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Learning to Lead Change: Building System Capacity
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Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive in Dangerous Times

Ron Heifetz, Martin Linsky

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252 pages

Heifetz and Linsky build their book around focusing on the most difficult problems faced by organizations — what they call *adaptive challenges*. Adaptive challenges are ones that go beyond our current capacity. Such challenges involve new, complex learning; they generate anxiety and avoidance because of the uncertainties; and they require involvement of all — “the people with the problem are the problem, and they are the solution.”

Leadership is dangerous according to Heifetz and Linsky because to be successful, relative to adaptive challenges, means that leaders must push into the unknown in order to find solutions, build ownership and develop new competencies.

The authors offer five strategic responses, all of which require leaders to balance difficult dilemmas: get on the balcony, think politically, orchestrate the conflict, give the work back, and hold steady.

The first dilemma involves being alternatively *on the balcony and on the dance floor*. Leaders need to see the bigger picture by distancing themselves from the fray, but also need to engage in actions in order to make an impact, observe consequences and take further action.

Thinking politically means finding partners and building relationships; and counter-intuitively it means attempting to work with opponents. Acknowledge loss as part of any change process, modeling new behavior and accepting casualties. Relating to people, especially those who are reticent or against a change direction, is central to leading and staying alive.

The third response involves *orchestrating the conflict*. It is necessary to monitor and control the temperature. In stimulating deep change there are two tasks. The first is to raise the heat enough that people sit up, pay attention, and deal with the real threats and challenges facing them. The second is to lower the temperature when necessary to reduce a counterproductive level of tension.

Fourth is *give the work back*. Think constantly about how to give the work back to the people who need to take responsibility for the problem. The other four responses help support people in this endeavor, but again, “the people with the problem are the problem, and they are the solution.”

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The fifth and final response for staying alive in dangerous times is to *hold steady* in the heat of action. Learning to take the heat and receive people's anger in a way that does not undermine the initiative is one of the toughest tasks of leadership. Taking heat with grace communicates respect for the pains of change. Another aspect of holding steady is to "let the issues ripen." Holding off until the issue is ready may be critical in mobilizing people's energy and getting yourself heard. In company with let the issues ripen is to know when to "focus attention on the issues." Getting people to focus their attention on tough problems is a complicated and difficult task because people typically find ways of avoiding painful issues. Getting on the balcony, finding partners, adjusting the thermostat, pacing the work, making your interventions unambiguous and timely, bringing attention back to the issues, and showing the relevant communities a different future than the ones they imagine are all methods of dealing with the disequilibrium that is generated with deep change.

Finally, Heifetz and Linsky advise leaders to anchor themselves, and to cultivate the virtues of an open heart which they define as: innocence, curiosity and compassion.

Why We Like This Book

It avoids superficial silver bullet solutions. It is inspiring through tackling the toughest problems and showing that there are ways of addressing them. *Leadership on the Line* is a book that elevates leadership to a bigger calling, not by appealing simply to an abstract vision, but by engaging both the heart and the mind. This is a book that is realistic about the nature of problems, and encouraging about the actions that need to be taken or avoided. It shows that leadership is dangerous, but worth it if you follow the authors' advice about staying alive. Leaders stay the most alive when they help address the adaptive challenges of the day.



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