tell people what they do not want to hear."

Of course, there's a significant chance 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

Leadership addresses emotional as well as conceptual work. When you lead people through difficult change, you take them on an emotional roller coaster because you are asking them to relinquish something—a belief, a value, a behavior—that they hold dear. 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.

Pacing the work is not a new or complicated idea. Mental health professionals have said for a long time that individuals cannot adapt well to too many life changes at once. If you suffer a loss in the family, change jobs, and move all within a short time, the chances are your own internal stability may break down, or show signs of serious strain. The same is true of organizations and communities. Change involves loss, and people can sustain only so much loss at any one time.

“Pacing typically requires people in authority to let their ideas and programs seep out a little at a time…”

Pacing the work can be ethically complicated because it can involve withholding information, if not outright deception. 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.

If you have some authority, you can use some of the basic functions of your position as resources for pacing the work. You decide which ingredients to mix and when. For example, in setting agendas, postpone the most threatening or provocative issues, either by ruling them off the agenda or by excluding their advocates from participation in the early stages. This will help modulate the rate of change. Also, in determining decision rules, think strategically about how decisions are made; draw out this process so the group is not faced with too much too soon.

Each of these techniques for pacing might be interpreted as simply putting off the hardest issues, as a kind of work avoidance. But it’s not avoidance if you in fact are preparing people for the work that lies ahead. Rather, you are taking control and making change a strategic and deliberate process.

How you pace the work depends on the difficulty of the issue, the tolerance of the organization, and the strength of your authority relationships and the holding environment. Assess the situation. Calculate the risks. Then decide how to pace the work, knowing that this is an improvisation. Not only must you be open to the possibility of changing course in midstream, you should expect that after seeing people’s reactions, you will have to reassess and take ongoing corrective action.

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.

It is not always possible to show people the future. It might not exist. You might not even be able to envision it yourself. But if it is possible, 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. You come to embody hope rather than fear. Confidence in the future is crucial in the face of the inevitable counter-pressures from those who will doggedly cling to the present, and for whom you become the source of unwanted disturbance.

To lead people, we suggest you build structures of relationships to work the tough issues, establishing norms that make passionate disagreement permissible. But keep your hands on the temperature controls. Don’t provoke people too much at any one time. Remember, your job is to orchestrate the conflict, not become it. You need to let people do the work that only they can do.

Chapter 6 - Give the Work Back

You gain credibility and authority in your career by demonstrating your capacity to take other people's problems off their shoulders and give them back solutions. The pattern begins early in school as children receive positive reinforcement for finding the answers, and continues throughout life as you become an increasingly responsible adult. All of this is a virtue, 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.

Moreover, shouldering the adaptive work of others is risky. When you take on an issue, you become that issue in the eyes of many; it follows, then, that the way to get rid of the issue is to get rid of you. Whatever the outcome, you will be held responsible for the disequilibrium the process has generated, the losses people have had to absorb, and the backlash resulting from those who feel left behind.

Take the Work off Your Shoulders

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.

"To meet adaptive challenges, people must change their hearts as well as their behaviors."

Place the Work Where It Belongs

To meet adaptive challenges, people must change their hearts as well as their behaviors. 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. Leaders have to locate the conflict and place the issue where it belongs.

A boundary of authority separates team and leader, and individual boundaries separate each teammate. But the boundaries between close-knit teammates can be more easily crossed over than boundaries that delineate authority or divide highly divergent groups, teams, or parties. So, taking the work off your own shoulders is necessary but not sufficient. You must also put it in the right place, where it can be addressed by the relevant parties. Sometimes this is within one group; other times this means getting different groups within the organization to work on the problem together.

Make Your Interventions Short and Simple

Exercising leadership necessarily involves interventions. Obviously, these need to be tailored to the particular situation, but 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. In practice, they are often combined with one another. Which you choose will depend on your own skills, your particular purpose, and your assessment of which intervention most likely to move the organization's work forward and leave you unscarred. The interventions you make will of course be calculated to have different effects. Some are meant to calm and others to disrupt; some will attract attention and others deflect it. And there will always be unintended effects.

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. For example, when a heated argument breaks out in a meeting, someone might say: "Wait a second. It seems to me the tensions are getting really high here. Everything was going fine until Bob made his comment."

In and of themselves, observations are no more than snapshots from the balcony. For that reason, observations tend to be less threatening and less catalytic than other interventions, although simply calling "time-out" and reporting what you see may be stimulating and productive.

QUESTIONS

When making an observation, you can either let it rest, letting the group fill the void, or go a step further with a question or an interpretation.

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. You might use a question because you really do not know the answer and therefore cannot render an interpretation. You might simply think it is important for people to address the issue on their own, or you might use a question because you want to stay as much out of the line of fire as possible, while still getting the issue addressed.

Of course, when you inject your understanding of events into the way you frame the question, it becomes a loaded question. Frequently, this ploy annoys people unnecessarily. Rather than simply making your interpretation of events available for discussion, people sense that you are trying to manipulate them into assuming your interpretation is true and then starting the discussion where your assumptions leave off.

INTERPRETATIONS

A bolder and generally more useful alternative to a loaded question is to follow an observation with an interpretation. For example, instead of merely observing and asking about the fight, you might say, “I don’t think this conflict is really about X. I think it’s really about Y, a separate issue that’s been simmering in our meetings for the last four months. Until we resolve that issue, I don’t see how we can make progress on this one.”

This technique might be useful if you had been worried for some time about a hidden issue, but wanted to wait until either more data or a relevant situation surfaced.

In offering an interpretation, you may not be fully certain of its accuracy. Clues on that score will be forthcoming from the response. Offer the interpretation, then hold steady and listen for the way the group treats your perspective.

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). When you make an interpretation, you reveal that you have spent some time on the balcony, and that makes people suspicious that you are not “on the team.” They may think you are somehow “above” them.

ACTION

Every action has an immediate effect but sends a message as well. Actions communicate. For example, when someone walks out of the room during a meeting, you lose that person's contribution. But the departure also communicates messages, such as: "You're not addressing the key issues I see," or "This conversation is too tense for me."

Actions as interventions can complicate situations because they frequently are susceptible to more than one interpretation.

.....

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 groups 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.

Chapter 7 - Hold Steady

We've explored why adaptive work generates heat and resistance, the forms of danger this resistance takes, and how to respond. But taking action to manage company relationships, orchestrate the conflict, or give back the work assumes that you are able to meet a more basic challenge—maintaining your poise so that you can plan the best next step. Holding steady in the heat of action is an essential skill for staying alive and keeping people focused on the work. The pressure on you may be almost unbearable, causing you to doubt both your own capacities and your direction. If you waver or act prematurely, your initiative can be lost in an instant.

Take the Heat

Learning to take the heat and receive people's anger in a way that does not undermine your initiative is one of the toughest tasks of leadership. 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 your group. Your allies want you to calm things down, at least for them, rather than stir things up. As they put pressure on you to back away, drop the issue, or change the behavior that upsets them, you will feel the heat, uncomfortably. In this sense, exercising leadership might be understood as disappointing people at a rate they can absorb.

No two people are wired exactly alike, and so we all respond differently to our environment. Some of us have a higher tolerance for heat and stress than others; indeed, there are those who thrive under peak pressure. But for most of us, who prefer to minimize opposition or avoid it altogether, the truth is that rarely, if ever, can we escape people's anger when leading any kind of significant change. Thus, the more heat you can take, the better off you will be in keeping your issue alive and keeping yourself in the game.

Taking heat from your friends and allies is very tough. In a way, it's easier to tolerate abuse from the opposition. After all, you know you must be doing something good if your opposition is calling you names. The people who speak in front of an angry crowd may appear especially courageous, but those who have been in that role know the ameliorating secret: When those who oppose you throws tomatoes in your face, a part of you feels reaffirmed.

The people you challenge will test your steadiness and judge your worthiness by your response to their anger, not unlike teenagers, who want to know that they can blow hot without blowing their parents away. Receiving people's anger without becoming personally defensive generates 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.

Let Issues Ripen

In your efforts to lead a company, you will often be thinking and acting ahead of them. But if you get too far ahead, raising issues before they are ready to be addressed, you create an opportunity for those you lead to sideline both you and the issue. You need to wait until the issue is ripe, or ripen it yourself. True, patience is not a virtue typically associated with people passionate about what they are doing. But holding off until the issue is ready may be critical in mobilizing people's energy and getting yourself heard.

Of course, most organizations have a whole spectrum of challenges confronting them at any given time. Common sense tells us we can't tackle them all at once. The availability of resources often dictates the agenda—we attack a problem when we have the wherewithal to do so. But resources are just one factor in determining the willingness of people to tackle an issue. The primary factor consists of the psychological readiness to weigh priorities and take losses. The leaders question becomes: Has the psychological readiness spread across enough groups in the organization to provide a critical mass?

An issue becomes ripe when there is widespread urgency to deal with it. Something that may seem to you to be incredibly important, requiring immediate attention, may not seem so to others in your organization, at least not at the moment. But it may become important to them in time.

What determines when, or whether, an issue becomes ripe? How does it take on a generalized urgency shared by not just one but many groups within the organization? Although there are many factors, we have identified four key questions:

1. What other concerns occupy the people who need to be engaged?
2. How deeply are people affected by the problem?
3. How much do people need to learn?
4. 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.

Sometimes, you have to hold steady and watch for the opportunity. However, if you notice that there is never a time for your issue, you may have to create the opportunity by developing a strategy for generating urgency.

"Used properly, a crisis can provide a teaching moment."

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. Why should they? Sometimes, fortuitous events ripen an issue by heightening the severity of a problem. Used properly, a crisis can provide a teaching moment.

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. A crisis can change this quickly.

Because crises and tragedies generate the urgency to tackle issues, sometimes the only way to bring focus to an issue and move it forward is to create a crisis. These can be small, like budget crises, which are often available to draw attention to the need to reevaluate priorities and direction. Or they can be large.

If you do not take into consideration how difficult the learning will be, the organization will box you off as an outcast, impractical visionary, or worse. You may have to take baby steps. It may take years to ripen the issue in an organization to the point that people understand what is at stake and can decide their fate.

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.

If you are the person in authority, you are not only expected to set the agenda, but also to select the issues that warrant attention. You cannot keep your authority in your organization if you insist on projects that your organization opposes. In other words, those who have authority put it at risk by seeking to raise unripe issues.

For people exercising leadership without or beyond their authority, ripening an issue becomes more difficult, requiring more dramatic and therefore riskier steps.

But if you hold steady, taking the immediate heat and keeping your intervention short and clear, your odds of success increase. Your position may be heard and people may respect you for putting yourself on the line. If you back down quickly, you merely reinforce your lack of credibility.

Focus Attention on the Issue

Getting people to focus their attention on tough problems can be a complicated and difficult task, particularly in large organizations where, typically, ways of avoiding painful issues—work avoidance mechanisms—have developed over many years. The most obvious example of work avoidance is denial. Even our language is full of shorthand reminders of this mechanism: “out of sight, out of mind;” “swept under the carpet;” “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Other typical work avoidance mechanisms are scapegoating, reorganizing (yet again), passing the buck (setting up another committee), finding an external enemy, blaming authority, and character assassination.

These mechanisms reduce the level of distress in an organization by deflecting attention from the tough issues and shifting responsibility away from the people who need to change. In leading, you need to hold steady in the face of these distractions, counteract them, and then redirect attention to the issue at hand. 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.

Again, a person in authority can more easily redirect attention than someone lower on the ladder. Typically, authority figures have established mechanisms for focusing attention: calling a meeting or sending an email. However, these methods do not always succeed. If you employ a routine mechanism for getting attention, people may well see the problem as routine and ignore it. So even with authority, you need to find creative ways to signal that the new situation is different.

If you are not in a position of authority, drawing attention entails risks as well as greater challenges. You might form alliances with people who have more authority and can direct attention to the issues you see.

To get the attention of higher-ups, chances are you will need to escalate your behavior or rhetoric to a level that creates some personal risk. For example, you might generate a story for an online company review web page. Leaking a story to a reporter might be effective in focusing people on your issue, but will likely be considered an act

of organizational disloyalty if you are discovered. Rising to ask a CEO a provocative question at a companywide picnic will surely get attention, but it may well be focused exclusively on you and not the issue. Your impertinence could even cost you your job, or at least cause some of your colleagues to put themselves at a safe distance from you.

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.

When you are operating beyond your authority, you tread a thin line between acting out of role such that people will notice, and being so extreme that your issue (and perhaps you) will be dismissed.

.....

Undoubtedly, you have experienced and observed the pressure on you to back off when you point to difficult, conflictive, value-laden issues in an organization. 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 bear 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.

Holding steady under a barrage of criticism is not just a matter of courage; it also involves skill. We have suggested a series of approaches to keep your bearings when you are under fire. For example, getting to the balcony, finding partners, adjusting the thermostat, pacing the work, making your interventions unambiguous and timely, bringing attention back to the issue, and showing the relevant groups a different future than the ones they imagine are all methods of dealing with the disequilibrium that you generate. In addition to these ways of assessing and taking action, however, we suggest a series of perspectives and practices that address the personal challenges of sustaining the stresses of leadership that we will explore in part three.

PART THREE

Body and Soul

Chapter 8 - Manage Your Hungers

From our own observation and painful personal experience, we know that the cleanest way for an organization to bring you down is to let you bring yourself down. Then no one else feels responsible. All too often we self-destruct or give others the ammunition they need to shoot us down.

Frequently people are defeated because, though they are doing their best, they make mistakes in how they assess and engage their environment.

But sometimes we bring ourselves down by forgetting to pay attention to ourselves. We get caught up in the cause and forget that exercising leadership is, at heart, a personal activity. It challenges us intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. But with the adrenaline pumping, 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 all have hungers, which are expressions of our normal human needs. But sometimes those hungers disrupt our capacity to act wisely or purposefully. Perhaps one of our needs is too great and renders us vulnerable. Perhaps the setting in which we operate exaggerates our normal level of need, amplifying our desires and overwhelming our usual self-controls. Or, our hungers might be unchecked simply because our human needs are not being met in our personal lives.

“Every human being needs some degree of power and control, affirmation and importance, as well as intimacy and delight.”

Every human being needs some degree of power and control, affirmation and importance, as well as intimacy and delight. We know of no one who prefers to feel entirely powerless, unimportant, or untouched in life. Yet each of these normal human

needs can get us into trouble when we lose the personal wisdom and discipline required to manage them productively and fulfill them appropriately.

Recognizing and managing these hungers is an individual effort, because each of us is unique. To employ a musical metaphor, you can think of yourself as a harp whose strings are tuned in a unique way by both your upbringing and your genetic heritage. Since each of us has our own distinctive harp strings, it follows that each person resonates a bit differently to the same stimulation. There's no such thing as a perfectly tuned harp. Each of us is highly sensitive to particular group dynamics and issues, and each of these sensitivities becomes a source of strength and weakness. You may notice an issue before anyone else does and be primed for action, but you may also see it when it's not there, or react in the wrong way or at the wrong time. Moreover, you probably miss hearing other parts of the music for which you have a tin ear.

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. This is especially true if you have strong hungers to begin with, or if your own needs are not being adequately met. Thus, all 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.

We're not suggesting that leadership requires repressing your normal human passions. But to return to our original metaphor, it is crucial to get to the balcony repeatedly to regain perspective, to see how and why your passions are being stoked. When you take on the tasks of leading, invariably you resonate with many feelings expressed by people around you. No doubt some of the feelings you bring to your professional role are "inherited"; we all carry both virtues and baggage from our parents and previous generations. Many other feelings in your job are produced by the way you resonate with the job environment itself. In each professional role you take on, you must be careful about your emotional inclination to carry the issues and sentiments of others in the organization, and be aware of how others in the environment affect you.

When you lead, you participate in collective emotions, which then generate a host of temptations: invitations to accrue power over others that appeals to your own sense of importance. 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 purposes. An inflated sense of self-importance can breed self-deception and dysfunctional dependencies.

Power and Control

The hunger for power is human. Everyone wants to have some measure of control over their life; everyone wants to experience a sense of agency. Yet some people, perhaps as a product of their upbringing, have a disproportionate need for control. They might have grown up in a household that was tightly structured, or unusually chaotic; thus they might react strongly in the midst of any organizational disturbance, having spent many years satisfying their hunger to take control. Their mastery at taming chaos reflects a deeper need for order.

That need, and that mastery, can turn into a source of vulnerability. Consider what can happen when someone with that profile plugs themself into a stressed organizational circuit. Imagine the scene: people are experiencing high levels of disequilibrium as they struggle with difficult issues; there is great chaos and conflict. The leader rides in on their white horse, ready and willing (and desperate inside) to take charge of the situation. Indeed, they appear to be a godsend to folks in the organization. And sure enough, they restore order.

This is indeed a blessing initially, because when people in an organizational system are overwhelmed, they cannot learn properly. Company learning requires some challenge to the social order, but within a productive range of disequilibrium. So someone who can bring a semblance of order to the chaos, lowering the distress to a tolerable level, provides a vital service. In this case, the leader kept the pressure cooker from blowing up.

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 employee expectations. To believe it comes from you is an illusion. Don't let it get to your head. People grant you power because they expect you to provide them with a service. If you lose yourself in relishing the acclaim and power people give you, rather than on providing the services people will need to restore their adaptability, ultimately you jeopardize your own source of authority.

Affirmation and Importance

When you take the lead, some will oppose your views and others will affirm them and 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. People may invest you with magic, and you can begin to think you have it. The higher the level of distress, the greater are people's hopes and expectations that you can provide deliverance. They may put too much faith in you.

Sometimes there are good strategic reasons to sustain people's illusions, at least for a while. In times of severe distress, people need to hope against hope. You may have to show more confidence than you personally feel.

As a senior authority during an organizational crisis, you may decide to withhold some bad news and allow your people to revere you temporarily; this strategy gains a little time if you are uncertain how much conflict they can tolerate and how fast they can take on the challenges ahead. But be careful to keep your thinking clear and strategic, and don't be lulled into complacency and overconfidence by their affirmation. 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. Over time, if you pretend to have more answers than you do, reality will catch up with you; ultimately, you risk your credibility by feigning wisdom.

In a similar vein, there may be zealots among your followers, passionate for your causes and eager to use their influence on you. In their exuberance, they may argue that your pacing strategy is an avoidance of the issues. Zealots are terrific at pushing the envelope, but they frequently set the wrong pace by failing to respect the views, stakes, and potential losses of their adversaries. Indeed, one of the great seductions of leadership comes from zealots who play to your need for affirmation and pressure you to move dramatically—and sometimes unwittingly over a cliff.

The skill of managing any tendency you might have toward grandiosity goes hand in hand with remaining mindful that people see you in your role more than they see you as a person. Indeed, what those in your professional surroundings see is the fulfillment of their goals or, conversely, the disturbing questions you represent. They see not your face but the reflection of their own needs or worries. These dominate their perceptions of you. To believe you have inherent power is a trap, both for you and for them. In the long run, dependency entraps people, and you must control your desire to foster it. Dependence can readily turn into contempt as the group discovers your mortal failings. 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. It robs them of the opportunity to develop their own strengths and settle their own issues. Don't begin to believe that the problem is yours to carry and solve. If you carry it at all, make certain you do so only for a limited period of time, while people accustom themselves to their need and ability to take responsibility for the challenge.

Of course, every human being hungers for importance and affirmation. Every person wants to matter in life, at least to somebody; but some of us are more vulnerable than others in this regard.

People with an exaggerated need to be needed scan the horizon for situations offering problems they can solve. They're not happy unless they are helping someone solve a tough issue, and the harder it is, the more important they feel. Their motto is "You've got a tough problem … I've got a solution." In a sense, they are professional scab-pickers (think "consultant"), examining people's fresh wounds, getting them to bleed a bit more, and then telling them: "We've got the remedy!" Make no mistake, these people are often wonderful and make extraordinary contributions. Just be aware that part of what impels them to serve people is their need to matter. Kept in balance, the feeling that you're on this earth for a reason generates meaning and caring, but this need can easily become a source of vulnerability. Imagine you are someone who needs too badly to be needed, and after coming into an ailing company you make one or two significant fixes. Your people say, "Wow, you're terrific!" and proceed to latch onto you in a state of uncritical dependency—just what you want! The problem is, you may start to buy into their misperception, believing you've got all the answers and can fulfill all sorts of needs. If the people around you aren't questioning you, and you've lost your capacity for self-criticism, an unconscious collusion begins to take place in which the blind lead the blind.

"You can move courageously into new terrain even if you're not convinced that you know what you're doing."

Grandiosity sets you up for failure because it isolates you from reality. In particular, you forget the creative role that doubt plays in getting your organization to improve. Doubt reveals the parts of reality that you missed. Once you lose your ability to doubt, you see only that which confirms your own competence.

Of course, the experience of going beyond your competence is also a necessary part of leadership. How can you possibly imagine yourself to have sufficient knowledge and skill to tackle the innumerable and ongoing adaptive challenges that will confront your business? 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.

Finally, when we hunger for recognition and reward in our professional lives, we may put on blinders that can cause us to run roughshod over our personal commitments and values.

Intimacy and Delight

Human beings need intimacy. We need to be touched and held, emotionally and physically. But some of us are vulnerable in the way we experience this need. We may, for example, have a special sensitivity to loneliness from having lost a parent at an early age, scurrying for solace the moment we get anywhere near that feeling. Or we may be particularly susceptible to rejection, so that whenever we begin to feel forsaken, we suspend good judgment and run to anyone willing to provide acceptance.

Through your own experience, you may indeed have become extraordinarily good at providing a holding environment for people, containing the tensions during a process of organizational change. You may have developed the great emotional and mental energy required to unite people in the midst of conflicting views and values. Indeed, like the walls of a pressure cooker, the holding environment requires strength and resilience.

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?

Chapter 9 - Anchor Yourself

To anchor ourselves in the turbulent seas of the various roles we take in life, professionally and personally, we have found it profoundly important to distinguish between the self, which we can anchor, and our roles, which we cannot. The roles we play in our organization and private lives depend mainly on the expectations of people around us. The self relies on our capacity to witness and learn throughout our lives, to refine the core values that orient our decisions—whether or not they conform to expectations.

Many people experience a rude awakening when they leave high positions of authority. Former CEOs and politicians alike find that their phone calls to important and busy people do not get through as easily, their e-mails are not answered as quickly, their requests for favors and special treatment from “friends” no longer get quick results. Such is the harsh realization that the benefits they enjoyed in the past were at least as much a function of the role they played, the position they held, as they were a product of their character.

Distinguishing Role From Self

It is easy to confuse your self with the roles you take on in your organization. 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 role with self is a trap. Even though you may put all of yourself into your role—your passion, values, and artistry—the people in your setting will be reacting to you, not primarily as a person, but as the role you take in their lives. Even when their responses to you seem very personal, you need to read them primarily as reactions to how well you are meeting their expectations. In fact, it is vital to your own stability and peace of mind that you understand this, so that you can interpret and decipher people’s criticism before internalizing it.

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. “You are a jerk” is not necessarily a personal attack, even though it is framed that way. It might mean that people don’t like the way you are performing your role. Perhaps you have not been tactful enough in making your challenge. You may have raised the temperature too high or too quickly, or you may be raising an issue people would rather leave alone. In fact, they may be right

to criticize your sensitivity or your pacing, and you may have a lot to learn to correct your style, but their critique is primarily about the issue, not about you. In the guise of attacking you personally, people are trying to neutralize the threat they perceive in your point of view.

Indeed, say you put forth an idea and it is attacked. If you accept the notion that the purpose of your intervention is to stimulate the group's work, then the attack becomes a form of the work. It is an opportunity. The resistance you receive is not a criticism of you, or even necessarily a dismissal of your point of view. On the contrary, it suggests that your input was worth reacting to, that it provoked engagement with the 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.

If 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 need to realize that you cannot have it both ways. If you are attacked, discredited, ostracized, or fired, you may feel that you have experienced a kind of assassination. But 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. It enables you to be just as involved in working on your idea as everybody else, without withdrawing or becoming entrenched in a personal defense.

Again, distinguishing yourself from your role is just as important with regard to praise as it is to criticism. When you begin to believe all the good things people are saying about you, you can lose yourself in your role, distorting your personal sense of identity and self-image. Also, people can gain control over you because of your desire to maintain their approval. Losing yourself in your role is a sign that you depend on the institution or community for meeting too many of your personal needs, which is dangerous.

Do not underestimate the challenge of distinguishing role from self. When people attack you personally, the reflexive reaction is to take it 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. As Stanton discovered, it is especially hard when your friends and the people whose support you seek are doing the attacking. But being criticized by people you care about is almost always a part of exercising leadership.

Indeed, leadership often means going beyond the boundaries of your constituency and creating common ground with other groups, divisions, and stakeholders. Adaptive work rarely falls on the shoulders of any one group. Each has its work of adjustment to do. In crossing boundaries, you may appear a traitor to your own people, who expect you to champion their perspective, not turn around and challenge their view. Violating their expectations generates a sense of betrayal, perhaps expressions of outrage. However, little of this is personal, even when it's coming from your compatriots.

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. In most situations the attack is a defense against the perspectives you embody, which threaten other people's own positions and loyalties. 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. For example, some might accuse a courageous woman of being pushy if she seeks a change in the culture of the organization. By making her style or character the issue, those who are threatened distract people in the organization from her message. Discrediting her reduces the credibility of her perspective.

Of course, everyone could learn better styles of communicating a challenging message. Unfortunately, there is no way around the fact that it is just plain difficult to pass out bad news. Nearly any boss would prefer to hire than fire. But if the boss gets deflected from the goal of helping people take in the message, and instead becomes the issue, the work won't get done and precious time will be lost.

Failing to distinguish role from self can also lead you to neglect the proper levels of role-defense and role-protection. To draw people's attention back to the issues after you have been attacked or unduly flattered, you have to divert them from your personality, personal judgment, or style. The absolute best longterm 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. We have been susceptible to these behaviors ourselves—everyone has. 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.

“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? Will Jack Welch find the strands of himself after playing the part of “Jack Welch: CEO of General Electric?” After putting all of himself into that role for so many professional years, will he know where to look?

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. In other words, distinguishing between self and role does not mean you need to avoid embodying important issues, though there are dangers when you do so, as we’ve discussed earlier. There are some situations in which you have no choice. Whether you like it or not, you will embody issues in the eyes of other people, and sometimes they will tackle you when they see you carrying the ball. At other times, you decide to incur these dangers anyway because it is the only way to move the issue forward.

This role/self distinction becomes extremely hard to practice when we get tackled in surprising ways that cut close to the bone. At those times, we find it far more difficult to get to the balcony and see that the challenges we represent to others remain distinct from our own essential identity.

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 contend 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.

Keep Confidants, and Don’t Confuse Them with Allies

The lone warrior strategy of leadership may be heroic suicide. Perhaps no one can be sufficiently anchored from within themselves for very long without allies and confidants.

Allies are people who share many of your values, or at least your strategy, and operate across some organizational 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. That means they can help you understand competing stakes, conflicting views, and missing elements in your grasp of a situation. They can pull you by the collar to the balcony and say, “Pay attention to these other people over here. You’re not learning anything from your enemies.” Moreover, if persuasive, they can engage their people in the effort, strengthening your coalition.

Sometimes however, we make the mistake of treating an ally like a confidant. Confidants have few, if any, conflicting loyalties. They 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 confidants.

Confidants 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’s 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 can put you back together again at the end of the day when you feel like Humpty Dumpty, all broken to pieces. They can remind you why it’s worth getting out there and taking risks in the first place.

When you ask them to listen, they are free to care about you more than they do about your issue. They either share your stakes completely or, better, they may not care about your issue at all, one way or the other.

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. These are people you can call when a meeting has gone sour, who will listen as you recount what happened and tell you where you screwed up. 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.

When you do adaptive work, you take a lot of heat and may endure a good measure of pain and frustration. The job of a confidant is to help you come through the process whole, and to tend to your wounds along the way. Moreover, when things are going well, you need someone who will tell you that you are too puffed up, and who will point out danger signals when you are too caught up in self-congratulation to notice them.

Almost every person we know with difficult experiences of leadership has relied on a confidant to help them get through. A governor who is making painful choices in bringing the state out of a perilous financial condition plays pool at night with an old friend who lives down the street. A businesswoman trying to change the values and culture of her company to meet new competition has long phone calls with her sister late in the evening. A bureaucrat trying to lead difficult change in his organization e-mails a new professional colleague thousands of miles away whom he just met at an intensive two-week seminar. A spouse, too, can be an excellent confidant, except of course when the issues are about the spousal relationship or family dynamics. Sometimes a confidant can be explicitly engaged. “I’m about to start a difficult process here at work. Do you mind if I call you from time to time and just pour my guts out so you can tell me what you hear?” Sometimes, of course, the dynamic is more spontaneous.

When you are discouraged and feeling low, think about an old friend, a roommate you have not seen in a decade or more, an employer or teacher who helped train you—someone who cares about you rather than any particular role you play. Give them a call. Ask them for time to hear you out. If they agree, then tell them the story, no holds barred, as well as how you feel so they can get a full picture of what is going on inside you as well as around you.

When you need someone to talk to in difficult times, it’s tempting to try to turn a trusted ally into a confidant as well. Not a good idea.

Allies can be the closest of friends. They may confide in each other about many aspects of their lives. At work, however, they have overlapping, not identical, stakes and loyalties. To protect their relationship, it becomes crucial that they also respect the boundary that separates them, and honor each other’s loyalties when those come into conflict.

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 gather and restore themselves.

A sanctuary is a place of reflection and renewal, where you can listen to yourself away from the dance floor and the blare of the music, where you can reaffirm your deeper sense of self and purpose. It's different from the balcony, where you go to get a wider perspective on the dynamics of your leadership efforts. Analyzing from the balcony can be hard work. In a sanctuary, you are out of that world entirely, in a place where you feel safe both physically and psychologically. The rules and stresses of everyday life are suspended temporarily. 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 your daily walk through the neighborhood, just to grab a few more minutes at the office. Clearly, it's when we are doing our most difficult work that we most need to maintain the structures in our lives that remind us of our essential and inviolable identity and keep us healthy.

We're not peddling a particular type of sanctuary. It could be a jogging path or a friend's kitchen table where you have tea. It could be a therapist's office, a 12-step group, or a room in your house where you sit and meditate. It could be a park or a chapel on the route between home and workplace. It doesn't matter what your sanctuary looks like or where it is. It doesn't even need to be a quiet place; your sanctuary might be as noisy as the pounding surf. 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.

Everyone seeking to exercise leadership needs sanctuaries among their anchors. We all need anchors to keep us from being swept away by the distractions, the flood of information, the tensions and temptations. As you attempt to lead people, you should

expect to encounter emotions you cannot handle unless you have a time and place to sort them out.

Human beings were not designed to deal with the nonstop modern world, so we must compensate. Getting anchors and keeping them is, at root, a matter of self-love and discipline. It is a serious recognition that we need to care for ourselves in order to do justice to our values and aspirations. Without antidotes to the modern world, we lose perspective, jeopardize the issues, and risk our future. We forget what's on the line.

Chapter 10 - What's On the Line?

We have focused in this book on practical advice that addresses the question, How can you lead and stay alive? And we have offered a variety of answers, none of them easy. Some solutions stem from your ability to analyze a situation and understand the issues, stakes, and pace of change appropriate for the people around you. Some answers lie in creating strategic holding environments for conflicts. Others emerge from your tactical ability to respond quickly to changing situations, work avoidance patterns, and deviations from the plan. And some answers can be found in the strength of your personal life, your relationships, and in your practices of renewal.

But we have not yet explored the root question: Why lead? If exercising leadership is this difficult, why bother? Why put yourself on the line? Why keep pressing forward when the resistance feels unbearable? We believe, plain and simple, that the only way you can answer these questions is by discovering what gives meaning in your life.

For most of us, surviving is not enough. If survival were the point, in the end we would surely fail: We don't live forever. However, accepting that obvious fact is never easy. It may seem ironic that in a book whose theme has been staying alive, we would promote the idea of accepting death. But the freedom to take risks and make meaningful progress comes in part from the realization that death is inevitable. Even the word "lead" has an Indo-European root that means "to go forth, die." As our Northern Irish colleague, Hugh O'Doherty, reminds us, "In the end they are gonna get you." Nothing is forever; the point is to make life meaningful while you can.

There are endless sources of meaning and significance: the amazement of the biologist who uncovers mysteries in the study of DNA synthesis; the joy of a pianist in playing a Bach suite; the satisfaction of a business owner who creates jobs and prosperity for the men and women of a community; the profound quiet of a sleeping child's breathing.

Some sources of meaning are rare; much depends on the talent, opportunities, and experiences that come our way. There is, however, at least one source available to each of us, at all times, in all circumstances. People find meaning by connecting with others in a way that makes life better.

So the answer to the question "Why lead?" is both simple and profound. The sources of meaning most essential in the human experience draw from our yearning for connection with other people. The exercise of leadership can give life meaning beyond the usual day-to-day stakes—approval of friends and peers, material gain, or the

immediate gratification of success—because, as a practical art, leadership allows us to connect with others in a significant way.

The Myth of Measurement

If the acts of leadership, available to all of us, are such a potent source of meaning, then it is worth considering again the words with which we began this book. Every day, opportunities for leadership present themselves to us, and we refuse most of them. Why?

We have devoted most of this book to exploring the dangers of leadership that make us hold back, as well as ways to diminish these obstacles and lessen the perils. In our work with thousands of men and women over the last twenty years, 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

For some people, stepping out on the line is worth the risk only if success can be seen, touched, felt, and, most of all, counted. But trying to take satisfaction in life from the numbers you ring up is ultimately no more successful than making survival your goal.

Meaning cannot be measured. Yet we live immersed in a world of measurement so pervasive that even many of our religious institutions measure success, significantly, by market share. Who's winning in the missionary competition? The Catholics, the Mormons, the Evangelicals, the Muslims, the Buddhists, the Hindus? How many Jews have left the fold?

We even witness religious organizations distorting their mission to mean "reaching more people," as if souls were a measurable commodity. Indeed, the mission of bringing the applications of spirit, which is by nature beyond measure, to our daily efforts to live good and honorable lives seems estranged in the competition that measurement fosters. All too often, "mission" is something we do to outsiders, not something that drives the work inside the community itself. We seem to forget at times that "If you save one life, you save the world."

Of course, measurement is a profoundly useful device, but it cannot tell us what makes life worth living. The challenge is to use measurement every day, knowing all the while that we cannot measure that which is of essential value. In business we

continuously measure the value of our products and respond accordingly to increase value.

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. But using measurement as a device is not the same as believing that measurement captures the essential value of anything. You cannot measure the good that you do.

Measurement is an extraordinarily useful tool. We don’t mean to diminish its utility. Three quarters of the courses at the school where we teach are based on measurement: cost-benefit analysis, economic analysis, policy analysis, financial analysis. The same is true in medical schools and business schools. But measurement is simply one artifice among many that cannot capture the essence of what makes our lives and organizations worthwhile.

If you buy into the myth of measurement, what happens to you after being in a job for twenty or thirty years? After becoming a big and important person with a big and important role, what happens when you lose that role? You are likely to think the next job, the next form of your work, has to be just as “big and important.” Otherwise, it isn’t worth doing; otherwise, you cannot find yourself. Having bought into the myth of measurement, you cannot define new modes of loving and caring, giving and mattering, unless they can be measured in the same terms as your previous work. We all know people who shriveled up inside after retiring or leaving a career because they could not find the big next thing to 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.

Maybe your company has been taken over by a huge conglomerate and you are pushed aside. Perhaps you’re actually fired from your job, or you’re secure but something is gnawing away at you inside, suggesting that this is just not right for you, or enough for you, even though it has put food on the family table for twenty years. Or you’ve stayed at home to raise the kids, and now your nest is empty.

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 makes it important.

They have identified themselves as their roles: I am the mayor, I'm a stay-at-home mom, I am a business executive. They confuse the form of their participation in life with the essence of its meaning and purpose.

If the essential ingredient of meaning in life is the experience of connection and contribution, 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.

Whatever vehicle you use is less consequential than realizing the continual possibilities for service that will surround you, right up until the end of your time.

Fundamentally, the form doesn't matter. Any form of service to others is an expression of caring. And because the opportunities for service are always present, there are few, if any, reasons that anyone should lack for rich and deep experiences of meaning in life.

Having purpose differs from having any particular purpose. You get meaning in life from the purposes that you join. But after working in a particular discipline, industry, or job for twenty or thirty or forty years, you begin to be wedded to that specific purpose, that particular form.

When you lose that purpose, that specific form, you think you have no meaningful options. We know a seventy-seven-year-old man, Bennie, who can retire with full salary and medical benefits. He's been in the same job for forty years. He no longer has the strength to do the tasks that go with the job. He refuses to quit, he says, because he does not know what he will do with his days.

Bennie fears retirement because he can't redefine the purposes in his life. Minus the form, he thinks he will lose his source of meaning. But what Bennie really has lost is something that he probably once had as a child: a sense of purpose.

The vehicles we find for meaning obviously take some tangible form, and certainly that form matters in significant ways. Some jobs suit your interests, personality, skills, and temperament; others do not. The point here is not to diminish the importance of finding forms and taking roles that personally gratify you, but simply to rekindle that youthful capacity to imagine a host of possibilities. Then, when you are forced to compromise, or when you suffer a deep setback, you can recover your natural ability to generate new forms of expression.

Exercising leadership is a way of giving meaning to your life by contributing to the lives of others. Opportunities for these labors cross your path every day, though we appreciate through the scar tissue of our own experiences that seizing these opportunities takes heart.

Chapter 11 - Sacred Heart

Exercising leadership is an expression of your aliveness. But your life juice—your creativity and daring, your curiosity and eagerness to question, your compassion and love for people—can seep away daily as you get beat up, put down, or silenced.

In our work with men and women all over the world, in all walks of life, we have seen good people take on a cloak of self-protection to insulate themselves from the dangers of stepping out. Self-protection makes sense; the dangers are real.

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. To avoid getting hurt too badly, it is easy to turn innocence into cynicism, curiosity into arrogance, and compassion into callousness. We've been there. Maybe you have as well.

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 following table, summarizes the common dynamics that take over when people lose heart.

Table 2 - Losing heart

Quality of Heart		Becomes		Dressed Up As
Innocence	→	Cynicism	→	Realism
Curiosity	→	Arrogance	→	Authoritative knowledge
Compassion	→	Callousness	→	The thick-skin of experience

Cloaking cynicism, arrogance, and callousness in more acceptable language does not hide the consequences of adopting them in the first place. Cynicism, arrogance, and callousness may be the safest ways to live, but they also suffocate the very aliveness we strive to protect.

Indeed, realism must capture both the ugly and the amazing in our lives, unvarnished. To interrogate reality unflinchingly takes courage. The cynical brand of realism, which assumes the worst will happen, is a way of protecting yourself by lowering your aspirations so that you will never be disappointed. It's like an insurance policy. If things go well, boy, that's terrific. But if you never expect anything to work out, you're never surprised, and, more to the point, you never have to experience frustration.

Furthermore, authoritative knowledge depends upon curiosity to teach you when and where to take corrective action. Maintaining doubt when the people around you yearn for certainty can strain you to the limits of your integrity. But how can you possibly learn if you do not retain a healthy measure of curiosity? And how can you continue to be authoritative unless you continue to learn?

As for the thick skin of wisdom and experience, it is natural to develop some protective cover as you grow in your role and bear the vicissitudes of life. Otherwise the slings and arrows might be intolerable. But it is too easy to buy in to the common myth that you cannot survive a demanding professional role without a tough exterior, as if you have to check your compassion at the office door. Calloused fingertips lose their sensitivity. Your listening becomes less and less acute, until you fail to hear the real messages from people around you, and cannot identify the songs beneath their words. You listen to them only strategically, as resources or obstacles in the pursuit of your objectives. In the effort to protect yourself, you risk numbing yourself to the world in which you are embedded.

Moreover, the deepest wisdom and the most profound expressions of your experience are rooted in compassion. How can you possibly guide and challenge people without the capacity to put yourself in their shoes and imagine what they are going through? How otherwise can you identify the sources of meaning that can sustain them through the losses of change?

The hard truth is that it is not possible to experience the rewards and joy of leadership without experiencing the pain as well. The painful part of that reality is what holds so many people back. As we have described, the dangers of leadership will come from many people and places, and take many forms, not only from known adversaries, but also from the betrayal of close associates and the ambivalence of trusted authorities.

Cynicism, arrogance, and callousness can come in very handy. It may often seem as though, without their protection, there is nothing between you and the experience itself. They get you through the day. In reality, however, they undermine your capacity for

exercising leadership tomorrow. Perhaps even more critically, they disable an acute experience of living.

A Reflection on Sacred Heart

The most difficult work of leadership involves learning to experience distress without numbing yourself. The virtue of a sacred heart lies in the courage to maintain your innocence and wonder, your doubt and curiosity, and your compassion even through your darkest, most difficult moments. Leading with an open heart means you could be at your lowest point, abandoned by your people and entirely powerless, yet remain receptive to the full range of human emotions without going numb, striking back, or engaging in some other defense. In one moment you may experience total despair, but in the next, compassion and forgiveness. You may even experience such vicissitudes in the same moment and hold those inconsistent feelings in tension with one another. Maybe you have. 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. Otherwise, you simply cannot accurately assess the impact of the losses you are asking people to sustain, or comprehend the reasons behind their anger. Without keeping your heart open, it becomes difficult, perhaps impossible, to fashion the right response and to succeed or come out whole.

A sacred heart means you may feel tortured and betrayed, powerless and hopeless, and yet stay open. It's the capacity to encompass the entire range of your human experience without hardening or closing yourself. It means that even in the midst of disappointment and defeat, you remain connected to people and to the sources of your most profound purposes.

Our underlying assumption in this book is that you can lead and stay alive. Leadership should not mean that you must sacrifice yourself in order to do good in the world. But you will encounter dangers and difficulties, as you may have experienced already, where you are likely to feel as if you are being sacrificed.

A sacred heart is an antidote to one of the most common and destructive "solutions" to the challenges of modern life: numbing oneself. Leading with an open heart helps you stay alive in your soul. It enables you to feel faithful to whatever is true, including doubt, without fleeing, acting out, or reaching for a quick fix. Moreover, the power of a sacred heart helps you to mobilize others to do the same—to face challenges that demand courage, and to endure the pains of change without deceiving themselves or running away.

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

You choose to exercise leadership with passion because a set of issues moves you, issues that perhaps have influenced you for a long time. These issues might have roots that were planted before you were born, in your family or in your culture; they may reflect questions that live within you and for which you've decided to devote a piece of your life, perhaps even the totality of your lifetime. Keeping a sacred heart is about maintaining innocence, curiosity, and compassion as you pursue what is meaningful to you.

Innocence

The word innocent comes from a Latin root that means, "not to injure and harm," as in "not guilty." We are not using that legal definition. Rather, 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.

Adaptive challenges require a culture to undergo some change in its norms, and that requires some abnormality. It does not mean that all norms change, but some norms must. Therefore, for change to take place, some idea has to be imported from a different environment, or exploited internally from a deviant voice from within that environment. That deviant voice may have it wrong 80 percent of the time, but that means the other 20 percent of the time, the strange, naive, but ingenious idea might be just what is needed.

When you lead people, you often begin with a desire to contribute to an organization, to help people resolve important issues, to improve the quality of their lives. Your heart is not entirely innocent, but you begin with hope and concern for people. Along the way, however, it becomes difficult to sustain those feelings when many people reject your aspirations as too unrealistic, challenging, or disruptive. Results arrive slowly. You become hardened to the discouraging reality. Your heart closes up.

As an organ, a healthy heart opens and closes every second. So how do we keep the spirit in our hearts opening, and not just closing, while in the midst of such difficult work? How do we maintain the innocence along with a realistic appreciation for the dangers involved in exercising leadership? How can you celebrate your desire to love and care, even as you recognize the realities you face, which may be hurtful?

Maintaining your innocence does not mean taking unnecessary grief. As one former student of ours expresses it, “For twenty-five years, every time I have to terminate somebody’s employment, whether for economic or performance reasons, it is enormously painful to me, and I suffer for it. I don’t think it is supposed to get easier every time, but I also don’t think I have to be stupid and not fire someone who is hurting the organization. So it doesn’t mean that I don’t act. But perhaps I don’t have enough calluses. How do I prevent this pain from becoming destructive, yet still stay smart about it? In a sense, every time I fire someone, I lose a little bit of innocence; I have to have mechanisms within myself and colleagues around me to rebuild that innocence or reconnect with it.

In response to reaching your own limits you have a choice. You could say respectfully to yourself, “You know, I can’t take anymore of this today. I can’t witness any more today. Time to turn on an old movie, look back at some family pictures, take time off, and reacquaint myself with the sweetness of life, because that sweetness exists all the time, too.” Or, you can allow your heart to close: by numbing yourself, developing a thick callus, or losing your innocence altogether.

Curiosity

Nearly all of the rewards of professional life go to the people who know, rather than the people who do not. Every day, even in a great university dedicated to learning, we see some colleagues more eager to show what they know than reveal what they do not. In business, assuredness goes a long way. People overstate their confidence in their products routinely.

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.

The dynamic starts early. By the time children reach adolescence, they already form deep attachments to having it “right.” They begin to lose that wonderful curiosity that comes from knowing what they do not know, when they assume that people with a different point of view are there to learn from, not just argue with. But the sense of mystery and wonder so precious in the early years fades fast as the routine debates develop the characteristic structure:

“I’m right,”

“No! I’m right!”

“No! I’m right!”

The unlucky ones keep winning and become the “best and the brightest.” They are unlucky because the awakenings, often come late, after the mistakes and the waste. Then, the deflating of a grandiose self-assurance becomes particularly painful and laced with regret.

A few, like Robert McNamara, who played a key role in the Vietnam War, demonstrate the extraordinary heart to revisit their mistakes and reclaim their doubts. The fact that McNamara would write deeply thoughtful memoirs analyzing his errors of judgment should stand as an inspiration for anyone taking on the risks of leadership. How many prominent people can say the same about their own memoir? Instead, layers of self-justification reinforce one another to protect some misguided notions of pride. Lessons for posterity are lost.

Is it possible to retain that childhood virtue, curiosity, even as we hone our capacity to reality-test assumptions? Are there ways to maintain a sense of the mystery of it all?

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 persuade yourself that, indeed, you do! And then you may say about your detractors, “How can they possibly doubt the value of what I am offering? Of this new technology? Of this new program?

Most of the time, if you are honest with yourself, you know that your vision of the future is just your best estimate at the moment. As we’ve said, plans are no more than today’s best guess. If you lack the heart to engage with “competitor” ideas, how can your organization possibly do the adaptive work needed to thrive in that competitive environment?

The practice of leadership requires the capacity to keep asking basic questions of yourself and of the people in your organization and community. The difference between assumptions that you hold and assumptions that hold you. The assumptions that hold you constrain you from seeing any other point of view. But we have a special and 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

At root, compassion means, to be together with someone's pain. The prefix com- means "together with," and the word passion has the same root as the word pain. We have described throughout this book both practical and transcendent reasons to maintain a reverence for the pains of change. The advice to "keep your opposition close" rests on many strong strategic and tactical arguments, for example, but it also draws upon the insight that the people who fight the hardest also have the most to lose; and therefore, they deserve the most time, attention, care, and skill.

When you lead, you cannot help but carry the aspirations and longings of other people. Obviously, if your heart is closed, you cannot fathom those stakes, or the losses people will have to sustain as they conserve what's most precious and learn how to thrive in the new environment.

Like innocence and doubt, compassion is necessary for success and survival, but also for leading a whole life. Compassion enables you to pay attention to other people's pain and loss even when it seems that you have no resources left.

.....

Opportunities for leadership are available to you, and to us, every day. But putting yourself on the line is difficult work, for the dangers are real. Yet the work has nobility and the benefits, for you and for those around you, are beyond measure. We have written this book out of admiration and respect for you and your passion. We hope that the words on these pages have provided both practical advice and inspiration; and that you have better means now to lead, protect yourself, and keep your spirit alive. May you enjoy with a full heart the fruits of your labor. The world needs you.