Adaptive Leadership: Diagnosing the System

Pears Foundation Professional Development Programme

Shoshana Boyd Gelfand

Based on *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*,
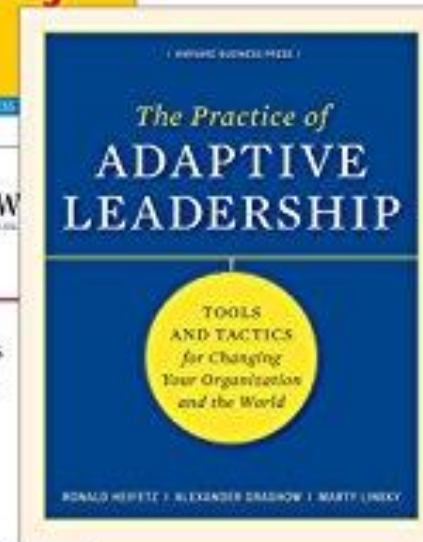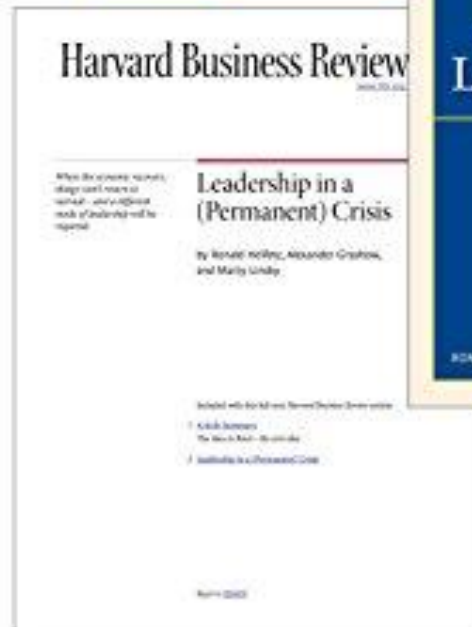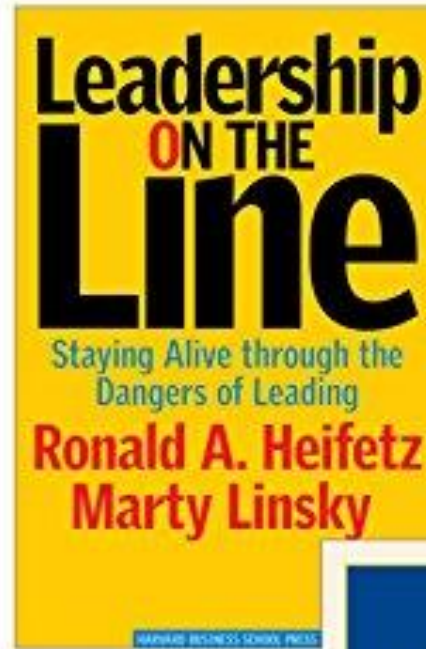by Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky

Prof. Ronald Heifetz

Leadership on the Line

Leadership without Easy Answers

The Practice of Adaptive Leadership

"The Work of Leadership" - HBR

Defining Terms

▶ LEADERSHIP

- Not a role (noun), but an activity (verb) – one "exercises" leadership
- Getting a group to address its vital challenges
- Can be exercised with or without a role

▶ AUTHORITY

- Legitimate power to make things happen
- Can be formal (e.g. elected official) or informal (e.g. trusted elder)
- Connected to a role – those who give us authority expect something in return (so authority can be either a help or a hindrance to leadership)

Technical vs Adaptive Challenges

TYPE OF PROBLEM	TECHNICAL (fixing a broken arm)	ADAPTIVE (responding to COVID-19)
Problem	Clear – easy to identify - based on experience	Unclear – hard to identify - requires learning!
Solution	Clear - based on experience and expertise	Unclear – requires learning!
Locus of work	Experts / Authority figures	Stakeholders - (those affected by the challenge)
Obstacles	Resources (time, money, attention, etc)	Values, loyalties, relationships, hearts and minds, LOSSES

Adaptive Leadership

▶ Definition: "mobilizing and sustaining people through the period of risk that comes with adaptive change"

Exercising Adaptive Leadership

▶ SESSION ONE: Diagnosing the System
   Identify the adaptive challenge (and the necessary learning)

▶ SESSION TWO: Think Politically
   Map the various stakeholders' values, loyalties, and losses

▶ SESSION THREE: Mobilize people to overcome their resistances
   Orchestrate conflict and sustain people through change

Diagnosing the System

▶ Get on the balcony

The Balcony vs The Dance Floor

▶ THE DANCE FLOOR: Where the day-to-day work gets done; full of action, to-dos, noise, and deadlines.

▶ THE BALCONY: Where you see the big picture; notice the patterns and dynamics; appreciate structural, political and social systems; reach a deeper understanding of the dance floor action

"Without the capacity to move back and forth between the field of action and the balcony, to reflect day to day, moment to moment, a leader easily and unwittingly becomes a prisoner of the system. The dynamics of adaptive change are far too complex to keep track of, let alone influence, if leaders stay only on the field of play." — Ron Heifetz

Exercise:

Getting on the Balcony

Think of a time when you got "stuck" on the dance floor and lost sight of the bigger picture:

1) Who/What kept you on the dance floor?

2) How did they keep your attention on the dance floor (consciously or not)?

3) If a similar situation were to happen again, how might you find a way to step off the dance floor and get on the balcony instead?

4) Are there any negative consequences you're afraid of that make it hard for you to get on the balcony?

Archetype 1: Gap Between Espoused Values and Behavior

A 17-year-old Civil Rights demonstrator is attacked by a police dog in Birmingham, Ala., on May 3, 1963. This image led the front page of the next day's *New York Times*.

Bill Hudson/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Archetype 2: Competing Commitments

How will the decision be made: through a mandate from on high, by majority rule, through consensus where everyone involved must agree?

What groups are going to lose something as a result of this decision, and what precisely are they going to lose?

Weighing values

Getting sick will affect your physical well-being, but wearing a mask might **make you feel as if you've given up your rights.**
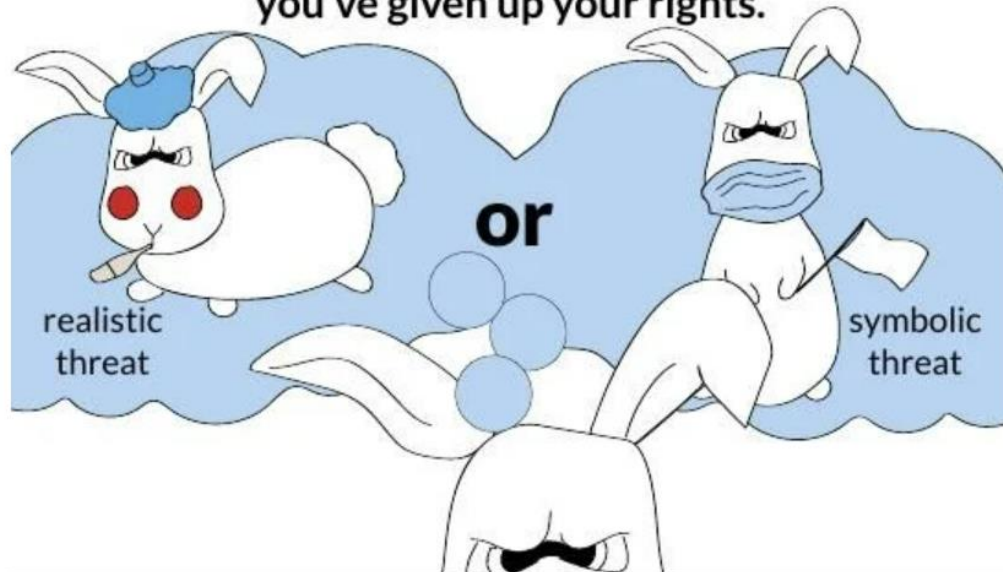
realistic threat

or

symbolic threat

Image by Alexis Allison

Archetype 3: Speaking the Unspeakable

Ex: Loss of Status or Power if the change effort succeeds

TABLE 5-2

What I thought and what was said

What I thought	What was said
	Joe, VP: "So, we really need to think about how we can generate new kinds of revenue. Expanding into emerging markets is one idea I'd like us to explore."
"Oh no. If we expand into emerging markets like China, Africa, and India, where will that leave me and my team? We'll get a lot fewer resources if the company steps up operations in those other regions."	**Me:** "There's a lot of potential in emerging markets."
What's unspeakable: the loss of status and power that could happen to my group (and other groups managing established markets) if our company dramatically changes its growth strategy.	

Exercise:

Identifying the Adaptive Challenge

Identify a problem/challenge you are facing:

1) Which elements of the challenge are technical? Which are adaptive? Which are so intertwined as to be indistinguishable at first glance?

2) Does your challenge fit one of the archetypes:

- Gap between espoused values and behaviour

- Competing commitments/values

- Requires speaking the unspeakable

3) Name the adaptive challenge

(including the learning that is required)

Exercise:

Analyse the Adaptive Challenge

RESPONSIBILITY:

Who needs to be involved in the learning process?

OBSTACLES:

What values, loyalties, beliefs, and/or behaviours are getting in the way of progress?

LOSSES:

What losses do people fear if the challenge is addressed?