

## BOOK REVIEW

# LEADERSHIP, NOT LEADERS: REFLECTIONS ON RONALD HEIFETZ'S THEORY OF ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

by Ian McAuley

**How can we mobilise the resources of a group or society to make progress on the difficult issues they face? Policy commentator Ian McAuley puts Heifetz's model of adaptive leadership into the Australian context.**

There is no shortage of works on leadership: a search through the National Library catalogue throws up 451 books and journals with 'leadership' in the title. Writings on leadership tend to fall into two categories: analysis of political and business 'leaders' such as Winston Churchill and Jack Welch, and advice on how to become a successful 'leader'.

A third and very small category is about 'leadership' as something separate from 'leaders'.

### THINKING ABOUT 'LEADERSHIP' RATHER THAN 'LEADERS'

Ronald Heifetz of the Centre for Public Leadership at the Kennedy School of Government has written three books on leadership – one alone, two in association with other authors – which hardly mention the word 'leader'.<sup>1</sup> Rather, they are about the hard work of *leadership*, a set of activities which do not necessarily attach to those holding positions of authority.

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1. R.A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994, 1998; R.A. Heifetz and M. Linsky, *Leadership on the line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, Harvard Business School Press, 2002; R.A. Heifetz, M. Linsky and A. Grashow, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*, Harvard Business School Press, 2009

Authority is generally associated with a particular position in an organisation – a CEO, a shift supervisor, a colonel, a corporal, a prime minister, a local government administrator. The boundary of responsibility for such positions is usually set out in a job description or a legislative mandate, and for the most part the work of the people in those authority positions is about directing, planning, controlling and organising – the textbook functions of management.

Heifetz defines leadership as something quite different. He sees leadership as a set of activities involving the mobilisation of the resources of a people or of an organisation to make progress on the difficult problems they face. Those holding positions of authority may exercise leadership, but so too may others who hold no positions of authority.

He is wary of the traditional 'leader-follower' model, because 'mobilising the resources of a people or organisation' involves handing the work to the people involved. The best work of leadership is often unseen and unsung.

The 'leader-follower' model prevails, however, particularly in times of stress when people seek out the strong 'leader' to solve their problems, and it is easy for those who step into this role to foster dependency. When the 'leader' fails to deliver, however, she or he is unceremoniously dumped – metaphorically 'assassinated'. Australia's federal political scene provides many cases in point. Similarly in the private sector, we often see a surge in a company's share price following the departure of a CEO and the appointment of a new one, an indication of heightened expectations and an assumed dependence on the 'leader'. Heifetz is particularly dismissive of the 'charismatic leader'.

'The pitfall of charisma... is unresolved dependency', he writes.<sup>2</sup>

Heifetz points out that the work of authority and the work of leadership are often in conflict, because while the work of authority is generally about maintaining order and protecting the organisation from disruption, the work of leadership, in tackling difficult problems, can lead to distress, dissonance, disorder and disequilibrium.

The 'difficult problems' to which he refers are those presenting stakeholders with an adaptive challenge, where there are no straightforward solutions, where there may be no clear short-term 'win-win' outcomes, and where parties face actual or apprehended loss. Often the nature of the challenge is far from clear: part of the work of leadership lies in clarifying the nature of the challenge.

## TECHNICAL AND ADAPTIVE PROBLEMS

Heifetz distinguishes clearly between *technical* and *adaptive* problems. Organisations with established authority structures are adept at solving technical problems. But as would be well known to those who work on Second Track processes<sup>3</sup>, there is no clear handbook for dealing with adaptive problems. In the most recent of his three books, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, he stresses the importance of flexibility and experimentation in handling challenges.

The table overleaf, adapted from that same book,<sup>4</sup> shows the distinction between the way technical and adaptive challenges should be handled. In handling adaptive challenges there is no one locus of work: all stakeholders should be involved, and the task of leadership lies in mobilising their resources.

2. *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, p. 247

3. P. Fritz, Second Track to Success; C. Fritz-Kalish, Twenty Years on the Second Track: GAP Case Studies, *Journal of Behavioural Economics and Social Systems*, 2019, vol. 1 issue 1

4. Taken from Figure 2.1 'Distinguishing technical problems and adaptive challenges', omitting, for the sake of clarity, the 'technical and adaptive' category which calls for a mixed approach.

## DISTINGUISHING TECHNICAL PROBLEMS AND ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES

KIND OF CHALLENGE	PROBLEM DEFINITION	SOLUTION	LOCUS OF WORK
Technical	Clear	Clear	Authority
Adaptive	Requires learning	Requires learning	Stakeholders

One could conceivably put a fourth column on to this diagram, specifying the type of approach – First Track or Second Track – corresponding to technical and adaptive problems.

Heifetz stresses that we can ‘make progress’ on adaptive challenges, but ‘solving’ them may be out of reach at least in the medium term, because the stakeholders’ adaptive work may involve living with the fact that some conditions have to be accepted. Those involved in Second Track processes will see that there are only shades of definitional difference between ‘adaptive’ problems and ‘wicked’ problems: most can be classified either way.

Public policy responses to climate change illustrate some of the differences between technical problems and those posing adaptive challenges. The transition to renewable energy presents huge technical problems for power companies and government regulators – problems to do with reliability of supply, provision of transmission infrastructure and affordability. In dealing with the consequences of climate change, insurers need to work with areas of uncertainty that are outside their well-established risk models.

The problems presenting adaptive challenges are not so clearly defined, however. Maybe international pressure to account for Scope 3 emissions, or a collapse in thermal coal prices, will see a rapid reduction of mining for thermal coal. Either way, there would be a concentration of losses among those involved in coal mining, including all people in

communities where the local economy is dependent on coal mining. Policy analysts may be able to assess the immediate financial losses of the people involved, but even if alternative economic activity is available, there will still be losses – companionship, prestige, autonomy and community, to name some qualities that people value but that are not always articulated. Even before there is any work on structural adjustment, good leadership involves identifying, articulating and respecting these losses – a task that involves much more listening than talking, and for which those conditioned by a successful experience of ‘directing, planning, controlling and organising’ may be poorly suited.

Heifetz acknowledges that the distinction between technical and adaptive work is not always clear-cut. In the Australian bushfires of 2019–20, many firefighters had to deal with the technical task of assessing the best way to deploy their limited resources, while dealing with the tough task of urging people to abandon their properties. The task of leadership can fall to people well down the line.

Sometimes what initially presents as a technical problem is actually a manifestation of a significant adaptive challenge. An example is presented by the crashes of two Boeing 737 Max aircraft in late 2018 and early 2019. There was certainly a technical problem, but it took time for the adaptive problem, which was about the culture of the corporation following the Boeing-McDonnell-Douglas merger, to emerge.

Heifetz warns of the way policymakers often try to treat adaptive problems as if they are technical problems. Although they may require a large commitment of administrative resources, the solution of technical problems is reasonably straightforward, while adaptive problems can be politically confronting. For example, in dealing with climate change it may be tempting for a government to go on handing out drought relief and carry-on finance to struggling farmers in the arid and semi-arid zones. That is a technical approach, sitting within current administrative structures. It is much harder to confront the possibility that some areas may have become unviable for grazing – a problem involving many stakeholders and much more distress.

## WORK AVOIDANCE

Deliberately defining a problem as a technical one when it is really an adaptive one is an example of what Heifetz calls 'work avoidance'. There are many other ways we can avoid working on hard issues. One way, in domestic, corporate and political life, is simply to deny its existence. Another, favoured by governments, is to shove the problem down the line by calling an inquiry, preferably one that will report after the next election.

The most destructive form of work avoidance is to sheet blame for the problem, or at least a manifestation of the problem, on to a particular individual or defined group. The individual scapegoat is often the authority figure, the 'leader'. Politically, it is usually the head of the party in office. Ethnic minorities and dissident protesters can be fair game.

When taken to extremes, scapegoating can have disastrous consequences, as in Hitler's scapegoating of the Jews, or in Stalin's scapegoating supposed enemies of the state. Even when its manifestation is less extreme – as in a series of coups against prime ministers – the consequences are serious, for they

involve a deflection of the energies which could be turned to meeting the adaptive challenges.

Unfortunately, in a democracy, there are not many rewards for a government or a party seeking government to spell out the nation's adaptive challenges, particularly if dealing with them involves some change in lifestyle or an increase in taxes. The temptation for the politician, too aware of his or her own impotence, is to engage in work avoidance. But in such situations the politicians can be helped by those whose capacity for leadership is not hampered by the constraints of formal authority.

Heifetz uses President Johnson's relation with Martin Luther King as a case in point: as a Texan Democrat, Johnson could not have put civil rights on to the agenda, but he was able to respond to pressure from King. In Australia, it is often the retired politician, free of the shackles of accountability to the party rooms and the party caucus, who can raise hard issues.

Sometimes, it is a person within the organisation, but who is well down the line, who can raise hard issues. In Australia's post war years, no political party dared question the virtue of tariff protection, but in the press there was a consistent voice against tariffs presented by 'a modest member of parliament'. The 'modest member', Bert Kelly, was a dissident, but he was no renegade. The Prime Minister, Harold Holt, had a strong belief in free trade, and valued Kelly's contribution as a pressure point. Often, if people want to see how those in authority think about an issue, it is useful to listen to voices down the line. Much can be gleaned from staff presentations at conferences, for example: their departures from the official line are often well-known and approved by those further up the hierarchy. Heifetz's advice for those in positions of authority who feel constrained within a narrow authorising environment is to nurture and support loyal dissidents and disruptors.

Heifetz does not downplay the possibility of authority as a platform for leadership. Those holding a position of authority have the capacity to put an issue on the agenda, and can devote resources to research and publicity. But they are impeded not only by the political expectations of office but also by the day-to-day demands of office. It is often hard for such people to 'go to the balcony' as he says, to see the broad picture. Senior public servants for example often find that their energy is taken by their ministers' demands for political support and by budgetary demands.

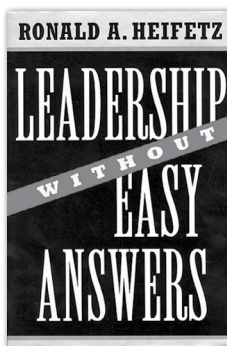
## CONCLUSION

Heifetz's ideas themselves set an adaptive challenge, for they force us to break away from our established ideas of leadership, as if leadership is some quality we achieve by virtue of being appointed to a position. Many of those exposed to his work through his courses at the Kennedy School, through his consulting with Cambridge Leadership Associates, or through his books, must feel let down, for they would have expected that his theories would help them achieve the coveted title 'leader' in their organisation, when what he tells them is that leadership involves a great deal of patient hard work and that others may get the credit. It won't come as a surprise to women that many men, particularly those who have achieved positions in organisations with strong authority structures such as armed forces, find his teaching discomfiting, while women find his ideas easier to understand.

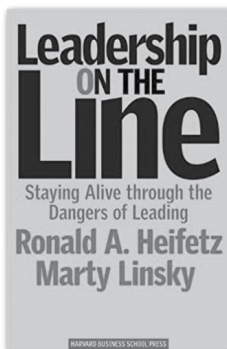
While Heifetz presents a general theory applicable to the public sector, not-for-profits and the private sector, the examples in his books are drawn mainly from the public sector. That may be because the public sector is under more exposure than other sectors: teachers of management seeking case studies would be lost without reports from government auditors and commissions of enquiry.

It may reflect the fact that hard jobs involving wicked problems tend to end up in the public sector. But his work is surely applicable to the corporate sector where we so often witness corporate collapse because of a failure of managers and boards to appreciate the adaptive challenges they face – their 'Kodak' moments. Is Schumpeter's 'creative destruction' an unavoidable collateral cost of capitalism, or can companies renew and adapt as they confront adaptive challenges?

Heifetz's three books, published over many years, are consistent in their theory but with different emphasis and readerships in mind.

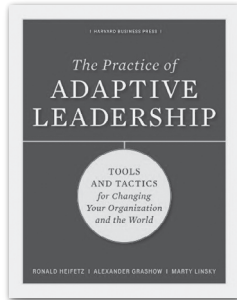


*Leadership Without Easy Answers* (1994, 1998) provides a solid theoretical basis for his work. Those with an academic interest in leadership will find it a rich resource.



His 2002 work *Leadership on the line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, co-authored with Marty Linsky, also of the Kennedy School, is a guide to those applying the theory of adaptive leadership. The subtitle 'staying alive' points to its content, for the exercise of leadership, with or without authority, involves striking a fine balance between work avoidance, and pushing

the group beyond their capacity to handle the pain and stress of adaptive change. Pushed too hard, the group's response is assassination.



*The Practice of Adaptive Leadership; Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*, written with Marty Linsky and with Alexander Grashow of Cambridge Leadership Associates, is a detailed 'how to' book. Its target readership seems to

be the person who has been appointed to a middle management position and is wondering why the gift of leadership has not accompanied the appointment. It could serve as guide for someone who prefers the careful pace of self-study to the compressed learning in an 'adaptive leadership' course.

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