

# The Leader of the Future

## **Harvard's Ronald Heifetz offers a short course on the future of leadership.**

*By William C. Taylor*

It's hard to imagine discussing "the leader of the future" without having a discussion with Ronald Heifetz — one of the world's leading authorities on leadership. Heifetz, 48, director of the Leadership Education Project at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, is a scholar, a teacher, and a consultant. His course at Harvard, "Exercising Leadership," is legendary for its popularity with students and for its impact on them. His students (many of them in mid-career) include leaders from all walks of life: business executives, generals, priests and rabbis, politicians. His clients have included senior executives at BellSouth, who brought him on to conduct a two-year program on leadership in a fast-changing world, and the president of Ecuador, who is struggling to lead that nation through tough economic times.

What makes Heifetz's approach to leadership so compelling is that he is so honest about what real leadership demands. The book that rocketed him to prominence was called *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1994). The role of the leader is changing, Heifetz argues. The new role is "to help people face reality and to mobilize them to make change." And making change is painful: "Many people have a 'smiley face' view of what it means to lead. They get a rude awakening when they find themselves with a leadership opportunity. Exercising leadership generates resistance — and pain. People are afraid that they will lose something that's worthwhile. They're afraid that they're going to have to give up something that they're comfortable with."

So why bother to lead? "There are lots of things in life that are worth the pain," he says. "Being a leader is one of them." In a series of conversations with *Fast Company*, Heifetz offered ideas, advice, and techniques for the leaders of the future.

### **How Leaders See**

**There is so much hunger for leadership in business today. Everyone wants better leaders. What do great leaders do?**

The real heroism of leadership involves having the courage to face reality — and helping the people around you to face reality. It's no accident that the word "vision" refers to our capacity to see. Of course, in business, vision has come to mean something abstract or even inspirational.

But the quality of any vision depends on its accuracy, not just on its appeal or on how imaginative it is.

Mustering the courage to interrogate reality is a central function of a leader. And that requires the courage to face three realities at once. First, what values do we stand for — and are there gaps between those values and how we actually behave? Second, what are the skills and talents of our company — and are there gaps between those resources and what the market demands? Third, what opportunities does the future hold — and are there gaps between those opportunities and our ability to capitalize on them?

Now, don't get the wrong idea. Leaders don't answer those questions themselves. That's the old definition of leadership: The leader has the answers — the vision — and everything else is a sales job to persuade people to sign up for it. Leaders certainly provide direction. But that often means posing well-structured questions, rather than offering definitive answers. Imagine the differences in behavior between leaders who operate with the idea that "leadership means influencing the organization to follow the leader's vision" and those who operate with the idea that "leadership means influencing the organization to face its problems and to live into its opportunities." That second idea — mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges — is what defines the new job of the leader.

**Most companies have a remarkable tendency to underestimate their external threats and to overestimate their own power. Why is it so hard for leaders to convince people to face reality?**

Companies tend to be allergic to conflict — particularly companies that have been in operation for a long time. Being averse to conflict is understandable. Conflict is dangerous: It can damage relationships. It can threaten friendships. But conflict is the primary engine of creativity and innovation. People don't learn by staring into a mirror; people learn by encountering difference. So hand in hand with the courage to face reality comes the courage to surface and orchestrate conflicts.

Leaders of the future need to have the stomach for conflict and uncertainty — among their people and within themselves. That's why leaders of the future need to have an experimental mind-set. Some decisions will work, some won't. Some projects will pay off, some won't. But every decision and every project will teach you and your organization something about how the world is changing — and about how your company compares with its competition.

In other words, facing reality means facing up to mistakes and failures — especially your own failures. In the mid-1990s, Bill Gates made a big decision about the Internet. He decided that the Net wasn't going to be all that important. Then he changed his decision, because the people whom he was listening to contradicted his earlier decision. In the mid-1980s, Ken Olsen, the cofounder of Digital Equipment Corp., decided that personal computers weren't going to be all that important. He didn't change his decision very quickly, and Digital suffered as a result. These days, leaving any big decision in one person's hands is like playing Russian roulette. It's much safer to run multiple experiments. You never know which ideas are going to flourish and which ones are going to die.

## **If everything is subject to change, how can leaders help people keep their bearings?**

Not everything is subject to change. If the role of the leader is first to help people face reality and then to mobilize them to make change, then one of the questions that defines both of those tasks is this: What's precious, and what's expendable? Which values and operations are so central to our core that if we lose them, we lose ourselves? And which assumptions, investments, and businesses are subject to radical change? At the highest level, the work of a leader is to lead conversations about what's essential and what's not.

Examples from politics abound. The civil-rights movement posed several questions: What's most precious about America? What values do we stand for? Do we stand for freedom and equal opportunity? Or do we stand for how we are living today? By posing those questions in such terms, Martin Luther King Jr. and the movement's other strategists generated conflict within the hearts and minds of many people around the country. People faced an internal contradiction between the values they espoused and the way they lived. Millions of people had to decide for themselves what was precious about their country and what was expendable about the supremacist lessons that they had learned.

Now, that is a very difficult inner conversation for anyone to have. Imagine how hard it was for Lew Platt, CEO of Hewlett-Packard, to lead conversations about breaking up that company — and about leaving the HP name with the computer business rather than with the test-and-measurement business, which is where William Hewlett and David Packard got their start. I wasn't privy to those conversations, but my guess is that they were quite emotional. You can understand the business logic: HP's technology is so established in the test-and-measurement world that the company can survive a name change in that business without losing market share. The HP name isn't what's precious. Even so, if you grew up in that business, immersed in the legend of Hewlett and Packard's innovation in a garage, it might seem awfully precious.

## **How Leaders Listen**

**With leaders, the sense of sight — vision — is closely linked to the sense of hearing. People who love their boss often say, “She’s a great listener.” What does it mean to be a “great listener”?**

Most leaders die with their mouths open. Leaders must know how to listen — and the art of listening is more subtle than most people think it is. But first, and just as important, leaders must want to listen. Good listening is fueled by curiosity and empathy: What's really happening here? Can I put myself in someone else's shoes? It's hard to be a great listener if you're not interested in other people.

Think about some of the best-known leaders in the airline business: Jan Carlzon at SAS (Scandinavian Airlines System) in the early 1980s, Colin Marshall at British Airways in the early 1990s, Herb Kelleher at Southwest Airlines today. These executives are always flying on their own airlines' planes. They're always talking with customers. They're always encouraging ticket agents and baggage handlers to be creative about helping customers to solve problems. They're in “dynamic listening” mode, asking questions all the time — and not getting seduced into trying

to provide all of the answers. If you're the boss, the people around you will invariably sit back and wait for you to speak. They will create a vacuum of silence, and you will feel a compelling need to fill it. You need to have a special discipline not to fill that vacuum.

### **What else does it take to be a great listener?**

Great listeners know how to listen musically as well as analytically. As president, Jimmy Carter relied on "rational discourse" to weigh the pros and cons of various initiatives. He would have people prepare papers, and then he would sift their views in private. Doing it that way enabled him to listen to their arguments analytically but not musically. What do I mean by that? Jimmy Carter did not enjoy being in meetings with people who were posturing, arguing, haggling. But there's an enormous amount of information in the haggling, and that information tells us quite a lot about the values, the history, and the personal stakes that people bring to an argument. It's difficult for someone who's lost the last six arguments to say in a policy paper, "I've lost the last six arguments. If I don't win the next one, what am I going to tell my people?"

But in a conversation, the tone of voice and the intensity of the argument give clues to that subtext. Listening musically enables leaders to get underneath and behind the surface to ask, "What's the real argument that we're having?" And that's a critical question to answer — because, in the absence of an answer to that question, you get superficial buy-in. People go along in a pseudo-consensus, or in a deferential way, but without commitment.

### **If curiosity is a prerequisite for listening, what's the enemy?**

Grandiosity. Leaders need to check their sense of self-importance. But you shouldn't think that grandiosity arises from bad intentions. It usually grows out of the normal human need to feel important. I don't know any human being who doesn't want to feel important, who doesn't want to matter to other people. And those of us who have a strong need to be needed — I happen to have that need, so I know a lot about it — spend our lives solving other people's problems. It makes us feel needed: "Surely you have a problem that I can solve." But that orientation creates its own kind of problem. The more we demonstrate our capacity to take problems off other people's shoulders, the more authority we gain in their eyes — until, finally, we become a senior executive or a CEO. And, by then, the tracks have been laid so deeply inside our brain that it becomes hard to stand back, hard to listen, hard to learn from others. Our normal need to feel important — "Let me help you" — has been transformed into grandiosity: "I have all the answers."

### **How Leaders Fail**

#### **Why do so many people dislike their bosses? Why do so many of us not respect our leaders?**

For decades, I've been interested in that question — because it sounds like a paradox: "Our leadership isn't exercising any leadership." Why do so many people feel that way about those who lead their companies or their communities? One reason is that people in positions of authority are frequently asked not to exercise their leadership. Instead of mobilizing their

constituents to face tough, frustrating challenges, they are asked to protect those constituents from having to make adjustments. It's very hard for a congressman to go to his district and say, "Good news: The Cold War is over. Time for 10,000 of you to lose your jobs." He has been elected to his post to protect people from challenges that will require adjustments to their way of life.

That's why leadership is dangerous. Sure, you have to protect people from change. But you also have to "unprotect" them. It's dangerous to challenge people in a way that will require changes in their priorities, their values, their habits. It's dangerous to try to persuade people to take more responsibility than they feel comfortable with. And that's why so many leaders get marginalized, diverted, attacked, seduced. You want to be able to stir the pot without letting it boil over. You want to regulate disequilibrium, to keep people in a productive discomfort zone.

### **How do you keep people in a "productive discomfort zone"?**

Attention is the currency of leadership. To a leader with formal authority, attention comes naturally. Fidel Castro can give a two-hour speech, and people will pay attention. So can Nelson Mandela. The president of the United States can give a State of the Union address that lasts an hour and 15 minutes. The big questions for that kind of leader are "How do I use that attention? What do I focus it on? When does a broad agenda become too broad? How do I push the organization without alienating my core constituency?" You have to remember: Drawing attention to tough challenges generates discomfort. So you want to pace the rate at which you frustrate or attempt to change expectations.

That means distinguishing between "ripe" and "unripe" issues. A ripe issue is one in which there is a general urgency for action. An unripe issue is one in which there is local urgency — a readiness to change within just one faction. The work that it takes to ripen an unripe issue is enormous — and quite dangerous. It needs to be done, but it's different from working a ripe issue.

Lyndon Johnson exercised wonderful leadership in helping to ripen civil rights as an issue. Six weeks after Kennedy's assassination, he called Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of the NAACP, and said, "When are you going to get down here and start civil rights?" Then he gave Wilkins counsel on how to lobby Everett Dirksen, the senate minority leader. Johnson was ripening an unripe issue: He couldn't get out front on the Civil Rights Act of 1964, but as an authority figure, he could provide counsel and cover for leaders without authority — leaders who could then disseminate a sense of urgency. He did the same thing with King. Basically, he said, "If you open the door, if you create the political will, I'll drive through that opening." Johnson was asking King to ripen the issue for him. He was expected to be president for all the people. So, unless King and other civil-rights leaders generated the necessary political will, he couldn't move on that issue. He was prevented from exercising leadership by virtue of his authority.

### **What about grassroots leaders — people without formal authority?**

Again, it starts with attention. People who lead without authority, who lead from below, must draw attention to the issues that they raise without drawing too much attention to themselves.

Grassroots leaders often generate “sticky” attention — attention that sticks to them personally, rather than to their agenda. To use a different metaphor, it’s never comfortable to be a lightning rod. The easiest way for an organization to neutralize the disturbance that you represent is to neutralize you.

There’s a second big difference between people who lead with authority and people who lead without authority. If you’re leading without authority, other people’s attention spans are going to be short whenever you try to communicate with them. Forget two-hour speeches — most people aren’t willing to give you more than 30 seconds! So you have to use their attention wisely. You have to make your interventions short, simple, intelligible, and relevant.

I’ve met many in-the-trenches leaders who blame the people above them when they fail to make progress on their agenda: “I know where we have to go, but my boss doesn’t get it. He’s standing in the way.” That’s usually a complete misdiagnosis of the situation. Don’t attack your boss. Look at the situation from his or her point of view. You should treat his or her attitude as a barometer of stress in the organization.

Let’s say there’s a well-meaning person — we’ll call him Max — who has an imaginative idea, an idea with plenty of merit. Max speaks up in the middle of a meeting, off the agenda, and offers his inspired intuition. What the boss notices is how Max’s colleagues fidget, roll their eyes, demonstrate their impatience. That’s because they’re all saying to themselves, “I’ve got an agenda item that I need to get covered, because my troops are expecting me to bring home the bacon. And there goes Max with his enthusiasms again.” The boss immediately picks up on that attitude and takes Max down.

Now, the boss isn’t the problem. Max is the problem. Max has to find a smarter way to intervene in behalf of his agenda. He has to understand the dilemma that he’s creating for the boss, and he has to figure out how to help the boss resolve that dilemma. Remember: Most bosses are already operating near the limit of how much distress they can tolerate — of how much disequilibrium, confusion, and chaos they can stomach. Naturally, they’re inclined to suppress additional disturbances. So Max needs to understand the pains of change that he represents and to choose his tactics accordingly.

## **How Leaders Stay Alive**

**Leadership is hard — on the people who work with leaders as well as on leaders themselves. How do leaders maintain the stamina, the energy, and the passion that they need to keep pushing ahead?**

I’m working on this question with a Kennedy School colleague, Martin Linsky. We’re writing a book for leaders that will be called *Staying Alive*. To sustain yourself over the long term, you must learn how to distinguish role from self. Or, to put it more simply: You can’t take things personally. Leaders often take personally what is not personal and then misdiagnose the resistance that’s out there.

Remember: It's not you they're after. It may look like a personal attack, it may sound like a personal attack — but it's the issues that you represent that they're after. Distinguishing role from self helps you maintain a diagnostic mind-set during trying times.

There's a second point: Because we get so swept up in our professional roles, it's hard to distinguish role from self on our own. That's why we need partners who can help us stay analytical. And we need two different kinds of partners. We need allies inside the organization — people who share our agenda. And we need confidants inside or outside the organization — people who can keep us from getting lost in our role.

Leaders also need a sanctuary, a place where they can go to get back in touch with the worth of their life and the worth of their work. I'm not necessarily talking about a physical place or an extended sabbatical. I'm talking about practical sanctuaries — daily moments that function as sanctuaries. One sanctuary that I recently developed for myself involves getting an email that's sent out by a rabbinic friend, who's a mystic and a biblical scholar. Every day, he sends out an interpretation of one word from the Bible. It's just a few screens long, but as I'm going through my email every day, I take a few minutes to read this thing, and it roots me in a different reality, a different source of meaning.

I'm not peddling any particular kind of sanctuary; we all have to find our own structures. Unfortunately, though, people who get swept up in fast-moving companies often treat their partners and their sanctuaries as expendable luxuries rather than as necessities: "I don't have time to have lunch with my friend"; "I don't have time to go to the gym in the morning, or to pray or meditate." I live in Boston. No one would live in Boston without owning a winter coat. But countless people think that they can exercise leadership without partners or without a sanctuary. To stay alive as leaders — to tend the wounds that we inevitably receive when we raise tough questions — requires maintaining these structures in our lives.

**You make leadership sound so hard, so demanding. Do you worry that more people are going to start opting out?**

Recognizing the challenges of leadership, along with the pains of change, shouldn't diminish anyone's eagerness to reap the rewards of creating value and meaning in other people's lives. There's a thrill that comes with the creation of value — and of course there's money and status — and those rewards are surely worth the pain that comes with the territory. There are lots of things in life that are worth the pain. Leadership is one of them.

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