RONALD A. HEIFETZ

LEADERSHIP

WITHOUT

EASY
ANSWERS

Leadership Without Easy Answers

Ronald A. Heifetz

Foreword

Richard E. Neustadt

This book is the product of teaching.

The Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University teaches
students at four levels: undergraduates in voluntary, noncredit study
groups; recent graduates in two-year Masters programs; midcareer
students, on average ten years older, in one-year Masters programs;
and senior officials, civil as well as military, in a range of short
courses called "executive programs." Much of what we teach is
adapted from traditional disciplines thought to be particularly rele-
vant for public policy and its analysis, mainly from economics,
political science, political philosophy, and sociology.

Some courses, however, are framed not by disciplinary concepts
but rather by the questions our experienced students draw urgently
from their own work in public life. "Exercising Leadership," a course
offered in various versions at all graduate levels of our student body,
attempts to give students insight on, and useful tools for working in,
a range of roles, unofficial and official, where leading others can
become essential to effective performance. Some of our students seek
such roles in elective politics, some in the military, some in law or
medicine, more in civilian bureaucracies, public, nonprofit and pri-
vate—but all will have the lead role thrust at them, perforce, as task
or opportunity, through the group memberships that mark their
professional and personal lives. Knowing this from experience, our
more mature students press us for something they can learn about
leadership—and take with them back to work.

But what? A decade ago we asked Dr. Heifetz, a young psychia-
trist, as well as a skilled musician, who had also studied with us and

so knew his fellows well, to take that question and address it afresh in concert with our students. He has done so ever since. This book is the result.

I find it a striking achievement. It presents concrete prescriptions resting on hypotheses immediately relevant for anyone who needs to take the lead in almost any sort of social situation, under almost any organizational conditions. Heifetz illustrates what he prescribes both from the vantage point of highest public office and from that of intimate interpersonal relations. On the one hand, here are the likes of Lyndon Johnson, Martin Luther King Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi, both in triumph and in tragedy. On the other hand, here are military officers and men, doctors and patients, college students, and local civic groups. Some manage, some butcher, the leader-follower relationship. Some, like LBJ, do both in turn. The cast of characters is varied, wide-ranging, and unfailingly of interest, sketched with precision, touched by empathy, and always on point: illustrating something a practitioner can try to do (or avoid doing) in a concrete effort to take leadership on something in particular, sometimes from a position of authority, sometimes not.

This prescriptiveness is what distinguishes Heifetz's book from most works in a literature on leadership as broad as it is diverse. In the English language alone it cascades down from Shakespeare to contemporary sociologists, from Samuel Pepys to contemporary memoirs and biographers. Mostly it describes, prescribing, if at all, only by inference, the inference of analogy: "If the shoe fits, wear it." Heifetz, in contrast, uses description only to illustrate, and his illustrations serve only to reinforce his analysis, which is prescriptive. It rests upon hypotheses of social interaction, some of which have roots in Freudian psychology, some in anthropology, some in music, but all of which have been exposed to long years of refinement by the harsh light of reactions from practitioners in public life with work to do, as well as lives to live.

Heifetz's ten years with practitioner-students has done for him somewhat the same thing seven years of Washington experience once did for me, and it has brought him, among other places, to the same ground I traversed more than thirty years ago in *Presidential Power*. That is the ground occupied by the maker of choices in a political system's highest formal authority, from whom leadership is both expected and resisted by others as matters of course. I dealt with one

such, the American President in the then contemporary setting. I sought rules of thumb to help him think strategically. All I could prescribe for such a one was that he think today about tomorrow's implications in each act of choice, with special reference to his prospects for prestige and reputation. This may have been good advice, as far as it went, but it was ambiguous: It jumbled up the long run with the short. So it was hard to apply predictively with confidence—as subsequent observers, even Presidents, have found.

Heifetz's advice is richer, more suggestive, hence I hope more usable, because his analysis goes deeper into what an authority figure of that sort could do, both to inform himself and to guide purported followers. Take note of social stresses; they are clues to needed work. Take note of attacks upon you: they are clues to work avoidance. Do not try to do the work yourself; instead, provide those followers a holding environment within which you challenge them. Then get up on the balcony—afford yourself perspective on the scene—to spot the pitfalls and to take corrective action, changing pace or path. These are terms of art; I leave it to Heifetz to define them. But I happily acknowledge that, taken together, his rules of thumb are likelier than mine were to help a person in the role of chief executive, or some such, build effective strategy.

A further strength in Heifetz, which I cannot claim, is that his rules of thumb address strategic thinking not only by leaders in positions of authority but also by those lacking such positions, endeavoring to stir their neighbors from the side, or from the rear. Some years ago, I talked with two state legislators both of whom felt they had gained much from the Heifetz course. The one, a committee chairman, went home confident he could steer his committee better than before. The other, younger, a "backbencher," went home feeling able to convince and move his seniors, chairs included, from behind!

So "leadership" for Heifetz is distinct from the positions of authority which usually are thought to be its starting point. His rules of thumb, his principles, apply to anyone who itches to get something done through and in company with others. That is a widespread sensation, especially in a democracy like ours, the universe Heifetz addresses. It follows that this book should be widely read, used, and taught. I hope it is.

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Contents

Introduction

On Wednesday, April 29, 1992, Los Angeles exploded in the most violent and destructive American urban riots of the century.[1] The acquittal of four white policemen for criminal assault in the widely televised beating of black motorist Rodney King unleashed a fury of looting, arson, and killing painfully reminiscent of the 1960s. Thousands of federal troops helped to restore order, but not before fifty-two people were dead, hundreds were wounded, and more than one billion dollars worth of property was destroyed.[2] On Friday evening, two days later, President George Bush, in a nationally televised speech, focused on the immediate sources of distress, condemning the violence and promising a swift restoration of order while suggesting federal action to ensure justice for King. He did not use his authority to mobilize commitment to the larger questions that underlay the riots—racism and chronic economic disparity.[3]

Coincidentally during the riots, I was in Washington, D.C., consulting in the government. The following three questions came up repeatedly: Was Bush exercising leadership? What criteria could we use to judge his actions as events were unfolding, without the benefit of historical hindsight? Was his focus too narrow in responding to symptoms rather than causes, or was it a necessary short-term tactic in a strategy to address the larger issues? This book, the product of a decade's research and teaching at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, addresses questions such as these about leadership, authority, and the challenge of tackling very hard problems.

1

Today we face a crisis in leadership in many areas of public and private life. Yet we misconceive the nature of these leadership crises. We attribute our problems too readily to our politicians and executives, as if they were the cause of them. We frequently use them as scapegoats. Although people in authority may not be a ready source of answers, rarely are they the source of our pains. Pinning the blame on authority provides us with a simple accounting for our predicaments. "Throw out the rascals! *They're* the reason we're in this mess!" Yet our current crises may have more to do with the scale, interdependence, and perceived uncontrollability of modern economic and political life. The paucity of leadership may perpetuate our quandaries, but seldom is it the basis for them.

Furthermore, in a crisis we tend to look for the wrong kind of leadership. We call for someone with answers, decision, strength, and a map of the future, someone who knows where we ought to be going—in short, someone who can make hard problems simple. But problems like the Los Angeles riots are not simple. Instead of looking for saviors, we should be calling for leadership that will challenge us to face problems for which there are no simple, painless solutions—problems that require us to learn new ways.

We have many such problems: uncompetitive industry, drug abuse, poverty, poor public education, environmental hazards, ethnic strife, budget deficits, economic dislocation, and obstacles to constructive foreign relations. Making progress on these problems demands not just someone who provides answers from on high but changes in our attitudes, behavior, and values. To meet challenges such as these, we need a different idea of leadership and a new social contract that promote our adaptive capacities, rather than inappropriate expectations of authority. We need to reconceive and revitalize our civic life and the meaning of citizenship.

These challenges are the subject of this book. To introduce them, it seems only fair that I introduce myself and the baggage and resources I carry into this study. I am a psychiatrist, musician, and lecturer in public policy at the Kennedy School of Government, where I direct the school's Leadership Education Project. As a physician, I carry several biases. The first is a belief that many problems are embedded in complicated and interactive systems. In medicine, for example, we want to know how the body will react to the opening in its defenses when illness sets in.

Most professionals have a systems bias. Car mechanics, business executives, and urban planners think systemically about problems, focusing on the interacting parts of a car, business, or city. They often intervene in a part of the system distant from the location of the symptom. When a car fails to start in the morning, a mechanic rarely locates the problem in the key switch itself, but several feet away in the battery, starter, an electrical connection, or the alternator. When citizens of Los Angeles rioted in response to the court's decision in the case concerning Rodney King, the problem was not just police brutality but injustice writ large—the festering issues of unemployment, poverty, inequity, and prejudice.

The second bias from biology is to assume that much of behavior reflects an adaptation to circumstances. An organism's responses to stress—whether the stress is induced by the climate, competition, food supply, sexual activity, or parenthood—represent adaptations developed over the course of evolution. Often, biological adaptations are transformative, enabling new species to thrive in changing environments. A most dramatic example is the evolution of our human hands, which seem to have been the trigger for a series of major adaptive leaps, including upright posture and the human brain.[4] Together, these responses to ecological challenge have given us the means to transform our world.

By adapting socially, I mean developing the organizational and cultural capacity to meet problems successfully according to our values and purposes. And when there are conflicts over values and purposes, which happen frequently, the clarification and integration of competing values itself becomes adaptive work.

As in biology, social adaptations run the gamut from minor to transformative change. By adapting, I do not mean accepting the status quo, or resigning ourselves to a new and bad situation. When President Bush first met with members of his Cabinet to respond to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Nicholas Brady, the Treasury Secretary, presented a strategy for coping with high oil prices in the near, medium, and long term were Iraq to stay in Kuwait and keep prices up. But Bush emphatically refused to *"adapt"* to this invasion.[5] His use of the term makes sense and communicates clearly, but it is not the way I use the term here. By adaptation I do not mean merely *coping,* even though coping may at times be a critical part of adapting.

The orchestration of many countries along with the United Nations to meet the challenge of a belligerent Iraq was the beginning of adaptive work par excellence. To break old myths in the Middle East, form new international alliances, invigorate the United Nations, and bring together much of the world community required many people around the globe to clarify values and change attitudes, beliefs, and behavior. A new world order that requires people to learn better ways of living together would be an enormous social adaptation, were we to achieve it. Of course, adaptation requires accomplishment as well as aspiration.

As a third bias, I think of authority relationships in terms of service. My job as a physician consists of helping people solve the problems for which I have some expertise. That is why they authorize me: Authority is a trust. If in some problem situations my latitude for action—my authorization—must expand, then the bases of my trust may have to change.

Furthermore, having a service orientation means having at once a practical and prescriptive view. In being "practical," I look for ways to apply theory and research to everyday problems. In "prescribing," I give advice, not simply by taking the patient's complaint at face value but by interpreting it. Problems often present themselves ambiguously. I interpret complaints both as symptoms of biological stress and as indicators of psychological or social imbalance in the individual's work and support system. I include the patient's environment in my analysis of problems. Similarly, outside the context of medicine, I consider a CEO's complaint about his loss of power as a symptom of an underlying problem within his organization. Perhaps the CEO's influence has diminished because he recently broached disturbing issues in his organization, and the response was to wall him off. In the medical sense, it would be poor practice to give advice based simply on someone's initial complaint. Prescription requires analyzing the problem in the larger system.

This may sound obvious, but its implications are not. Many consultants and theorists of leadership think they have completed their task by advising the executive or politician on how to gain more power, if that is what he asks for. In some cases, they may be right. Yet it is not always enough simply to give someone what he thinks he wants. One may have to interpret the executive's wishes in the

context of problems facing the organization in order to help him clarify the systemic problem so that he can then clarify what he wants. Perhaps he would rather move the organization to face an issue that is being avoided than to simply regain power. Perhaps he would willingly trade power to mobilize attention to the issue. Perhaps he has identified an issue not quite ripe for his organization's attention and should slow down. The loss of power may indicate that the issue requires a change in tactics.

As a psychiatrist, I believe that many adaptive and communicative processes are unconscious, and I learn about them by inference. People do not always say what they "really think" or understand why they do what they do. Moreover, many difficulties with making headway on problems arise from poorly orchestrated and unresolved conflicts—internal contradictions in values, beliefs, and habit. Furthermore, I also believe that people's defenses deserve respect. In identifying and raising issues, I assume that people and their social systems are doing the best they can given their adaptive capacity and the challenges they are up against. I assume they are working on real problems, even if the manner of work is distorted and riddled with avoidance. Their behavior is their effort to adapt. As a consequence, I intervene in people's lives and social systems with the aim of increasing their adaptive capacity—their ability to clarify values and make progress on the problems those values define.

Finally, psychiatry has a bias regarding how people accomplish adaptive work. In psychotherapy, people adapt more successfully to their environments, given their purposes and values, by facing painful circumstances and developing new attitudes and behaviors. They learn to distinguish reality from fantasy, resolve internal conflicts, and put harsh events into perspective. They learn to live with things that cannot be changed and take responsibility for those that can. By improving their ability to reflect, strengthening their tolerance for frustration, and understanding their own blind spots and patterns of resistance to facing problems, they improve their general adaptive capacity for future challenge.

Policy experts proceed with a similar bias. They help communities by interpreting and analyzing problems, distinguishing cause from effect, fact from fiction, and formulating and offering possible solutions. They too believe that facing problems is better than neglecting

them. Indeed, they complain, quite understandably, about the resistance they meet to the troubling information they gather, analyze, and offer.

As a musician, I bring several metaphors from music to the study of leadership. Music teaches that dissonance is an integral part of harmony. Without conflict and tension, music lacks dynamism and movement. The composer and the improvisational musician alike must contain the dissonance within a frame that holds the audience's attention until resolution is found.

Music also teaches to distinguish the varieties of silence: restless, energized, bored, tranquil, and sublime.[6] With silence one creates moments so that something new can be heard; one holds the tension in an audience or working group, or punctuates important phrases, allowing time for the message to settle.

Creating music takes place in relation to structures and audiences. Structural limits provide scaffolding for creativity. Plato put it this way: "If there is no contradictory impression, there is nothing to awaken reflection."[7] People create in relation to something or someone. Although the audience may be safely tucked inside the composer's mind, still it is there. Because we do not think of creativity as a product of relationship, audiences often do not know their power. In a hall of five thousand, one person in the back of the second balcony talking to a neighbor or getting up to leave has all too real an impact. So too, in politics and organizations, people mistakenly look to an authority figure, presuming that he or she performs independently of them.

Music teaches what it means to think and learn with the heart. In part, it means having access to emotions and viewing them as a resource rather than a liability. It also means having the patience to find meanings left implicit. When I was a student in the Master Class of Gregor Piatigorsky, the great Russian cellist, we cellists would play a phrase of Brahms or Shostakovich, and Piatigorsky would launch into a story that seemed at first to come from nowhere with no apparent relevance to what we were doing. In time, he would often land hawklike on his subject. But sometimes the challenge of finding the connection was ours. If we looked hard, we could usually discern his intent, or find our own lesson beyond his intent. We had to take responsibility for our learning.

With this background, I have spent the last ten years developing and teaching courses in leadership and authority to young adult, midcareer, and executive students at Harvard. They have come from governments, nonprofit institutions, and profit-making enterprises throughout the United States and abroad. They have included top- and middle-level managers in public agencies and private businesses, members of Congress, congressional staff, mayors, state legislators, city officials, entry-level public servants, diplomats, all levels of military officers, foreign officials, journalists, community organizers, and heads of banks. A few have been graduate students in law, business, education, divinity, medicine, public health, and international development.

These practitioner students, many hundreds of them by now, have given me the means to develop, test, and refine a set of ideas about leadership. Beginning with the assumptions and metaphors of my past, I have plied them for their wisdom. This book is the product of our joint daily efforts to elucidate their successes and failures.

Teaching students who are practitioners has forced me to look for the fine line between generalization and practical guidance. Generalizations are needed to speak to students from every conceivable kind of organization and culture. I could not teach so varied a group without looking for generic ideas. Yet at no time could I get away with teaching theory disconnected from reality, as I might with a class of undergraduates. Practitioners have little patience for ideas that fail to speak to real experience. My students have forced me to develop a general theory that has practical application.[8]

My practitioner students have directed my attention to the difficulties they see in exercising leadership and have slanted my theory in the direction of the kinds of adaptive work that generate perceptions of loss, real or imagined, by people facing change. In contrast, I have spent much less time on other forms of adaptive work, for example, the entrepreneurial challenge of spotting and seizing untapped opportunities or the challenge of sustaining excellence in a well-functioning operation.

The theory presented here is empirical in the sense that it reflects engagement with real problems. But it is not empirical in the rigorous sense of methodically categorizing and selecting cases on which to examine and test the full range of possible hypotheses. In the emerg-

ing field of leadership analysis, this book represents theory-building—an effort to provide a powerful and practical conceptual framework from which to launch more focused empirical research. The book provides a source of ideas, interpretations, and conjectures, many of which are illustrated but none of which is proven.

My view of leadership is organized around two key distinctions: between technical and adaptive problems, and between leadership and authority. The first points to the different modes of action required to deal with routine problems in contrast with those that demand innovation and learning; the second provides a framework for assessing resources and developing a leadership strategy depending upon whether one has or does not have authority. Viewed in these ways, for example, our questions about Bush's leadership and the Los Angeles riots become: What adaptive challenges in Los Angeles and the country at large gave rise to the riots? And what resources and constraints associated with presidential authority in an election year did Bush have for leading the nation in meeting those challenges? Furthermore, how could people without authority, or with less authority, exercise leadership on the issues without waiting for the President?

Steeped as I am in the U.S. constitutional system, my conception of leadership is shaped fundamentally by it. If my argument has relevance for people from societies with other politics, that would be fortuitous. This is an argument about the strategies of leadership most suitable to a democratic society, as well as for economic institutions that aspire to compete in the modern world, and for other institutions that need to inspire intense commitment of members (particularly those ascribing to modern norms of democracy and self-expression) rather than mere compliance.

Part One presents an overview of the meaning of leadership, focusing particularly on the concepts of adaptation and authority. Parts Two and Three focus on strategies of leading with and without authority. Part Four concludes with practical recommendations for leading and staying alive.

Throughout these discussions I use cases not as evidence but to illustrate theory and enrich speculation about how individuals might think about leadership in a variety of settings. Some of these stories may touch on the reader's experience. They include interpersonal,

small group, and organizational problems, as well as local, national, and international affairs. Some are part of our recent and shared history: "Star Wars," civil rights, and Vietnam. Although most of the cases are taken from the public realm, these ideas have been tested in other contexts as well: businesses, religious institutions, schools, and nonprofit organizations.

This book is meant for those who lead in this place and time. Although I count on my colleagues in the academy to analyze, test, refine, and deepen this argument, my aim here is to provide the practitioner with a practical philosophy of leadership—an orienting set of questions and options for confronting the hardest of problems without getting killed, badly wounded, or pushed aside.