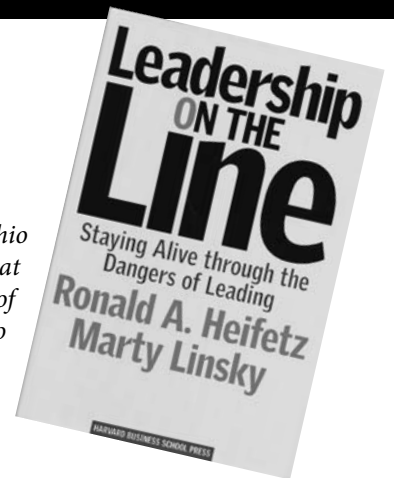


THE HARVARD EXPERIMENT

Recognizing and Conquering Adaptive Challenges

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This is the second in a series of articles written by Marg Connor, Barbara McMorow and Patty Orecchio after their experience with The Art and Practice of Leadership Development, an executive course at Harvard University, featuring Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky. The reason for three members of the Institute for Education Leadership (IEL) participating in the course was to support the IEL to stay on the cutting edge of leadership knowledge. This article explores what they learned about the possibilities and perils of adaptive challenges and the value of this perspective for issues facing Ontario school and system leaders.



The terms “adaptive challenge” and “technical challenge” are familiar to many education leaders and were certainly well known to us even before we had the opportunity to head to Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government for eight days of intensive experiential learning. We understood that:

Problems that we can solve through the knowledge of experts are technical challenges. Problems that the experts cannot solve are called adaptive challenges. Solutions to technical problems lie in the head and solving them requires intellect and logic. Solutions to adaptive problems lie in the stomach and the heart and rely on changing people’s beliefs, habits, ways of working or ways of life.

Heifetz, R. & Linsky, M. (2004, April).
When leadership spells danger. Educational Leadership, 37-38.

Adaptive challenges require experiments, discoveries and adjustments from many places in the organization or community. To make the adaptive leap to survive in the new environment requires people to learn new ways of behaving and adopt new values and attitudes. Sustaining change requires the people with the problem to internalize the change itself.

Heifetz, R. & Linsky, M. (2002). *Leadership on the line.*

Our familiarity with the concepts gave way to mild alarm as Ron Heifetz launched day three with a vivid description of the perils facing people, at any level, who mobilize others to conquer adaptive challenges.

For many individuals in the class of 63 leadership practitioners from around the globe, this alarm intensified as expectations of sitting raptly, while our heads filled with knowledge were replaced

with the reality that in this class the learning would happen “below the neck” and losing sleep as a result of new learning was deemed a successful outcome.

As we learned, the problems leaders face in today’s world, are increasingly in the adaptive or “swampy” category. Like a stone tossed into a pond, all problems generate a certain amount of disturbance or what Heifetz refers to as “disequilibrium.” Solutions to swampy challenges often take longer to create as they must be learned and tested through experimentation. They involve dealing with people who often have different viewpoints than ours. The longer people experience uncertainty and what might appear to be inaction, the more time there is for “raising the temperature” as fear and impatience begin to bubble up. As potential solutions are posed, various “factions” of people involved begin to worry about the relative size of the “losses” they may sustain as a result of an eventual solution. The rising temperature creates resistance and puts pressure on the leader to abandon the search for a solution and safely retreat to the status quo.

In times of turmoil people demand answers from authority figures, not questions and experimental solutions. The depth of change and amount of new learning needed to solve a problem is proportional to the resistance that is created. This resistance in turn creates danger for leaders. Even leaders who recognize an adaptive challenge when they see one may be pressured into backing down and settling for a technical solution.

Heifetz asks, “Is it any wonder that the biggest source of failure in leadership is treating adaptive challenges as technical problems?”

How do we diagnose the types of challenges we face? The basic test is whether the challenge can be solved by authorities applying the current know-how (technical) or whether the challenge can

only be truly conquered by the people with the problem working together to learn new ways.

Some of the following characteristics may be evident in adaptive problem-solving.

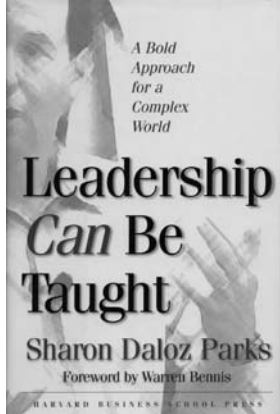
- There is persistent failure in solving the problem, after trying to apply technical solutions.
- Emotions are high and values are at stake.
- There are many players or factions with different or unknown positions on the issue.
- The solution is likely to lead to losses for at least one faction, who will have to suffer by changing their behaviour.
- Problems cannot be fixed by hiring a consultant.
- Work avoidance tactics are employed by one or more factions that create barriers to addressing the problem. (These tactics may include hiring a consultant or scapegoating a faction.)

Another leadership failure is not seeing the big picture and recognizing interdependent systems; the way that parts of systems are connected and how they relate to each other. Critical to assessing adaptive issues is the ability to open our eyes to unexamined assumptions and the larger system around us. The terms “being on the dance floor” and “moving to the balcony” used by Heifetz provide a good analogy for developing perspective. While it is essential to take action, most of us spend too much time on the “dance floor” where we are so caught up in the action that we do not see the larger patterns. Only by thinking differently and observing the action from the vantage point of the balcony can leaders get a holistic view of the immense web of relationships and patterns at work. This is what enables leaders to diagnose the situation and identify the questions to ask or actions to take.

Following the diagnosis and with a nod to evolutionary theory, the search for possible solutions or adaptations to problems requires the leader to pose three questions.

1. Which parts of the “organizational DNA” must be discarded for the future state?
2. Which parts of the “organizational DNA” must be preserved?
3. How will creativity and ingenuity be stimulated to create new, more adaptive DNA?

What additional tips can we share about getting better at exercising leadership in the face of adaptive issues? The key is that leadership is



about helping people to face up to reality and mobilizing them to change. However as we have learned, change is painful, involves conflict and can take time. Moreover the engine of adaptability is experimentation and there can be a high failure rate. Leaders must have the “stomach” for conflict and uncertainty and the resolve to stay the course while in search of solutions.

In life we associate with our allies more than the opposition. However, successfully mobilizing people to adapt, knowing what to keep and what to throw out when moving to a new reality requires knowing the beliefs and practices of others in the system. Respecting the values and concerns of everyone involved is an important lesson for all leaders trying to effect change. In class Heifetz referred to knowing the ancestry of each player or faction and understanding “the water they are carrying.” A memorable tip here was, “In light of a dilemma you are facing, think of the person with whom you have the least in common and get to know their issues. Take that person to lunch.”

One lesson we discovered is that learning all the nuanced skills and techniques to address adaptive challenges takes more than eight days at Harvard. However we also discovered that the experience has had a transformative impact and that we are thinking and behaving differently as a result. Our stomachs are stronger and we are on the balcony more often. We are sharing our learning with you, through these articles, because we fervently believe that this approach has tremendous value for Ontario schools and for breaking through to new levels of student achievement and well-being.

Want To Know More?

Read books by Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky. *Leadership Without Easy Answers* and *Leadership on the Line* are good.

If you are unable to attend Harvard to take the Art and Practice of Leadership Development course, read *Leadership Can Be Taught* by Sharon Daloz Parks with a forward by Warren Bennis.

If you are interested in taking the course, visit <http://ksgexecprogram.harvard.edu>.

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