

'Staying Alive'

Self Care for those Exercising Leadership

By Ronald Heifetz

Reprinted from "Leading Ideas", The Newsletter of Trustee Leadership Development, Volume 2, Number 4, Winter 1997

This article addresses the issue of how to sustain oneself not only with stresses of leadership but in the stresses of any high-powered job, called "staying alive" in my book *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1994). I believe there are at least eight personal challenges in the exercise of leadership.

Getting on the Balcony

The most common reason people get silenced, badly hurt, or taken down in organizational life is that they get blindsided in their efforts to exercise leadership; they don't see what's coming because they get swept up in what we call "the dance floor." When you dance, and the music is fast, you can easily be swept up in the music. You may see the people who are dancing right next to you or with whom you are dancing, but you don't get the overview.

It's important to be able to get to the balcony, and to be able to achieve what Theresa Monroe taught me the Jesuits call "contemplation in action," the capacity to keep reflecting on what's going on. What are the patterns? What are the politics of this institution? What is causing people to take "my point of view" either well or poorly? "What's going on here, what am I missing?"

That capacity, in some ways, is an obvious skill. We all know it's important to gain perspective. But it's quite difficult to do, particularly in the kinds of jobs that many people in leadership have, where you can be swept up into what is pressing at that moment. Many people want something from you at times when there are other competing claims. These are usually times when you're trying to digest a lot of data and synthesize it quickly. I think it's easy to get blindsided.

The important thing is to be able to step back in the midst of action, even at the end of every day, and de-brief with somebody – to say, "What just happened to me today? I was in this meeting. I thought this was simple. It turned out to be complicated. How come? What didn't I foresee? What didn't I understand?"

Developing Confidants

That leads me to the second problem with staying alive. A lot of people, who see themselves as leaders, have a heroic self-image. They tend to isolate themselves. They may know a lot of people and be really good at making allies. Indeed, they can be surrounded by people. But in some ways they are fairly isolated and don't make very good use of partners. I think that notion, the heroic lone warrior model of professional life or leadership is suicidal, because the political dynamics of organizational life in our communities and businesses are too complicated for any individual to be able to assess. They keep changing. So to be able to keep abreast of them, to keep track of who cares what about these issues, who's going to be upset, what are their stakes, who is going to have to take a loss if they really take into account this "initiative of mine," is very hard to do well. We need partners, and not just allies – we need confidants.

A confidant is somebody to whom you can pour your heart, somebody who can put you back together again at the end of the day, who can tell you why it's worth trying to do what you're doing and taking the hits that you're taking. Somebody who occasionally can pull you by the collar and pull you up to the balcony and say, "Let's take a look at what just happened to you today." Or, "I know you're wonderful, but you just did the same thing that happened last year."

You just have to have people to debrief with, who can see around your own blind spots.

Distinguish Role from Self

One of the things a partner can help us do is to distinguish oneself from the roles that we tend to be in. Most of us are not that good at that. The idea, itself, is not so complicated. Parenting is a good example. When I started being a parent, a friend of mine, Marty Linsky, said to me, "You know, you'll really know you've made it as a parent when your kid slams the door in your face and you don't take it personally. And it will take you to the second kid before you figure it out!"

I found that really to be true. We, as parents, know that it would be absurd to take it personally when a two-year-old looks you in the face and says, "I hate you" because you refuse to give her another piece of cake. But by the time that two-year-old gets to be eight-year-old, or 12-years-old or 16-years-old, it's hard not to take it personally, because they get good at knowing how to make it personal.

So distinguishing your role from the self isn't that strange a notion, but in organizational life people often fail to do so, leading them to make two kinds of errors. The first error is a diagnostic error. Because they take it personally, they don't diagnose accurately what it is that people are upset about. Instead of saying, "Ah-ha, they're upset with me because I'm raising an issue that represents to them a loss," we let the personal attack change the topic on the table from the loss or the challenging issue, to you and your style or your manner.

Distinguishing self from role is quite life saving because it allows you diagnostically to read what issues is it that people see in you as a product of your role. You can then take yourself out of the way and be focusing on what you mean to people, rather than how they're making you feel about yourself.

The second reason why it is important to distinguish self from role is just personal. It's a lot easier to take the hits if you know that it isn't really you they're hitting at. It still hurts, but it hurts a little bit less.

Externalizing the Conflict

It's important to not personalize the conflict. Quite often, creative and challenging people tend to make it seem as if there is a conflict between their point of view and everybody else's point of view. When you set up a conflict like that you're very easily neutralized, because organizational systems like to restore equilibrium, and one of the ways they can restore equilibrium is to neutralize whoever is raising a deviant point of view.

One of the ways to get important points of view across is to not see yourself as the source of the conflictive idea, but instead, as the identifier of a conflict that already exists in the organization, between different sets of values or perspectives. And therefore, what you're doing is surfacing a conflict that is already there, rather than creating a conflict.

Learn to Listen

To stay alive, one needs to listen. Many people who see themselves as leaders don't listen very well. They talk better than they listen. Sometimes they hire pollsters to do the listening for them so they know what to say.

One of the first lessons I learned when I did my residency in psychiatry is that you don't only listen out there; there is another way of listening that you learn – you listen to yourself as data.

The notion is that none of us is an island. We pick up the emotions and the undercurrents that we call the music beneath the words in what other people are saying. We resonate with certain issues. Therefore, some of the feelings that you end up with when you insert yourself into an environment are going to reflect feelings or currents or themes that are in the environment. And therefore, if you can read yourself, sometimes that can give you a clue to the trends and sub-currents in the environment.

For example, it's very common that people who are exercising leadership often feel an intense sense of urgency. Usually they are tackling issues in which there is urgency already in the community. They feel urgency because everybody is looking to them to do something about the problem. Many then behave urgently. So they make a fast decision, they try to speed along a process. They set an early deadline for a committee to finish its work. What they don't do is step back again, on the balcony, perhaps, or with somebody's help and ask themselves, "Hey this is curious. I'm feeling awfully urgent, I wonder what's happening around me. I bet there is urgency in the system. Maybe what I need to do is calm people down, buy all of us some time, rather than act urgently and come to premature closure on a decision." But many people don't do that. They don't see that their own experience of urgency or frustration or anger or hopelessness is an indication of something among the audience that they're listening to. They need to probe, "Wait a second, what's going on with them? I'm feeling hopeless. I wonder if there is hopelessness here. I'm feeling angry. I wonder if there are some undercurrents here."

I'm suggesting using yourself as a barometer. Of course, people are not barometers. We filter what we hear, and our feelings don't by any means exactly mirror the feelings in the environment. But they can provide clues.

Seek Sanctuary

To stay alive, one also needs a sanctuary. And I don't have any particular sanctuary to recommend. For some people it really is a religious place, a formal institution. For other people it could just be someone's kitchen table or it could be a jogging trail or a tree that you sit beneath. But in our own professional lives, when we're moving fast and thrown into action, we generally conceive of sanctuaries as an expendable luxury.

Sanctuaries and partners are like winter coats. You shouldn't expect to survive a cold winter without a proper coat, and you shouldn't expect to stay alive and lead without partners and a sanctuary. You've got to be able to preserve some place where you can hear yourself think again – to get away from all the noise, from all the music, from all the shouting, from all the different people who are expecting different things from you.

Place Passion in Perspective

To stay alive, we need to manage our human hungers. When you're a person who plugs himself or herself into 10,000 volt sockets of electricity, when you wet your fingers and you stick your fingers into the socket of organizational and political life, you're conducting high voltage emotional currents.

A community in turmoil, an organization in distress, a business with losing market share, a country with a multiplicity of pains and conflicts all generate intense passions, and one ends up conducting the electricity, the emotional currents of one's constituents. Those currents go through us and they do funny things to us as individuals because people are not designed to conduct those kinds of high voltages. These emotional currents amplify our normal human needs into distorting, self-destructive behaviors.

Let me be more specific. I'll just mention three normal human needs: there are a lot more. First we each need to feel important in our lives. Nobody likes to feel that they don't matter. Everybody wants to feel that they matter. Quite basic. But take somebody who is a bit vulnerable regarding the normal human need to be important and plug them into a situation where people are desperate for answers – an organization in distress, a community in distress. Pretty soon that individual begins to start feeling that, "God, everybody is looking for me to have the answers. People are crying out for the answers." And perhaps that individual does indeed have some answers. But before you know it the need for self-importance is amplified beyond the normal human need for significance. It becomes grandiosity. This is clearly destructive to the community as it falls into a state of inappropriate dependency. But in the end it's often quite self-destructive, too, because the grandiosity generates a dynamic in which people keep looking to you to pull the next rabbit out of the hat and you keep having to be a better and better magician. Pretty soon there are no more rabbits to pull out of the hat because society is really facing a set of problems for which you don't have any easy answers and then they kill you off.

Another normal human need: power. Everybody needs to feel some sense of control or power. There is not anybody who likes to feel powerless in their lives. But you take somebody who has a bit more vulnerability here and you put them into a situation that is chaotic, where people are desperate for the restoration of order. And, lo and behold, somebody comes along who is going to restore order and people love it for awhile.

The problem is when that power hungry person doesn't see the restoration of order as simply a tactic in a larger strategy of getting that society back on its feet; they begin to think that maintaining order is the norm that needs to be maintained. And with them, of course, in the power position.

Third, we need to talk about intimacy. Everybody needs to be held, cared for. When you take somebody who is very busy serving as the containing vessel of a large social system and they've got to hold it all together, it really amplifies some of their own needs to get held. People don't know what to do with that craving to be held when they're holding together not just a small band of 20 people but when they're holding 10,000 or 10 million people in a process. It really powerfully amplifies their own need to get very basic kinds of gratification. So, extraordinary people sometimes engage in very self-damaging behavior because they're overwhelmed by their own hunger to get held, sometimes acting out their heightened passions in sexually destructive ways.

Rekindle Your Sense of Purpose

My eighth and last idea is less about staying alive professionally as about keeping your soul alive.

What happens to many people at transition points is that they die inside, they shrivel up, because their sense of meaning is lost, and people need a sense of purpose and meaning to make their lives feel rich. One needs to distinguish one's sense of purpose from a specific purpose. As we get older, we forget about our capacity to generate a variety of specific purposes. As teenagers we had a sense of purpose, but we later forget that generative capacity to scan the world around us and ask, "What is worth doing? How can I add value?" There are so many meaningful ways to make a difference in people's lives. When we face the loss of a specific purpose, we have to remind ourselves and be reminded by others that there are so many ways to love in life.

Ronald A. Heifetz directs the Leadership Education Project at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. He is the author of "Leadership Without Easy Answers" and co-author with Sharon Daloz Parks of "The Art of Learning and Practicing Leadership." He is a graduate of Columbia University, Harvard Medical School and the John F. Kennedy School of Government.