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## Leadership Requires Political Thinking

by Ken Embley, CPPA Outreach Director

Picture this - you and other members of your management team are in a meeting with the consultants and the "big cheese." All of you know something is going on and sure enough, they are announcing a change in procedure that will profoundly affect everyone. Your peers are all looking cross-eyed at one another and the body language tells it all. You just know the staff is going to hate the change.

As the management team files out of the meeting, you hear stories of events that are sure to happen: "Jimmy is going to go nuts;" another manager, "I'll bet Bill will retire;" another, "Mary will get passive aggressive;" and from still another, "This will never work, I am going to wait this one out." One thing is for sure, everyone is going to experience a little bit of heck in the office.

Oh my, how we all dread change, and it is not just the change in procedure. What we seem to dread the most is the effect of change on people, that old "attitude" stuff that just gets difficult when we mess with people. You think to yourself, what am I to do?

Ronald Heifetz offers a number of suggestions in his book *Leadership on the Line* and captures some in the umbrella concept—leadership requires political thinking.

*Adaptive leaders know that in everyday personal and professional life, the nature and quality of the connections human beings have with each other is more important than almost any other factor in determining results.*

Most people approach change through the eyes of a technical fix (to tweak what you do, teach staff how to perform the new procedure, etc.). Now, we all know that the technical fix is important for any change process; however, it may not be the most important consideration. Heifetz argues the most important approach is the "quality of the connections human beings have with each other" and this requires political thinking.

Now, picture yourself back in your office. You begin to think about human connections and a need to emphasize the development of personal relationships. You recognize that it is through the quality of these varying and diverse connections that change will happen. You start to frame your political thinking strategy.

- **Find partners**—first, partners create alliances for you with factions other than your own. Partners strengthen both you and your change initiatives. With partners, you are not simply relying on the logical power of your arguments and evidence; you are building political power as well. Second, change is never smooth and when something goes wrong, partners provide protection. You decide to make a list of people you will need as partners and you commit to take the time needed to develop relationships with these partners.
- **Keep the opposition close**—to survive and succeed in exercising leadership during change, you decide to work as closely with potential opponents as you do with your partners. You begin by thinking about the people who will have the most to lose by the success of the change initiative. It is precisely because some will have more "on the line" to lose than others that they deserve more of your attention. This additional attention is a matter of compassion as well as a tactic of strategy and survival. You make a second list—a list of potential opponents.
- **Accept responsibility for your piece of the mess**—when you are too quick to lay blame on others, you create risks for yourself. Obviously, you risk misdiagnosing the situation but most importantly, you risk making yourself a target. You sit back in your chair and ponder Heifetz's suggestion. In an environment of change, it is easy to point fingers at consultants, members of other departments, and



the “big cheese.” This finger pointing can easily take a turn when people defend themselves by laying blame on you. The strategy is to accept responsibility so there is no need for anyone to point fingers and thereby enable staff to move toward more productive and solution oriented strategies. You commit to being “up-front” with staff.

- **Acknowledge their loss**—remember that when you ask people to change, you are asking a lot. You may be asking them to choose between values—the old and comfortable procedure and the new efficient procedure—both of which are important to the way they understand themselves. Again, you ponder the thought. People on staff have, over the years, learned to value and care about the current procedure. After all “if it is not broken, why fix it?” Learning a new procedure means losing the old and that is a loss to acknowledge. You decide to work to discover and acknowledge loss.

As Ronald Heifetz teaches—leadership is not about wielding power and authority. It is about mobilizing people to make progress on the tough, adaptive challenges that make or break organizations. It is about being able to both see the bigger picture and make decisions under fire. Moreover, contrary to popular notions about the importance of charisma, leadership is not about personality, but presence, the capacity to foster collective action to resolve pressing issues.

You make a decision to engage people in the technical aspects of the change process but more importantly, you make a decision to think politically and connect with human beings throughout the change process. You make a decision to find partners, keep the opposition close, accept responsibility for your piece of the mess, and acknowledge loss. You commit to being a presence in the work place by fostering a collective action to resolve the pressing change issue.

Learn more about Ronald Heifetz's: [http://ksgfaculty.harvard.edu/Ronald\\_Heifetz](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>

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