

March 25, 2008

To Lead is to Live Dangerously

by Ken Embley, CPPA Outreach Director

Listening to the sound of a wind chime guided by a gentle breeze is, at least to me, sweet and relaxing, a call for tranquility. Listening to the sound of the same wind chime guided by blustering wind and for hours on end can be an irritating and bothersome experience for the ear and my nerves. I decide to take action.

Feeling sure of an awkward rejection, I decide to avoid direct communication with my across the street neighbor. My approach—nighttime raids—stuffing the chimes with an old tee shirt, tying them up with twine, and simply removing the chimes from their noisy post, gently laying the offending chimes on the porch. Failures in every case. The neighbor finds a remedy to my tactics and the chimes quickly return to action. Besides, I am sure the neighbor sees me as the primary suspect and eventually the neighbor will catch me red-handed. I cannot look my neighbor in the eye. I need some new tactics. Maybe I should take a systematic approach, manage the situation and show some leadership.



Ronald Heifetz in his book *Leadership on the Line* speaks directly about a number of adaptive leadership skills. Among other things he advises leaders to think politically and develop personal relationships with people. Maybe his advice can be of help.

"There are... essential aspects of thinking politically in the exercise of leadership: one for dealing with people who are with you on the issue; one for managing those who are in opposition; and others for working with those who are uncommitted..."

- **Find partners**—a job more easily said than done. Why should other neighbors want to risk their necks? Moreover, if I disrupt things too much, the neighbors will abandon the effort. Nevertheless, my strategy of one is too risky. I know I need partners who can provide me some protection. I know I need to start acting with the power of many who share the same perspectives. As Heifetz says, "It is a mistake to go it alone." Therefore, I make my list of potential partners.
- **Keep the opposition close**—to survive and succeed in exercising leadership. There are neighbors who have chimes and others who do not. My guess is those with chimes will oppose my efforts because they will have the most to lose (and in turn, my potential partners are those who have the least to lose). For this reason, I know my across the street target and neighbors who have the most to lose will deserve more of my attention, as a matter of compassion, as well as a tactic of strategy and survival.
- **Acknowledge the loss**—victory over an annoying chime will result in loss for my neighbor. I need to understand that asking my neighbor to leave behind something they have lived with for years or for generations invites them to resist. My job will be to help my neighbor with the change effort. My work is to communicate, in every way possible, the reason to sacrifice the sound of chimes. My neighbor will need reasons to sustain their loss. The neighbor needs to know that the stakes are worth the effort to change.

Heifetz is hinting that change efforts require leadership and to lead is to live dangerously. Finding partners, keeping the opposition close and working to acknowledge loss requires exposure—a leader in any change effort is in danger.

Heifetz goes on to warn of other dangers. "Actions draw attention, but the message and the context must be crystal clear. If not, they are likely to distract people and displace responsibility."

"You stay alive in the practice of leadership by reducing the extent to which you become the target of people's frustrations. The best way to stay out of range is to think constantly about giving the work back to the people who need to take responsibility."

- **Accept responsibility for my piece of the mess**—my supportive neighbors need to know about my failed attempts to silence the chime. Taking responsibility for my nighttime raids will clear the air such that all my neighbors can focus on solutions. Besides, taking responsibility makes it so I do not become the target and part of the problem.
- **Give the work back**—my neighbors need to make the decisions that have an effect on their lives. My role as a leader is not to make the decision for my across the street neighbor and others in the neighborhood. Heifetz argues that the role of leadership, and specifically an adaptive style of leadership, is to help all the neighbors make the best possible decision—to chime or not.

All important change efforts require the application of strategy, but leadership enables success. The problem, of course, is that to lead is to live dangerously.

As for me—I am having second thoughts. I am beginning to hear the sweet sounds of chimes. Note to self: until the heat dies down due to my nighttime raids, avoid eye contact with the across the street neighbor—and—get a life!

Readers—I will have more to say in the coming months about Ronald Heifetz, adaptive leadership and his extensive writings.

Learn more about Ronald Heifetz's: http://ksgfaculty.harvard.edu/Ronald_Heifetz

Leadership on the Line—Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading:
<http://www.amazon.com/Leadership-Line-Staying-Through-Dangers/dp/1578514371>

Published by [Center for Public Policy & Administration](#)

Copyright © 2008 The University of Utah. All rights reserved.

The Center for Public Policy & Administration offers research, education and services to public and nonprofit organizations that will strengthen administration, leadership and public policy making.

Powered by [IMN](#)