

Adaptive Leadership as Key to Organizational Problem-Solving

The research of Ronald Heifetz aims to provide a conceptual foundation for the study and practice of leadership and strategies that build adaptability. Heifetz is well known for developing transformative methods of leadership education and development.

ZOE: You have developed the concept of adaptive leadership 34 years ago, which theory influenced your work decisively and why at the time?

Heifetz: To begin with the most decisive influences were history and my own experience more than theory. Theory became critically important to understand the history. The evolution of different theories, too, became critically important to understand. But my conception of leadership really is anchored in a historical problem. And the problem is twofold:

The question: «How does misleading take place?» became profoundly interesting to me. In history, we see that charismatic authority is not only a resource, but also a source of danger. What are the vulnerabilities of a population in distress to charismatic authorities who become charlatans? That question has very broad historical relevance. We are living it right now in the United States. But personally, it's animated me through my own family history in the tragedies of Germany before and during WW II.

The second influence is my background in medicine and biology. One of the most fascinating questions in the history of life, again a historical question, is: «How does an organism take the best from its history and change to whatever extend is needed, through innovation, to thrive in new and challenging conditions?» That question is not only fundamental to biological evolution, but also to our cultural, political, economic, and social evolution. How do we conserve the best from our history, traditions, and wisdom, discard what is no longer precious and essential, and innovate, so that we can thrive in our changing world?

ZOE: The reference to DNA and adaptive pressures are key elements in your work.

Heifetz: Yes, it's a critically important question. Particularly as the adaptive pressures on humanity have accelerated since the advent of agriculture 10.000 years ago, and have continued to accelerate exponentially for the last 200 years.

Humanity is faced with a whole host of adaptive pressures, at every level from the micro to the macro. From the micro system of a family trying to figure out how to make it work when there are so many uncertainties in the economic eco-system of that family. When there are so many temptations on the family to not maintain faithfulness to each other and for youth to fall beyond the norms of healthy experimentation. That was more easily achieved in a stable eco system compared to now.

And certainly adaptability is relevant as you scale up the micro-challenges to us as individuals and families to every level of small and larger business, community, village, city, national and multinational organizations and companies. As you keep scaling it up we find that the world is throwing people in these various levels of complex systems adaptive challenges that basically demand: you either are going to achieve new levels of adaptability, new capacity, or you're going to perish.

At the most macro level we see humanity as a whole, which is a very young organism. You know the cockroaches in your house have been around for a 100 million years. We've only been around 6 or 7 million years, and in our modern form we've only been around maybe 200.000 years. So, we're a very young species to have overgrown the whole planet. We oursel-

ves then have to understand the adaptive pressures that we've created for ourselves and other forms of life. If we are going to reduce the likelihood of catastrophes for us and for other species, we need to be able to analyse our adaptive failures and short-sighted mistakes.

ZOE: Mobilizing for greater adaptive success is a challenge in light of its complexity.

Heifetz: Yes, in fact one of the greatest challenges of leadership is to understand that there are enormous pressures on people in authority to avoid mobilizing people to face up to these adaptive pressures. When faced with major adaptive pressures, people are vulnerable to the illusion that somebody with certainty knows the way out of the situation. That then begins to explain what is happening in my country and in many countries around the world today.

One of the important lessons to learn from charlatans actually is the degree to which they inspire people by anchoring their message in the conservation of historically precious traditions and values. They actually are not really talking so much about change as about a renewal of our archetypal old ways. What inspires people is less the change as much as it is the restoration of what they are worried they are in the process of losing.

And that's an important lesson for people who believe that change really is necessary. Because it says one should speak about change, but also speak about change in the context of all that you hope to preserve and conserve from tradition and history, from language, from culture, from current working structures, strategies and competencies, that should not, change. Change needs to be held in a larger context of not-change. And in a sense then the word adaptation gives us a clue to what it means to make highly transformative changes that expand the functionality of a creature and the functionality of an organism to take advantage of whole new eco-systems. Such as the really transformative change in the development of a wing. A whole new eco system is opened up for the winged creature because it can fly.

That kind of transformative new capacity is also in nature highly conservative. And many people in the praxis of leadership make the mistake of being so enthusiastic about the change, about the wing, that they don't talk about all the rest of the caterpillar that's going to remain the same. You know the legs, the thorax, the abdomen, the neck, the head, the eyes, that most of the structure, most of the anatomy, most of the DNA that informs the production of that organism is going to stay intact as the organism goes from being a caterpillar to a fly. That becomes a really important lesson: that transformative change is highly conservative. And therefore, that leadership mobilizes people to accomplish adaptive change not only by speaking to innovation but also by speaking to conservation.

ZOE: Apart from these two key historical questions, which bodies of theory have illuminated your work?

Heifetz: First, I think like a doctor because I was trained in medicine. I've then taken from all the various leadership theories many nuggets of insight and observation. Unfortunately, most leadership theories are not anchored by the challenges to be faced in leadership. They don't start with the challenges of leadership. Most theories start instead with the powers and tools often used by people in authority, or the abilities to gain those tools.

For example, what do I need to gain power and influence in people's eyes? Those are tools. Or, what are the abilities that enable me to gain those tools? Presence, my own ability to speak, my own ability to analyse, my expertise and background, relationship network, that I look a certain way, or have a particular kind of energy? You know these are all capacities or tools.

One of the big sources of confusion in leadership studies is that people start by focusing on the abilities, not realizing that there is no one set of abilities for leadership. The ability to stomach a conflict or ambiguity, the ability to improvise, to be present to people, to listen well, to inspire people – these are all important in romance or as a parent when you're raising teenagers. These are all very important abilities in leadership, but they're non-specific. Whatever sets of abilities you come up with are not specific to the work of leadership. They are generally useful abilities.

The same accounts for tools. The tools of various forms of power and influence are critically important, such as persuasion and inspiration. But those are equally important if you're selling peaches, art, or a new set of services.

What makes the uses of these tools and abilities leadership is the challenge to be met. That's what makes it specific. So, that's why leadership studies by and large have so far been fairly undisciplined. It's disoriented because it orients the exploration of leadership around tools and abilities rather than the challenge to be faced.

ZOE: Say more about the challenge....

Heifetz: We have to deconstruct the kinds of challenges:

There are a lot of problems in life where you don't need leadership. When we go to a doctor, we need a physician to have the expertise to do diagnosis and treatment for medical challenges. There are a lot of problems we solve every day for which we don't need leadership - we need managerial skills or expertise. If you need to build a house, you hire a carpenter. The skill and tools of the carpenter could be used to sculpt, make fine cabinets, or make violins, in which case you would call that person an artist, a cabinetmaker, or a violinmaker. It's the challenge that defines the profession, not the skills and tools.

For what kind of challenges do we need leadership? Those collective challenges that require the development of new capacity. Where the deployment of current expertise in a group or organization isn't enough, where you can't simply take the problem off peoples' shoulders as the expert authority and give them back a solution. We need leadership when the people themselves have to develop, own, and internalize the solution – when they' have to be part of the solution because they are part of the problem. We need leadership when people are facing adaptive challenges and need to be energized, organized, persuaded and inspired to sift through what to conserve and what to discard, to accept trade-offs and losses, and to develop new capacity to meet challenges to survive and thrive.

In biology, challenges that demand the development of new capacity are called adaptive challenges. I like this metaphor from biology for many reasons, so I would say that leadership in our organizations and societies is anchored in the work of meeting adaptive challenges.

ZOE: You refer to addressing issues from the outside in and the inside out. How can people in leadership positions, but more importantly coaches and trainers, best assist those leaders in developing such capacity?

Heifetz: The critical discipline both in leadership practice and leadership coaching or consulting is to start any diagnostic inquiry from the outside in. And not to begin by going inside out. I think this discipline is critical because if you start from the inside out, if you start by asking a person, «what is bothering you?» rather than «what challenges is the organization facing?» your inquiry will take you inside the person and very quickly you can lose the context and become disoriented by the multiplicity and complexity of their internal world, much of which will be very interesting but not very relevant to the current leadership situation and organizational challenge.

ZOE: So, diagnosing the system first?

Heifetz: Exactly. I always start with the question: What challenge is your organization facing. I want to know what is the context in which they are embedded. And I slowly work from the outside in, tell me about your organization, what is it doing, larger than your particular office, tell me more about the eco system of your organization, tell me more about the history of how it's faced these challenges in the past. And then I begin to ask, where are you situated, what's your role in your organization, what are your constraints and leverage to meet these challenges in a successful, adaptive way?

So, I really am disciplined about maintaining the professional context when I work with people – to do a pretty robust diagnostic search process, to understand diagnostically the en-

vironment they're in, the leadership they're facing, from their platform, their level of formal authority, and their informal authority – where does their authority come from, what are the relationships like? Then I begin to unpack the adaptive challenges, write the challenges down for me. Try to break the adaptive challenge into smaller parts and to understand the sequence and pacing that is needed.

So, when I coach people, I spend most of my time working with the person to help them diagnose the nature of the challenges the organization is facing, the dynamics of the organization's response, and the culture and politics surrounding that challenge, starting farther out with the wider context, and then moving closer in to the local context where they are sitting. I then look at their platform of action, the leverage they have, and help them develop a strategy of action. I also want to prepare them for the improvisational process of leadership. By that I mean, I want them to know that they take action and then they must reflect and make adjustments in their actions as they develop and move forward. I want them to learn if I'm working with a practitioner how to do that for themselves, how to debrief themselves or debrief with their colleagues so they can take corrective action routinely. Of course, a coach can also provide that de-briefing function to help the person practicing leadership de-brief what's working and what's not.

ZOE: When do you go inside out?

Heifetz: I only begin to go inside out as I begin to discover their particular personal difficulties in practicing leadership. For example, if they are having trouble engaging in a thorough diagnostic search process among the relevant stakeholders because they can't imagine knocking on someone's door, then we might go inside to discover why that might be. In such circumstances, I might ask: "who told you you can't talk to them? To whom would you appear to be disloyal if you talked and listened to them? Or, Whose trust might you be violating if you were to put yourself in their shoes for a moment to understand their perspectives? Depending on their answers, I would go further inside their heart, mind, history, and relationships.

In other words, I only go inside if there are specific behavioural impediments that they're beginning to exhibit in practicing the leadership required in their organizational context.

ZOE: What approach or kind of framework do you use to «go inside-out»?

Heifetz: The framework that I've been developing is a sort of political psychological framework. It's a psychological framework in the sense that I'm saying your identifications are the largest source of your identity. So, let's begin to deconstruct and unpack your core identifications. I divide these into three sectors.

First, the professional level of identifications: Level 1. In the case I just described, who in your professional surround would you be disappointing if you were to talk to that person?

Second, the social surround, which I call level 2: your community, your family, your neighbours, and all the people who are part of your living life, outside your professional environment. These relationships, these identifications, are the major sources of your identity, as sister, brother, friend, father, fan of this ball team, member of this country, patron of this way. These Level 2 identifications provide you with enormous wisdom and many, many lines of code, which tell you how to interpret the world and how to behave and work in it. Among those lines of code may be instructions that tell you in your job: «if this person is a particular way, then keep your head down and don't talk to them.»

And so, as a coach, you want to be able to help the practitioner go inside if the impediment is deeper in their life. To unpack what identification in their social surround, upbringing or familial identifications is preventing them from having the liberty to practice the leadership that's needed in this professional context.

On the third level then, occasionally but less frequently, one might need to go as deep as the ancestral, or third level of identifications. That may in a family go back to grandparents and great grandparents, of people who are no longer alive, or it may go back to the history of one's country, city, gender, or particular ethnic or religious group – all of which will inform both one's the wisdom and the limitations that one brings to a professional set of options.

But again, I only want to do those deeper internal inquiries in the context of solving a behavioural impediment in that person's practice of leadership. I never lose sight of the context.

ZOE: You have already referred to authority and leadership several times. One of the key elements in your work is the differentiation of different kinds of authority and leadership.

Heifetz: Ultimately the way I've developed my work over my career is to focus on the locus of the individual actor. What can an individual person do at varying levels of authority: without informal authority or with a lot of informal authority, with some formal authority or with a lot of formal authority such as the president, chancellor, prime minister or king. What can a person do from different operating platforms to mobilize an organization or society for greater adaptive success?

ZOE: What implications has such distinction between informal vs. formal authority and leadership for teams and organizations?

Heifetz: Enormous implications. When you uncouple leadership and authority you begin to see that leadership is a practice

that can be performed from any position. And indeed, when we begin to distinguish leadership from authority we begin to notice all of the people who've exercised leadership with lesser authority or with no authority, or beyond their authority. Many times these people are heroes, they're unsung heroes. Maybe they exercise leadership only at a moment in time – that is, they were at that meeting and they raised the critical question that prevented their group from making a very big mistake. Maybe they never exercised leadership again, but at that moment their question was key in getting people to face up to that piece of adaptive work.

So, when we begin to uncouple leadership from authority we can begin to celebrate, learn from, but also encourage a more distributed leadership throughout an organization. And therefore, an organization begins to draw on more of its collective intelligence.

There is an old rabbinical story. About a monastery in the mountains, in the Carpathian Mountains in Eastern Europe. The monks in the monastery were fighting with each other. And some of the members of the monastery were leaving. And the head of the abbey, the head of the monastery tried everything he could to restore the monastery to functionality. And finally in his desperation he went a few miles down the road to the local Jewish village, and he asked the local rabbi, rabbi do you have any ideas what I can do to restore my monastery to health? And the rabbi said, well you know, I had a dream the other night that maybe you'd be visiting me, and in the dream it occurred to me that the Messiah is going to come to the

Biography

Ronald Heifetz is the King Hussein Bin Talal Senior Lecturer in Public Leadership and Co-Founding Director of the Center for Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. He is the author of multiple books and articles.

He advises heads of government, businesses, and nonprofit organizations around the world. President Juan Manuel Santos of Colombia commented on Heifetz's advice in his 2016 Nobel Peace Prize Lecture.

He pioneered leadership theory and education beginning in 1983. His research aims to provide a conceptual foundation for the study and practice of leadership and strategies that build adaptability. Heifetz is well known for developing transformative methods of leadership education and development.

A graduate of Columbia University, Harvard Medical School, and the Kennedy School, Heifetz is both a physician and cellist. He completed his medical training in psychiatry and as Cellist was privileged to study with the Russian virtuoso, Gregor Piatigorsky.

Earth, and he is one of the members of your monastery. But I don't know which member.

So, the head of the abbey went back, puzzled, to his monastery and he said to all of his monks, he said, the rabbi said that he had a dream, and one of us might be the Messiah. So, all of a sudden all the monks in the monastery started treating each other like the potential Messiah. Because nobody knew who might be the one, they began to treat each other with intent listening, with honour and respect. And all of a sudden the monastery started to perform in a way that it hadn't in a generation.

The story illustrates the idea that many times we're not really accessing our collective intelligence. Too often we restrict people's intelligence to the formal job description, the formal authority that's captured in their job description, and don't get people permission to speak to issues that are beyond their job description.

ZOE: Is there sometimes a tension between the theory and the practice of adaptive leadership? In other words, what would you say is the most difficult part for people to put into practice?

Heifetz: My colleagues and I, we have made enormous progress over these decades in developing a problem-centred or work-centred, or challenge-centred, theory of leadership practice. And in doing so we've come up with a lot of ideas, both macro ideas that are foundational in defining our terms. And also more practical ideas, at different levels of operationalization, from general principles to more actionable tools.

But it's still a very, very large frontier, like a coastline with many different coves and inlets. So, there is a great deal more work to be done in figuring out how to apply these concepts in various specific settings, in this culture, in this village, in that industry, at that moment in time, in this policy area, in this government agency, in this complex situation.

I think the theory gives people very powerful questions to be asking themselves, and guidelines, too. But there's a lot of work still to do by people doing practical research in the coaching and consulting industry and in academia. Practitioners who want to step back and reflect on what's made them successful, even the training and HR functions within companies and organizations. And as they gather lessons, it's important to remember that we are at a frontier, that this is an undisciplined area. It's not a well-studied discipline like engineering, economics or physics or medicine or law.

So overall, one needs to have an experimental mindset in learning by doing. I think there are many big gaps in how to apply this theoretical orientation, this practical theory in countless specific contexts.

ZOE: You acknowledged that people in leadership are often under enormous pressures and stress – how can people

hold steady even if circumstances are very adversary and stressful?

Heifetz: I think we need a series of mechanisms to help us maintain an effective self-discipline. And the self-discipline can work against us in two directions. You can be too bounded and not jump back into action when you should. So, holding steady becomes holding back. Or you can be under-bounded and speak too soon when you should stay quiet to give the process more time to unfold, to reveal itself before you then make the next move.

So, one needs help in both directions. And I think there are several forms of help.

First one needs both a diagnostic and action framework to analyse organizational and political challenges so that, on a moment-to-moment basis, you can identify when the door is open to move and when it is not. The framework has checklists that would help analyse what to look for, and when and how to move.

Second you need practices to help you practice the art of reflection in in the midst of action: what I've called «Getting on the Balcony». Practices like meditation, pushing your chair back in the meeting two inches, having a little alarm vibrate on your watch that goes off to remind you to get on the balcony to observe and analyse the process that you're in the midst of.

Third, I think one needs allies and confidants. People with whom you debrief meetings routinely to assess new developments and generate the next set of options and mid-course corrections. You need to study and reflect as a process unfolds, and to do so, one needs both confidants and allies.

ZOE: You use this method for yourself while teaching the case in point method.

Heifetz: Yes.

ZOE: What makes the case in point method so special?

Heifetz: I think people learn the most when they learn from experience. And I draw on three different kinds of experience in my courses.

The first is that I have people analyse their past experience, mainly peer-to-peer in small groups, by analysing a past case of a leadership failure from their own experience. My students spend a lot of time analysing a past case. I have them focus on failure because I think we need to desensitize people to failure. In leadership, one is failing all the time. You can't take corrective actions quickly if you can't face into your failure, if you're too proud to look into your mistakes. Failures might be micro at the tactical level or they may be macro with strategic implications; they may be diagnostic, or they may be action mistakes.

Second we use their current experience of the learning and role dynamics in the classroom itself for cases-in-point. I call this case-in-point teaching. For example, we step back and look at the class's authority relationship with me as the instructor as a case in point, or the role dynamics as they do or don't listen to each other, as cases in point for common organizational dynamics. Having real time evidence in the classroom makes the learning much more real to people. They learn beneath the skin when they have the evidence, the illustration, right in front of their eyes. And then third we do structured exercises of various kinds. From film analysis to musical exercises, like you do your art exercises. In our musical and poetry exercises, we illustrate lessons of improvisation, listening, courage, partnership, and inspiration.

ZOE: And you actually also work with peer groups where you have people experiment with a designated authority, in which they may experience the reaction to different styles of authority?

Heifetz: Yes. That's right. I have people learn from their small group consultation process both by doing a case consultation but also by observing the consultation process, its productivity and difficulties, in weekly written analyses. These would include reflecting on the person who is, you know, designated to manage the group's consultation process that week so that everyone can learn from the way they played that role of chairperson.

ZOE: Practitioners and you have founded the Adaptive Leadership Network. www.adaptive-leadership.net What are the key learnings so far?

Heifetz: We are helping people lead the world at every level for the better. The Adaptive Leadership Network is an emerging global network for people who are practicing leadership or coaching, consulting or teaching or training in leadership. The Network is developing a set of services to support people in a community of ongoing learning and practice. We've just had our third annual conference in Washington, DC with people from around the world. The intention is to develop a whole support system so that people can learn throughout their careers, and support one another in both the dangerous and meaningful work of leading, and in the wonderful work of leadership education and consulting.

ZOE: You are about to depart for sabbatical – is there a new book or articles, which we should be watching out for?

Heifetz: I'm going to spend my sabbatical focusing on biology and adaptive processes in nature. I will be trying to understand more richly the lessons to be learned from nature that might be applied to cultural, social, political, organizational adaptation and cultures of adaptability.



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