

# Ronald A. Heifetz Speech On Leadership To the International Leadership Association's Annual Conference

Summarized by Herb Rubenstein

President, Sustainable Business Group

## Introduction

Ronald Heifetz is Director of the Center for Public Leadership at the JFK School at Harvard University. His books on leadership yield many practical lessons of leadership. His speech focused on sharing distinctions about leadership that are based on his research findings.

Ron stated that our language about leadership often fails us. The word leadership does not have one common, accepted meaning. It can mean "authority" or position power or it can mean the action that moves a situation in a certain direction. I define leadership as the creation and fulfillment of opportunities by honorable means.

Heifetz believes that the exercise of leadership requires moral authority. Much of a leader's role is to "refashion allegiances." Leaders must know their target audience to be able to refashion allegiances. Using Dr. Martin Luther King as an example, King knew that the primary audience for his message were those who either didn't care about the race situation in the United States or who cared but were not doing much about it. He did not consider those who were antagonistic to his point of view as his audience because he knew he could not move them to action on his side. His words, action and rhetoric were all designed to move his supporters and those who were "on the fence" toward action. Knowing his audience made King a great leader.

## Are Leaders Born or Made?

Heifetz states that casting the question about leadership in this fashion is destructive, since we know that some minor parts of leadership are in born, while most are taught and the result of the environment in which a leader acts and grown. Heifetz equates leadership to some extent with "social domination." He believes that some elements of leadership are characterological (either born, bred in or taught at a very early age).

Research has shown that when we shake six week old babies we get a variety of responses. Some of the babies get startled/terrified; some are resilient and do not cry or complain. Most in the middle of these two extremes. Conducting research on these same children some ten to fifteen years later reveals that the babies with the most resilient, shock absorbent capacity become more socially dominant, and those who get rattled quite easily are more shy in social situations. Heifetz equates the shock absorbent capacity as the ability of a child to be "field independent," one of the character traits of leaders.

Heifetz stated that girls and boys have different social dominance hierarchy systems. Social dominance is defined as the child that gets the most attention, is the one who others look to as they get organized or decide on what to do. In the boys world, attention is a major "currency" or goal.

In contrast to the socially dominant child, the "differential person" is one who looks for others to make decisions and to organize the group. This type of person seeks other ways to get attention.

### **Leadership and Public Authority.**

Heifetz believes there is an inherent paradox between authenticity and leadership at the public level. First, people expect authorities to know the way and to have answers. Second, a public leader must, in order to remain in power and be effective in the short run as well, must convey to his or her followers that he or she not only knows what to do, but can get others to move the direction the leader believes will solve the problem at hand. Third, if the leader does not know what to do (as is currently the case with illegal, destructive drug abuse in the United States), the leader will lose credibility with the populace if he or she admits that he or she does not know what to do.

We must reconceptualize the concept of trust to understand "leadership." When society is faced with an adaptive challenge - people will trust you more when you lie to them. Give them a wrong, fake remedy and that creates trust. Can't say "I don't know" because it means an abdication of authority. Telling the truth can cause a great loss of trust.

This truth results in the leaders saying they know what to do, like appoint a drug czar and bomb poppy fields in foreign countries, and all the while these leaders do not have a clue about how to solve the problem at hand. This scenario ends up wasting not only hundreds of millions of dollars, but also delaying society's needed research and inquiry into this type of "adaptive problem," which could lead to a much better long run solution to this challenge. Thus, when society does not know the answer to a major problem, and we call these adaptive problems, public leaders have a strong conflict of interest in trying to devise an approach to solving the problem. They want to look like they know what they are doing. The public expects them to act like they know what they are doing, and acting this way in the short run is seen as essential by the leader to keep the trust of the followers.

### **Leadership as Relationships**

Authority is an amazing gift. Our job in life is to make social change feasible. Trusting relationships are sacred, because without trust you get the disintegration of life. Many people have been "violated" by those in authority. Once trust is violated, people withhold giving authority to others. Therefore, it is important to assist in the recovery of people's capacity to establish trusting relationships. Having one's heart in right place and the competence to ask the right questions at the right time to the right people/organizations/institutions are the keys to building leadership and trust. Most of the services that people are asked to provide, those in authority, are quite primitive: Food, clothing, health care, sanitation, transportation, security, protection orientation, order, resolve conflict, create/generate, enforce norms - are

all basically routine problems. People in authority are supposed to provide direction and resources. Those in authority are those who must be willing to serve.

When under environmental distress we want to see people in authority and see them exercise authority and decisiveness, even though they may not know what they are doing. This is a primitive response. People want those in authority to keep or restore "equilibrium." In times of distress we look to people in authority to give answers.

### **Adaptive Challenges vs. Technical Challenges**

Adaptive failure causes extinction: Species that do not know how to solve the problems they face in a new environment will become extinct.

Technical challenges are those that are already within our problem solving expertise; procedures, norms, systems, methods are already known and well tested. Technical challenges are best handled by giving authority to the expert to implement - no meetings are necessary, no consultation, no learning is required. Adaptive challenges are not the same as technological challenges. Static environments can do well with just authoritative expertise. Adaptive environments need something more than authoritative expertise. They need adaptive leadership. Technical challenges invoke a problem solving response.

Adaptive challenges are those where we do not know how to solve the problem and in fact, we are the problem. Adaptive challenges require people to learn new ways, change behavior, achieve new understandings, see the world through new filters and people do all of these things in a collective way very slowly. The problem in an adaptive challenge is that the problem is in the people, the society, the culture, the mores and we must change the people to figure out how to solve the problem. Meetings, participatory leadership, consultation, research, development of new paradigms are appropriate for this type of problem.

Confusing adaptive challenges with technical challenges is a big mistake. Most problems come bundled - they are part technical and part adaptive in nature. (Heart disease, obesity; health problems, for example are both technical and adaptive challenges.) Drug abuse is primarily an adaptive problem. Government policy can only be a partial solution to adaptive problems with traditional government actions, like drug interdiction events like bombing Columbia and drug abuse education by teachers who do not know very much about drug abuse at all.

One certainly can not address adaptive problems by externalizing the problem or blaming others. Stating that the problem is over there will not work and results in money, time, energy and opportunities to get at the real core of the problem being completely wasted.

### **Leadership vs. Authority.**

Leadership is not about maintaining equilibrium. Leadership is about making decisions that are accepted by others in determining what is precious and essential and what is expendable? Advising people on what a new environment should look like and how to adapt to and thrive in the new environment? What kind of challenges require authority? What kind of challenges require leadership? These are the essential questions of adaptive leadership - taking from the history what is best and making a new, better environment. The process of figuring out what

part of history to give up, what to keep, is very painful in a changing environment. Adaptive work is very hard and often outside the realm of activity by those in authority.

The pinch of necessity tells us what is essential or expendable. It causes strategic thinking; it causes real trade offs. It guides our ability to use adaptive leadership to fashion a new future.

Heifetz's definition of leadership is the activity of mobilizing adaptive work or meeting adaptive challenges. Routine or critical problem solving is the role of managers and those with authority.

An essential element of leadership is "limit setting" in adaptive challenge resolutions. Authority, power and influence are tools of leadership. They are not leadership itself. Leaders must be organizationally prepared as well as individually prepared and able to enroll substantial resources in support of their aims..

### ***Saying You Are A Leader is Taboo***

I asked Ron Heifetz, "Why is saying 'you are a leader' a taboo in the United States.?" He said it was an interesting question. In his view saying that one is a leader invokes competitive dynamics and sets up one to be assailed by everyone who wants to compete with you. By saying that you are a leader, you are seeking credibility which is in our society bestowed on one by a third party, and not by oneself. Heifetz does not often refer to a person as a leader since he believes that leadership is an activity; not a person per se.

### ***About the Author***

Herb Rubenstein is the President of Sustainable Business Group a consulting firm to businesses. The headquarters of the Sustainable Business Group is Denver, Colorado. He is co-author of Breakthrough, Inc. - High Growth Strategies for Entrepreneurial Organizations (Prentice Hall/Financial Times, 1999). He also served as an Adjunct Professor of Strategic Planning George Washington University, and has been an Adjunct Professor of Entrepreneurism at George Mason University and Colorado State University. He has his law degree from Georgetown University, his Master of Public Affairs from the LBJ School of Public Affairs, a graduate degree in sociology from the University of Bristol in Bristol, England and was a Phi Beta Kappa/Omicron Delta Kappa graduate from Washington and Lee University in 1974. His email address is herb@sbizgroup.com and he can be reached at 303 910-7961. To learn more about the Sustainable Business Group, see [www.sbizgroup.com](http://www.sbizgroup.com).