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Leadership on A Razor's Edge

by Ken Embley, CPPA Outreach Director

It is common to hear those with traditional management values define leadership in technical terms. For example, technical step one is vision; step two is persuasion; and step three is action to realize the vision. To say it another way—a leader is a person with a clear vision and the ability to persuade people to realize the vision. There may be some truth to this traditional approach to leadership, but I also believe it is incomplete. Why? The traditional approach places the responsibility for actions to resolve pressing challenges on the shoulders of leadership. Therefore, when vision and persuasion prove true—the leader is a hero and John Wayne triumphantly rides off into the sunset; and when vision and persuasion prove false—the leader is a villain and Richard Nixon in shame turns from a White House helicopter and waives goodbye.



What reality demands to complete the scene is for both leaders and followers to take responsibility for actions and to realize a collective vision. In addition to the traditional role, the job of leadership is to help people adapt to resolve the challenges—a role that places leadership on a razor's edge.

Ronald Heifetz, in his book *Leadership without Easy Answers*, states, "Leadership is [on] a razor's edge because one [leader] has to oversee a sustained period of social disequilibrium during which people confront the contradictions of their lives . . . and adjust their values and behavior to accommodate new realities." Leadership does more than provide vision and persuade; leadership creates conditions such that people can adapt.

Thirteen years ago, my youngest turned 10 and he was up for new and exciting challenges. At the time, we enjoyed hiking so I came up with the brilliant idea of taking him on a new and exciting hike—one that promised to meet his expectations.

Being a great leader, I established the vision. "Scott, let's go up Little Cottonwood Canyon, hike to White Pine Lake, and then," with Scott's challenge in mind and with a persuasive voice, "let's cross over White Pine Ridge and return on the Red Pine trail." Scott, believing in my vision and excited by my persuasive tone of voice, was ready to go in a flash.

With relative ease, we found ourselves at White Pine Lake and I began to survey the area for the best route. Wow! As I thought to myself, the reality of White Pine Ridge rising sharply over a thousand feet above the lake placed a little damper on my vision. However, one look in Scott's admiring eyes and this leader was ready for action and the pressing challenge of White Pine Ridge.

Confidently, I pointed the way, "Let's head up the Ridge where the grade is not so sharp, and get as high on the Ridge as we can. Then when it gets too steep, let's traverse and follow the map's contour lines around, then over the Ridge to Red Pine trail." Wow! I marveled at my plan and could not help thinking to myself, not bad for a "fair weather" hiker. I headed out, and Scott followed.

Going up the Ridge was a little challenging for us "fair weather" hikers. Neither of us had ever scrambled in our hiking lives, but being on "all four" seemed to work. Scott certainly had his

challenge and we both became very serious about what we were doing. Scott looked at me with his trusting eyes. He looked to his dad for leadership!

As expected, we encountered a sharp incline and that signaled us to begin our traverse of the Ridge. The contour line strategy quickly took a turn. We could traverse the Ridge but below, the drop off was sharp. We continued for maybe a quarter mile or so and then came to a small but challenging fissure—and a call for leadership. Scott, we can do this!

We made our way into the fissure but found ourselves nearly swallowed by it. We got in but there was no easy way out—and another call for leadership. I turned to my son, looked at him and our eyes said it all; clear vision and the capacity to persuade vanished, the trust was gone. All I saw were tears and disappointment. For me, I was scared and I knew I needed help. Scott and I were in a position where we had to adjust our values and behavior to accommodate new realities. We were in big trouble.

Heifetz describes leadership as being on the razor's edge because conditions create "disequilibrium during which people confront the contradictions of their lives . . . and must adjust their values and behavior to accommodate new realities." He goes on to describe leadership from a position of authority—in adaptive situations.

Exercising leadership from a position of authority in adaptive situations means going against the grain. Rather than fulfilling the expectations for answers, one provides questions; rather than protecting people from outside threat, one lets people feel the threat in order to stimulate adaptation; instead of orienting people to their current roles, one disorients people so that new role relationships develop; rather than quelling conflict, one generates it; instead of maintaining norms, one challenges them.

"Dad, we're in trouble, aren't we?" The threat was real, and we both knew the answer to his question. Silence! All we could hear was the wind above the fissure.

"What do you think, Scott?" He looked at me as if to say, "I am 10 years-old, Dad, what do you want from me?"

"I need your help, son. I am not the guy with all the answers." "I'm your dad, but here and now we need to be partners; we need to help each other. Scott, I'm scared,"

"Dad, so am I," and with that said, weird but true, trust eked back into our relationship, a relationship that had never before existed.

Scott looked over my shoulder, made his way around me and to the side of a large bolder that blocked our path. "Dad, if we can squeeze through here I think we've got a chance." That was a tight squeeze and I was fighting claustrophobia all the way. Scott yelled, "You can do it!" and I did.

Now standing on the other side of the fissure, something was completely different. My vision and capacity to persuade was meaningless to the relationship of the moment, but a relationship had developed that was stronger than any we could imagine. We made our way down the Ridge and into familiar "fair weather" hiking conditions. There, we came across an experienced hiker who took great pleasure in our story and then directed us to a pass over the Ridge. Once again, we found ourselves in a challenging position, scrambling up and over the White Pine Ridge with sheer drops everywhere. Once again we had to accommodate new realities and, together, create conditions where we could adapt. This time we worked together from the start and we made our way down to the Red Pine trail and safety.

The traditional role of leadership between a father and son remained. We both knew my role

calls for leadership to initiate action by saying, "Eat your vegetables, be home at ten" and the like, but our relationship was now different. Ours was no longer a one-sided, top-down, traditional relationship. Our relationship developed far beyond that to one where we can together, in the face of adversity, adapt and resolve a pressing challenge.

A traditionalist might say something like, "Hey Dad, you have a ten year old son who really needed your help and the bottom line is you failed to take charge when your son needed you most. This story is not an example of good leadership; it is an example of bad leadership, you wimp!"

Hence, the title of the article is—Leadership on A Razor's Edge. Heifetz recognizes that adaptive leadership is risky business. Traditionalist may not understand or value adaptive leadership as a concept or as a practical means to address and resolve pressing challenges. However, folks like Heifetz, and for that matter, a person like me, want to encourage people to develop adaptive leadership skills. When the conditions call for adaptive leadership—and conditions up on White Pine Ridge called for it—Heifetz and I want leaders who can help followers ". . . adjust their values and behaviors to accommodate new realities." We want to encourage adaptive leadership, leadership on a razor's edge.

Note to 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 without Easy Answers:

<http://www.amazon.com/Leadership-Without-Answers-Ronald-Heifetz/dp/0674518586>

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