



Thoughts from Linda:

Leadership on the Line
Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading

Ronald A. Heifetz & Marty Linsky
2002

Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky, both professors at Harvard Business School, collaborated on this very practical book aimed directly at leaders who answer the call to step into the arena, as Robert Greenleaf would say. I have found this book to be invaluable in my own leadership career as well as in my consulting practice, as I coach other leaders. It offers strategies and specific suggestions, with great examples, that can help leaders identify issues appropriately and employ strategic moves that increase their likelihood of success. It deals with the subtleties of organizational, team and individual behaviors—all of which can derail even the most gifted of leaders.

The book's title describes the content exactly. And, it builds on the expressions of Greenleaf in extolling those who can lead to do so, with the full recognition that "there is no wholeness except in using (one's creativity and genius.)" Quoting Camus, Greenleaf noted that it is quite significant that he (Camus) titled his last lecture Create Dangerously.

So what is so dangerous about leadership? Quoting the authors: "To lead is to live dangerously because when leadership counts, when you lead people through difficult change, you challenge what people hold dear—their daily habits, tools, loyalties and ways of thinking—with nothing more to offer perhaps than a possibility. People push back when you disturb the personal and institutional equilibrium they know. And people resist in all kinds of creative and unexpected ways that can get you taken out of the game: pushed aside, undermined, or eliminated."

The book is about opportunities to lead and they ask these questions:

1. Why and how is leadership dangerous?
2. How can you as a leader respond to those dangers?
3. How can you keep your spirit alive when the going gets tough?

I think the two main insights I gained from this book are two of the 'trademark' paradigms that Heifetz is best known for, namely, the concept of "getting on the balcony" on your own leadership along with the distinction between technical and adaptive change.

The two authors blend their very unique backgrounds in a most interesting way as they draw upon examples from the world of music and psychiatry along with media and politics. The book is divided into three parts, entitled: The Challenge, The Response and Body and Soul.

They note that the single most common source of leadership failure, in their vast experience, is that leaders treat adaptive challenges like technical problems. Understanding the distinctions and thus the strategies for driving true cultural and behavioral changes in our organizations requires this knowledge. And this book not only provides the complete framework for building the distinctions, it also provides strategies and even tactics for leading adaptive work. It rings true to me as a long-time leader in organizations of all sizes, as I have often erred in this arena myself. The examples range from corporate ones to those of nation-states.

I particularly like the final chapter, which goes to the soul of leadership. Certainly with the challenges of COVID today, this chapter alone provides inspiration for leaders who chose to tackle the tough issues and lead as servant leaders.

In looking at the drivers of ambition and leaders with a cause, they offer some great wisdom. "Frequently, people are defeated because, though they are doing their best, they make mistakes in how they assess and engage their environment (the technical vs. adaptive diagnosis.) But sometimes we bring ourselves down by forgetting to pay attention to ourselves. We get caught up in the cause and forget that exercising leadership is, at heart, a personal activity. We can act as if we were physically and emotionally indestructible." They go on to offer an approach to the development of certain 'practices' to compensate for our own unique vulnerabilities, which they call "anchors." These include such ideas as "distinguishing the role from the self," and in a very illustrative approach, offering advice on "keeping confidants but not confusing them with allies."

At the end of the day, they ask the question: "Why Lead?" And the answer is as they note, both profound and simple. "The sources of meaning most essential in the human experience draw from our yearning for connection with other people. The exercise of leadership can give life meaning beyond the usual day-to-day stakes—approval of friends and peers, material gain, or the immediate gratification of success—because as a practical art, leadership allows us to connect with others in a significant way.

The word we use for that kind of connection is love."

I love this book and have turned to it over the past 20 years when I needed to remind myself of some of these concepts and also when I wanted inspiration. The last sentences of the book are appropriate in 'my book' as I so highly recommend this to you: "We hope that the words on these pages have provided both practical advice and inspiration and that you have better means now to lead, protect yourself, and keep your spirit alive. May you enjoy with a full heart the fruits of your labor. The world needs you. "

It needs all of us. I hope you enjoy this book and I am so thankful that they wrote it.