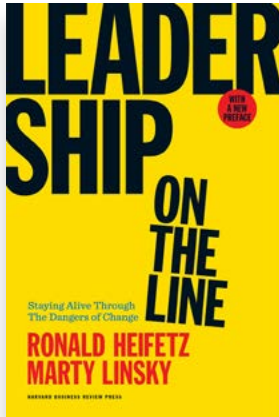


EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

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Leadership on the Line THE NUTSHELL

Harvard Business School Publishing 2002

Leadership would be a safe undertaking if your organizations and communities 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 or community. Without learning new ways by 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.

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. It also challenges their sense of competence because adaptive change forces people to question and perhaps redefine aspects of their identity, loss, disloyalty, and feeling incompetent. That's a lot to risk. No wonder people resist.

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The dangers of leadership take many forms. Although each organization and culture 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.

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." 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 or community, without critical evaluation of its merits. The herd instinct is strong. A stampede not only tramples those who don't keep pace, it also makes it hard to see another direction until the dust settles.

To see yourself from the outside you have to watch the system and the patterns, looking at yourself as part of the overall pattern. You must set aside your special knowledge of your intentions and inner feelings, and notice that part of yourself that others would see if they were looking down from the balcony.

Moving from participant to observer and back again is a skill you can learn. When you are sitting in a meeting, practice switching roles by 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 and watch the body language. Watch the relationships as well to see how people's attention to one another varies. Is it supporting, thwarting, or listening?

To lead people, we suggest you build structures of relationships to work the tough issues, establishing norms that make passionate disagreement permissible. Just 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 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 factions 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,

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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 is your ability to hold steady in the aftermath in order to evaluate how to move next.

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. 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.

Opportunities for leadership are available to you, and to us, everyday. But putting yourself on the line is difficult work. 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.