Leadership Can Be Taught

A Bold Approach for a Complex World

Sharon Daloz Parks

Contents

Contents

Leadership for a Changing World

A Call to Adaptive Work

O N A COLD, rainy December afternoon, the last session of a course in leadership had just ended. Seated beside me, a bright, thoughtful young man was intently filling out his course evaluation form. Fourteen weeks earlier, I had observed him on the first day of class and suspected he might not take the course. The course begins in an unconventional manner, and he appeared well prepared to exercise other options. Yet now at the close of the term, here he was.

After he finished the evaluation, I told him I had noticed his skepticism on the opening day, and I wondered now how he felt about the course at the end. He responded immediately that the course had been very valuable. Then I asked, "Do you remember why you decided to stay?" After a long pause, he replied, "That would be hard to say—*leadership is a word that holds a lot of hungers.*"

His response has remained with me because his understated eloquence rang true. We live in a time when the hungers for leadership are strong and deep. As our world becomes more complex, diverse, and morally ambiguous, leadership trainings and programs abound and executive coaching has appeared on the scene. Yet there remains a gnawing awareness that our prevailing myths and many of our assumed practices of leadership match neither the central perils nor the finest aspirations spawned by the forces of dramatic change—affecting every society, institution, corporation, agency, organization, community, neighborhood, task force, or project team.

At least five key hungers conspire to create what is increasingly recognized as a growing crisis in leadership. Two of these are ancient, and three of them arise from the particular conditions of this moment in history: (1) Within every person there is a hunger to exercise some sense of *personal agency*—to have an effect, to contribute, to make a positive difference, to influence, help, build—and in this sense to lead. (2) Throughout human history, within every social group there is a hunger for *authority* that will provide orientation and reassurance, particularly in times of stress and fear. What is new is that there is now a hunger for leadership that (3) can deal with the intensification of systemic *complexity* emerging from the cybernetic, economic, political, and ecological realities that have created a more connected and interdependent world; and (4) can respond adaptively to the depth, scope, and pace of *change* that combined with complexity creates unprecedented conditions. Finally, (5) this new landscape creates a new moral moment in history.[1] Critical choices must be made within significantly changed conditions, a greater diversity of perspectives must be taken into account, assumed values are challenged, and there is a deepened hunger for leadership that can exercise a moral imagination and *moral courage* on behalf of the common good.

Leadership for the Common Good
in a Complex, Changing World

The image at the root of the concept of the common good is "the commons." Aligning command-and-control, trait-based, and other prevailing models of leadership with the common good becomes more difficult as "the commons" is being transformed. The new commons in which we now find ourselves is both global in scope and relentlessly local in impact. In a simpler time, the village green, the market square, Main Street, the wharf, the great plaza, the town, the city, or even the nation offered a sense of a shared life within a manageable frame. Today's new commons requires participation in a more dynamic, interdependent, and vast web of life—within a frame growing increasingly *un*manageable.[2] In the complexity and change of this new complex commons, hardworking managers who contribute their best find that success in the past does not necessarily translate into the present as new forces thwart their best intentions. Even highly talented people are vulnerable to finding themselves blindsided and their efforts stymied as the new landscape seems to be a place where "vision" has become problematic and competencies are required that can't be reduced to a toolbox.

Leadership for today's world requires enlarging one's capacity to see the whole board, as in a chess match—to see the complex, often volatile interdependence among the multiple systems that constitute the new commons. This capacity is vital to the best aspirations of democratic societies, for democracy presses toward inclusion but functions poorly without leadership.[3] Because power in democratic systems tends to be more circular than linear, to rest in networks more than in hierarchies, those who would practice effective leadership must practice a high degree of imagination, pragmatism, and trust, without falling prey to naïveté.[4] They must hold steady in the

face of uncertainty and threat, while remaining creatively open to the demands of changing circumstances, enabling people who may represent significant differences to create together something that is both workable and worthy. Whether it is being worked out within the life of a corporation or the life of a marginalized community, effective leadership in the service of democratic principles is not an easy practice.

Despite these changes and challenges, a deep ambivalence remains regarding the object of today's hungers for leadership. Are we simply to wait for born leaders to appear? There is a strong temptation (as in every age) simply to look for gifted persons who will hold positions of formal authority and who will make the needed difference. Traditional understandings of leadership akin to this impulse focus on personality characteristics, situation analysis, and transactions of power and influence. Now, however, a growing consensus among leadership theorists and practitioners is that in a networked society with power and information widely distributed, the presumption of "born leaders" along with command-and-control leadership models are inadequate. Yet, though there have been calls for a recomposing of the art and myth of leadership, larger-than-life heroic leaders continue to be studied and offered as models.[5] Why? Because we haven't developed good alternatives—both in content and method.

Can Leadership Be Taught?

If leaders are not simply "born," can leadership be taught? It has been well acknowledged that it is difficult to teach for the world of professional practice. It is particularly difficult to teach for the practice of leadership. Teaching and learning are typically conceived as a matter of transmitting knowledge: teaching as telling. Conventionally, such transfer of knowledge is presumed to occur through a

formal or informal process of reading, lecture, or presentation from an expert in the field, perhaps some discussion (primarily involving students' questions and the teacher's answers), note taking, and perhaps also term papers and exams. Within this paradigm of teaching and learning, and across every sector and profession, it is one thing to teach knowledge of the field, and it is quite another to prepare people to exercise the judgment and skill needed to bring that knowledge into the intricate systems of relationships that constitute the dynamic world of practice. It is yet another challenge altogether to prepare someone to practice leadership within the profession and the communities it serves—to prepare a physician, for example, to practice leadership within a hospital system and the regional, national, or world health care systems as well as to care for individual patients.

Learning by Doing and the Artistry of Good Coaching

In his classic, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, Donald Schon eloquently argued that people cannot simply be *told* what they need to know in the complexity of practice. They must learn to *see* for themselves. What is needed is access to coaches who initiate the learner into the "traditions of the calling" and help them by "the right kind of telling" to see on their own behalf and in their own way what they most need to see. "We ought, then," he wrote, "to study the experience of learning by doing and the artistry of good coaching. We should base our study on the working assumption that both processes are intelligent and—within limits to be discovered—intelligible. And we ought to search for examples wherever we can find them."[6]

Building on these assumptions, this book affirms that leadership can be taught. We do so by looking in depth at one particular approach

to practicing and teaching leadership that responds to Schon's call for "learning by doing and the artistry of good coaching." This is found in the work of Ronald Heifetz, author of *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, and coauthor with Marty Linsky of *Leadership On the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading*.[7] Across more than two decades, Heifetz and his colleagues at Harvard University have pioneered a distinctive, bold approach to learning and teaching leadership, created and practiced in a manner that is responsive to the hungers for a new story about what leadership means and asks—and ways of learning it. Other theorists and practitioners also have begun to explore new understandings of leadership that more adequately honor an interdependent, systemic awareness, and the need for significant shifts in perspective and practice. Fewer, however, have wrestled with the attendant questions: Can leadership be learned? If it can be learned, can it be taught? And, if so, what methods or approaches will work? Is teaching an act of leadership? If leading involves risk, what are the risks involved in teaching leadership? Can new insight move beyond conceptual awakening and actually change leadership behavior at the level of default settings—habitual ways of responding, especially in crisis and under stress?

The response of Heifetz and his colleagues to these questions is an approach that artfully integrates a set of ideas—a framework for understanding a practice of leadership fitting to today's world—with a corresponding teaching methodology that is congruent with those ideas. The methodology is called *case-in-point*.

Case-in-Point

Case-in-point teaching, as Heifetz and his colleagues have developed it, draws on several well-established learning traditions and methods—seminar, simulation, presentation of ideas and perspectives (through lecture, reading, and film), discussion and dialogue, clinical-therapeutic

practice, coaching, the laboratory, the art studio, writing as a form of disciplined reflection, and the case study method.

The celebrated case study method pioneered by Harvard's law and business schools is a powerful research methodology (critical to helping scholar-practitioners analyze data and work inductively with concepts that may apply broadly across multiple contexts). It is also a powerful pedagogical tool (giving students multiple situations, concepts, and images to work with as they think about experiences that they haven't yet had).[8]

Educators, at least since John Dewey, have persuasively argued that human beings, and particularly adults, learn best from their own experience. The traditional case study method draws on practical experience, but it is usually somewhat removed from the actual, immediate experience of the student. In the quest of a methodology that can teach further below the neck—to the default settings that people act from in a crisis—case-in-point teaching and learning seeks to make optimal use of the student's own past and immediate experience.

In case-in-point teaching, what goes on in the classroom itself is an occasion for learning and practicing leadership within a social group. The class is recognized as a social system inevitably made up of a number of different factions and acted on by multiple forces. The class also has a clear and challenging purpose—to make progress in understanding and practicing leadership.

The teacher has a set of ideas and frameworks to offer. But instead of presenting a lecture, or starting with a written case from another context that may or may not be relevant to the learning of the people in the class, the teacher waits for a case to appear in the process of the class itself. Every group generates its own set of issues, shaped, in part, by what is set in motion by the context and content provided by the teacher-presenter and the events of the day.

The challenge is to make use of both the explicit and underlying issues that surface in the group by connecting those issues to the course content. The teacher, therefore, must reflect on what is happening

in the class *as it is happening*, asking, "Is there any way I can use what is happening right here and now to illustrate the content I want the class to learn today?" In other words, the teacher imagines that what went on in the class for the last ten minutes was a case. Then the teacher works to use it to illustrate the theme, concept, or skill that he or she is trying to present. The work is to create a live encounter between the experience of the learner and the idea.

Everything that happens in the classroom is open to scrutiny—including the actions, inconsistencies, and blind spots of the teacher. The students are encouraged to "be on the dance floor" (that is, in the action) and also to "get on the balcony" to see if they can read the larger patterns of what is going on and figure out how to intervene in ways that will help the group make progress. All the while, the students are being offered concepts, metaphors, and frameworks that assist them in interpreting and naming what they are learning to see and do.

In this approach, the teacher remains the authority in the classroom—providing orientation and maintaining equilibrium in the group. But the teacher is also practicing leadership—skillfully allowing enough disequilibrium (confusion, frustration, disappointment, conflict, and stress) to help the group move from unexamined assumptions about the practice of leadership to seeing, understanding, and acting in tune with what the art and practice of leadership may actually require. In the process, the teacher must be aware of the various factions among the students in the room, the differing points of view that each represents, and then must find ways of recruiting, honoring, and sustaining the attention of each of them.

Four Critical Distinctions

Case-in-point teaching provides a model in real time of the practice of leadership that is being taught in the course. This approach rests on a framework for understanding and practicing leadership that

rests in four critical distinctions: authority versus leadership, technical problems versus adaptive challenges, power versus progress, and personality versus presence.

Authority Versus Leadership

Heifetz and his colleagues draw a distinction between *authority* and *leadership*. Most people tend to presume that a leader is a person in a position of formal authority—the boss, CEO, president, chair, captain, supervisor, director—the head, or, similarly, the expert. All organizations depend on such roles and the functions they provide to maintain equilibrium within the social group. The functions of authority include providing orientation and direction, setting norms, resolving conflict, and, when necessary, providing protection. The approach to leadership we describe here, however, recognizes that the functions of authority often play a vital but markedly insufficient role in the practice of leadership.

In this view, the function of leadership is to mobilize people—groups, organizations, societies—to address their toughest problems. Effective leadership addresses problems that require people to move from a familiar but inadequate equilibrium—through disequilibrium—to a more adequate equilibrium. That is, today's complex conditions require acts of leadership that assist people in moving beyond the edge of familiar patterns into the unknown terrain of greater complexity, new learning, and new behaviors, usually requiring loss, grief, conflict, risk, stress, and creativity. Often, deeply held values are both at stake and under review. Seen in this light, authority becomes only one resource and sometimes a constraint in the practice of leadership, and often a leader must act beyond his or her authorization.

Technical Problems Versus Adaptive Challenges

The second distinction at the heart of this approach flows from the first: the distinction between technical problems and adaptive

challenges. *Technical problems* (even though they may be complex) can be solved with knowledge and procedures already in hand. In contrast, *adaptive challenges* require new learning, innovation, and new patterns of behavior. In this view, leadership is the activity of mobilizing people to address adaptive challenges—those challenges that cannot be resolved by expert knowledge and routine management alone. Adaptive challenges often appear as swamp issues—tangled, complex problems composed of multiple systems that resist technical analysis and thus stand in contrast to the high, hard ground issues that are easier to address but where less is at stake for the organization or the society.[9] They ask for more than changes in routine or mere preference. They call for changes of heart and mind—the transformation of long-standing habits and deeply held assumptions and values.[10]

Today's adaptive challenges may appear on any scale and within every domain. They include obvious global issues such as the growing vulnerability of all populations to untreatable epidemics, climate change, terrorism, and the widening social-economic divide. Adaptive challenges are equally likely to take the form of what is assumed to be a local, technical challenge but, in fact, requires a new mode of operating within a nonprofit agency, an engineering division, or a long-established product line.[11]

Power Versus Progress

When leadership is understood as an activity—the activity of making progress on adaptive challenges—there is less attention to be paid to the transactions of power and influence and more attention given to the question of whether or not progress is being made on swamp issues. Accordingly, making progress on critical adaptive challenges becomes the basic measure of effective leadership in this approach. Note the shift. When a distinction is made between "authority and technical problems" on the one hand and "leadership