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Book Review: Leadership Without Easy Answers by Ronald Heifetz

Deborah L. Wise

University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center

Abstract

The purpose of this book review is to create an artifact as part of my doctoral portfolio, as well as enable me to become more experienced in critical writing. Having been assigned the book *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Heifetz, 1994) as a reading, my goal is to compare and contrast this work with two other books I have read on similar topics: *The Stirring of Soul in the Workplace* (Briskin, 1998), and *The Executive's Compass* (O' Toole, 1993). Each focuses on an aspect of leadership, and how the person in authority uses conflict, values and spirit to influence those he leads. Each of these books is well written, and adds to the existing body of scholarly work in the field.

Book Review: Leadership Without Easy Answers by Ronald Heifetz

Key Principle – Adaptive Work

“Adaptive work consists of the learning required to address conflicts in the values people hold, or to diminish the gap between the values people stand for and the values they face.”

-Ronald A. Heifetz

Once upon a time, people lived from birth until death in the same community. There was little value conflict, since values were most likely shared by all members of the community as part of the inherent culture. Once we began to venture from our home community, this similarity of culture gave way to an environment that includes values and traditions that may be far different than our own. In a world system, with economies and cultures that can be very different yet right in our own neighborhood, it becomes necessary to be able to live peacefully with everyone while at the same time not losing our own unique sense of identity. This is the essence of adaptive leadership: to be sensitive to the interests of all parties involved, to give each the honor and position they require, while being mindful of a larger vision and how all parties can be orchestrated toward the same result. As our society becomes more global, this is an especially timely topic and should be part of all leadership training. Adaptive leadership doesn't deny conflict; rather it embraces conflict as a necessary agent for change.

The Author

Ronald A. Heifetz is the King Hussein Bin Talal Lecturer in Public Leadership and the founder of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard University. Given this background, the author uses many political examples to make his points about leadership, many of which

occurred during the civil rights era in the United States. This book was published in 1994, which is of course before the events of September 11, 2001. Given the nature of world events since that time, some of these earlier examples no longer seem to be relevant. The author has also written *Leadership on the Line*, which was published in 2002 and carries the same adaptive leadership theme into a more contemporary application.

Values in Leadership

The author makes the claim that leadership involves our self-images and moral codes (as opposed to being value-free). This leads one to assume that an organization (whether it be a country or a corporation) reflects the value and self-image of its leader. In an age where the names Enron and Tyco have become synonymous with greed and poor moral choices, this certainly appears to be true. O'Toole (1993) also presents a picture of an ever-complex network of interrelations and interests asking in the end, whose values will prevail. He comments that organizations are more complex than ever and that leadership requires the simultaneous pursuit of several values. His work with the Aspen Institute, an executive think tank, has produced something called a "compass card," a quadrant on which the polar positions are the ideas of Liberty, Equality, Efficiency and Community. This "compass" helps executives to explore the elements of a good society in their organizations. Briskin (1998) also mentions the conflict leaders face by saying "There is no greater challenge to the soul than the forces of authority and the group that seek its surrender." He goes on to describe the values of the groups we belong to, and how the constant balancing between conflicting value groups influences our decision-making.

Leadership Theories

Situational Leadership

A situational leader is one where the historical times produce the leader, not the other way around. A good example of this type of leader would be Abraham Lincoln, who may have been an unremarkable leader in another context. It was the nature of the times that caused Lincoln to become an unlikely public figure (as well as his untimely death). Situational leaders can rise to their leadership challenge by creating holding environments that protect followers while at the same time moving them toward a common goal.

Contingency Theory

A contingent style of leadership is dependent on the requirements of the particular situation. The events of September 11, 2001, demanded a leader who was at the same time both compassionate toward the families of those affected and resolute toward bringing those responsible to justice. Rudy Giuliani was the leader who at that moment touched the heart of a nation. He didn't ignore the conflicts caused by competing values, but rather embraced a common theme of empathy for the loss of life.

Transactional Theory

A transactional leader is one where the individual gains influence and sustains it over time, in effect becoming the embodiment of the cause they represent. Heifetz uses Martin Luther King as his representation of a transactional leader. MLK embodied the cause of civil rights and became the leader of this movement through a series of transactions over time. While this helped galvanize the civil rights movement in the 1960s, it also caused MLK to become a scapegoat, and the target of elimination.

Social Usefulness

The author states that socially useful goals not only have to meet the needs of followers, they should also elevate followers to a higher moral level. In my other reading, this has been described as transformational leadership – where the lives of followers are changed as a result of the efforts of a particular leader. O’Toole (1993) also focuses on social responsibilities, claiming that there is a persistent trade off among interests of community, efficiency, equality and liberty – an increment in one value leads to an equivalent loss in another. Briskin (1998) on the other hand, writes more about the discovery of one’s own soul and the internal moral compass that determines which social goals guide us.

Adaptive Leadership

The process of adaptive leadership is the core of what Heifetz presents in this book. While he never uses the word “process,” it is clear that adaptive leadership is a dynamic event, requiring a change in values, beliefs and behaviors of all involved. This also suggests that competing value perspectives may actually benefit adaptive success. Briskin (1998) refers to these competing values as the dances of souls in organizations, where each individual soul is a microcosm of society. The role of leadership, in many respects, is to contain the opposites and move all souls in the same direction. This has an inward – out direction of leadership, where both Heifetz (1994) and O’Toole (1993) seem to have a more outward-inward focus.

Adaptive Survival

Heifetz (1994) says that adaptive survival attempts to close the gap between reality and those values not restricted to survival. Basically, this intimates that we all have a personal lens we see the world through, and our actions and values reflect that lens. Our own biases are present in how we put facts together to view reality. Briskin (1998) mentions this lens by stating,

“The soul is not “inside” but rather the boundary between inner experience and outer events.”

O’Toole (1993) takes perhaps a more external perspective, saying that the task of leadership is to secure “the good society” for its citizens, yet every person defines what this is differently. It is then the responsibility of leadership to break the deadlock by finding areas of fundamental agreement.

Patterns of Disequilibrium

According to the author, there are three patterns to the conflict (something of a leadership triage) that arises when values challenge adaptive work:

- The current problem presents no new challenge and a response from the current repertoire may restore equilibrium
- The response to the current problem may restore equilibrium in the short term through a variety of expedient measures but may not solve the underlying problem
- The response cannot solve the problem, but the social system may mobilize to produce a new adaptation sufficient to meet the challenge.

Why People Fail to Adapt

Again, the author creates a triage of points as to why people fail to adapt:

- They misperceive the nature of the threat
- The threat may be perceived, but the challenge may be beyond the culture’s adaptive capability
- The problem and the change it demands create enough stress to develop work avoidance mechanisms – holding onto past assumptions, blaming authority,

scapegoating, externalizing the enemy, denying the problem, jumping to conclusions, or finding a distracting issue

The example used was that of the people of Easter Island, who as farmers discovered the island, and failed to make the adaptive changes necessary to thrive as a community over time. When Dutch sailors arrived at the island on Easter day, 1722, there were only a handful of descendants remaining to tell the story.

Domination in Small Groups

No matter what authority structure might formally exist, the author claims that small groups will naturally assign informal authority to a person of their own choosing. Men and women routinely establish a hierarchy of roles and look to their leadership choice for orientation, cohesion and direction. As long as the person in authority can provide the services that keep the group composed, authority will increase. If O' Toole (1993) addresses small groups at all, it is in the context of community, where people are bound by common interests and responsibilities. Briskin (1998) does a better job of describing group dynamics but more in the context of the individual soul in relation to the group.

From Dominance to Authority

Regardless of whether it is assigned, authority can be given and can be taken away in a group. Authority is conferred as part of an exchange for services rendered and until the collective power of a group is realized, authority is deferred habitually. Briskin (1998) also agrees that authority is assigned communally as opposed to power, which is more individual in it's attributes. O'Toole (1993) talks about the trade-off between community and efficiency; small groups have to balance the needs of the individual members of the group with the assigned goal.

Roots of Authority

Cultural norms often fulfill the social functions of authority. As a culture matures, a trustworthy network of authorities is required so that people internalize a fairly coherent set of norms. In well-established and coherent institutions, authority may play primarily symbolic role as the embodiment of cultural norms. If we all remember the Andy Griffith Show on television, the town of Mayberry hardly needed police enforcement. The townspeople had a well-developed set of cultural norms that were passed on from parent to child. The roles of sheriff and deputy were largely symbolic, as their authority rarely needed to be enforced. As Briskin (1998) would put it, the authority structure was there but its power rarely needed to be implemented.

Stress and Charismatic Authority

When an organization is in its infancy, the central authority may seem larger than life because they are the source of the organization's energy. When the start-up phase is over and challenges to the established norms appear, it is expected that the authority will restore equilibrium. In times of great stress, people are willing to grant leaders extraordinary power. In these situations, leaders create *holding environments*. A recent example of this has been the War on Terror. President Bush was granted extraordinary powers in the days following 9/11, and he has been criticized for not making full disclosure of some intelligence issues. As President, he needs to determine how to advance the approval of internal security initiatives with what the country really needs to know regarding classified information.

Situational Types

In the book, the author gave an excellent example to illustrate the three situational types (see table 1). He described a man who upon having some pain, went to see the physician who had treated him for a health problem several years previously. He already had built a trusting relationship with this physician based on his previous experience, which was an easy diagnosis and ultimately cured. This previous illness was a good representation of situation Type I. There was a clear diagnosis, a clear method of treatment and the responsibility for the execution of the treatment was with the physician, who wrote the prescription. With this new illness however, the news isn't as good; the patient has cancer, and now the physician assumes the role of keeper of the holding environment, deciding what to tell the patient and his family as they deal with the realities of their situation. Situation Type II is where there isn't a clear solution to the illness, and implementation requires learning on the part of both the physician, who balances what to tell the patient at any particular time and with the patient, who needs to make lifestyle choices to accommodate his declining situation. In Situation Type III, there is still a delicate balance between what the Physician can do and what the patient must accept but now the patient is more responsible for making the arrangements necessary to deal with the inevitable. Because of the prognosis, there is a continual reassessment of values and actions, creating an adaptive situation where no more technical work can be done.

Table 1

Situational Types

Situation	Problem	Solution and	Primary locus of	Kind of work
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	definition	implementation	responsibility	
Type I	Clear	Clear	Physician	Technical
Type II	Clear	Requires learning	Physician and patient	Technical and adaptive
Type III	Requires learning	Requires learning	Patient > physician	Adaptive

Mobilizing Adaptive Work

Humanity has the ability to create complex systems of authority as part of our creative and social process. Within this ability there can be appropriate and inappropriate dependencies on leadership, making a particular leader solely responsible for the attainment of a goal (in some cases, the leader himself will encourage an unhealthy dependency). What is important is to distinguish adaptive work where there is dynamic action in values adjustment, from technical work where a leader executes a definitive action to restore equilibrium (see Table 2).

Table 2

Technical vs. Adaptive Action

Social function	Situational type	
	Technical	Adaptive
Direction	Authority provides	Authority identifies the

	problem definition and solution	adaptive challenge, provides diagnosis of condition, and produces questions about problem definitions and solutions
Protection	Authority protects from external threat	Authority discloses external threat
Role orientation	Authority orients	Authority disorients current role, or resists pressure to orient people in roles too quickly
Controlling conflict	Authority restores order	Authority exposes conflict, or lets it emerge
Norm maintenance	Authority maintains norms	Authority challenges norms, or allows them to be challenged

Leadership With Authority in Adaptive Situations

Creative Deviance

Just as there are leaders who are granted authority, there can be leaders who exercise a tremendous amount of influence with no formal authority. Heifetz (1994) calls this creative deviance, enabling one in the absence of authority to deviate from the norms of authoritative

decisionmaking. While this person can work against authority, he can also be an ally in helping to move people toward a goal.

Assassination

For the transactional leader who becomes the embodiment of a particular cause over time, this embodiment can either create an immediate identity with the cause, or it can create scapegoating, where the leader becomes the source of the problem and necessary to eliminate. The assassination of Martin Luther King may have rid society of the most identifiable figure in the cause for civil rights, but his elimination didn't extinguish the cause. In fact, the opposite happened; more individuals picked up the torch for the cause until an entire society adapted to a new way of thinking.

Conclusion

Adaptive leadership is a dynamic process by which a leader balances with values and cultures of individuals with the pursuit of a common goal. While the process is well-defined in this book, some of the examples are from the 1960s and while culturally relevant, may not serve as the best current example. This style of leadership bears a resemblance to Burn's theory of transformational leadership, which places a strong emphasis on follower's needs, values, and morals. Of the two books used to compare and contrast this work, *The Stirring of the Soul in the Workplace* (Briskin, 1998) is the most similar in its inward-outward goal of knowing one's own soul before trying to lead the souls of others. The other book, *The Executive's Compass* (O'Toole, 1993), is more of an outward-inward look at balancing liberty, efficiency, equality, and community to create "the good society."

References

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