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***Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading.* Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press. 2002. Pp. xi+241. \$27.50 (hardcover)**

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In a world where “leadership” is touted by businesspeople and politicians, journalists and writers, those using the word often seem to have difficulty defining what it actually means. Scratch the surface of a dozen leadership manuals, and you’re likely to find that many opt not to define leadership at all, while others argue that leadership is about achieving the goals of an organization, managing effectively, or – most commonly – influencing those around you.

In 1994, psychiatrist-turned public policy lecturer Ronald Heifetz stepped into this debate – with the publication of *Leadership without Easy Answers*. Heifetz contended that leadership should not be viewed as influence at all, but rather as providing an opportunity for a group to tackle a difficult problem. He called the process of creating such a crucible “adaptive work”. Adaptive work could only take place when people delved down to the root of a problem, rather than dealing with its symptoms. Instead of imposing answers, leadership involves making people take ownership of a problem, and devise a solution themselves.

Heifetz termed the type of problem requiring adaptive leadership a “problematic reality” – in other words, a state of affairs that can only be solved by changing the opinions of a particular group of people. The task of the person exercising leadership is to create an environment in which the group comes to deal with the underlying problems facing them.

Importantly, Heifetz distinguishes adaptive work from what he calls “technical work” – mechanical decisions that do not require systemic change. Technical work might include coordinating disaster relief after a flood, providing medical care to an injured person, or deciding whether a particular tax policy will stimulate the economy. Adaptive work requires new ideas, or deviant voices, which challenge a group’s cultural norms.

For several years, Heifetz, Linsky, and other lecturers have taught this style of leadership at Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, where it is now a required part of the Master in Public Policy curriculum. Instead of conventional lectures, the teaching style is part-experiential, part-Socratic – designed to dispel any notions that students have about their inherent ability to “lead”. The vocabulary of adaptive leadership infuses the course, as it does with *Leadership on the Line*. Students and readers are encouraged to “hold steady” (not to always yield to one’s instinct to intervene), “go to the balcony” (thinking about the group as a system), avoid “assassination” (when the group rejects you because it finds your ideas too threatening), and not “avoid the work” (by focusing on technical issues, making jokes, etc).

When does “adaptive leadership” appear in practice? One example that appears in both books is Lyndon Johnson’s handling of the desegregation marchers in Alabama in 1964. Governor George Wallace, an arch-segregationist, had ordered police to attack unarmed marchers calling for equal voting rights for African Americans. Several months later, Reverend Martin Luther King organized another march. Johnson was faced with impassioned calls from civil rights activists to send in federal troops, and equally fierce demands from southern politicians to stay out. Instead of acting, he held steady. Over the following few days, Wallace came to realize that his troops would be unable to maintain law and order. By forcing Wallace to deal with the problem himself, Johnson forced him to adapt his anti-federal rhetoric: in the end, Wallace himself requested that Johnson call in the National Guard.

Leadership without Easy Answers and *Leadership on the Line* are both replete with examples of successful and unsuccessful leadership, from the domains of politics, business, and personal relationships. But where the first book sought to set out the theory for a predominantly public policy audience, the second book aims to make it more accessible (in the acknowledgements section, the authors say that they are aiming to write in the spirit of Fisher and Ury’s best-selling *Getting to Yes*). *Leadership on the Line* also expands upon particular aspects of adaptive leadership. In a section on “Body and Soul”, the Heifetz and Linsky discuss the importance of not playing the role of the person with all the answers, how to avoid assassination, and the value of being anchored to a set of values.

Unfortunately, while this will be the most novel section for those familiar with the first book, it also proves to be the most disappointing, since it ducks the challenges facing adaptive leadership. The greatest problem with the theory of adaptive leadership is that it presumes that each problematic reality has its own right answer, which will become clear to all participants if only they focus on the underlying issues. Heifetz and Linsky appear to believe that all problems have an inherent truth – the challenge is to search for it. Missing almost entirely is the recognition that many problems have no “right” answer – and are themselves the product of differing sets of values.

After laying the groundwork in *Leadership without Easy Answers*, one might have hoped that this book would have dealt with the most profound question in Heifetz’s theory: what happens when adaptive leadership confronts relativism? What if we believe that individuals’ criteria for judgment can vary with time, circumstance and culture? It is all very well to present examples involving racism in the 1960s, companies that are unwilling to accept inevitable change, or individuals reluctant to face the future. But how would adaptive leadership apply to the clash of beliefs between radical Islam and American capitalism? To the rift between reformers and traditionalists in modern China? To the Catholic Church’s insistence that the use of contraception to prevent HIV spreading in Africa is a sin? When core values differ, applying adaptive leadership becomes a far more difficult task.

Alas, none of these problems are addressed in *Leadership on the Line*, which concludes with long parables from the lives of the two authors, and statements such as “...leadership allows us to connect with others in a significant way. The word we use for that kind of connection is love.” (p.209). Instead of deepening our understanding of adaptive leadership, the book appears to be verging towards the self-help literature.

As well as needing to be more rigorous in its treatment of the theory of adaptive leadership, it would also be useful if some of the examples in the book were tightened up. Heifetz and Linsky attribute Lee Kwan Yew's electoral success in the mid-1960s to his "capacity to listen to and speak with the people in their own languages" (p.64). Yet – perhaps because they rely only on material provided by Lee – they omit to note that Lee was also assisted by the summary incarceration of many of his political opponents, including the politically formidable opposition leader, Lim Chin Siong, who was more linguistically skilled than Lee, and arguably more in tune with ordinary Singaporeans. Secondly, in discussing George Bush Sr's decision not to invade Baghdad, they imply that it was clear in 1991 that this was the ideal option. Yet given that Bush Sr has recently stated that he expected Saddam Hussein to fall in the early-1990s, Heifetz and Linsky seem to be relying heavily on the benefit of hindsight. Thirdly, given that Heifetz is the founding director of the Center for Public Leadership, it would probably have been helpful if the authors had noted that Leslie Wexner, whose adaptive leadership they praise, is also a substantial donor to the Center.

Despite these difficulties, adaptive leadership is a challenging and innovative theory – much richer, in many ways, than the conventional notion of leadership-as-influence. As a framework for analyzing organizational behavior, adaptive leadership could potentially be applied to a wide range of situations. Yet the theory would also benefit from more a more rigorous approach. Hopefully *Leadership on the Line* will inspire others to explore some of the "problematic realities" that lie at its core, and further develop what is clearly one of the most interesting theories in the emerging field of leadership studies.