Get on the Balcony

Why Leaders Need to Step Back to Get Perspective

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Leadership on the Line:
Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading

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Few practical ideas are more obvious or more critical than the need to get perspective in the midst of action. Any military officer, for example, knows the importance of maintaining the capacity for reflection, even in the “fog of war.” Great athletes can at once play the game and observe it as a whole—as Walt Whitman described it, “being both in and out of the game.” Jesuits call it “contemplation in action.” Hindus and Buddhists call it “karma yoga,” or mindfulness. We call this skill “getting off the dance floor and going to the balcony,” an image that captures the mental activity of stepping back in the midst of action and asking, “What’s really going on here?”

Why do so many of the world’s forms of spiritual and organizational life recommend this mental exercise? Because few tasks strain our abilities more than putting this idea into practice. We all get swept up in the action, particularly when it becomes intense or personal and we need most to pause. Self-reflection does not come naturally. It’s much easier to adopt an established belief than create one’s own. Most people instinctively follow a dominant trend in an organization or community, without critical evaluation of its merits. The herd instinct is strong. And a stampede not only tramples those who don’t keep pace, it also makes it hard to see another direction—until the dust settles.
For example, we were recently at a business meeting in which a woman named Amanda made a provocative comment, questioning whether everyone in the room was pulling their weight during a challenging restructuring of the firm. Her comment didn’t seem to go anywhere. Then some time later Brian, a man a bit senior to her in the organization, offered what amounted to the same comment. Suddenly, the group engaged around the idea and the conversation moved, or at least lurched, in the direction Amanda had originally hoped. Brian walked away feeling influential, and Amanda felt invisible and frustrated.

Groups often devalue someone by ignoring them, by rendering them invisible—a form of marginalization. Surely this has happened to you at least once or twice. Women tell us this happens often to them.

Amanda would have had a tough time getting on the balcony. She wondered why she had been ignored, but mostly she felt trampled and angered, diminishing her capacity to distance herself from the situation. She was totally engaged on the dance floor: preoccupied by the fear of being ineffective, reacting to having been brushed aside, and unable to get an overview and see what was really going on.

Typically only a few people see these dynamics as they happen. Swept up in the action of the meeting, most never notice. They simply play their parts. The observational challenge is to see the subtleties that normally go right by us. Seeing the whole picture requires standing back and watching even as you take part in the action being observed. But taking a balcony perspective is tough to do when you’re engaged on the dance floor, being pushed and pulled by the flow of events and also engaged in some of the pushing and pulling yourself.

The most difficult part to notice is what you do yourself, whether you play Amanda’s or Brian’s part. So you might imagine looking down on the room from a sky camera and seeing yourself as merely another player in the game.
The balcony metaphor captures this idea. Let's say you are dancing in a big ballroom with a balcony up above. A band plays and people swirl all around you to the music, filling up your view. Most of your attention focuses on your dance partner, and you reserve whatever is left to make sure that you don't collide with dancers close by. You let yourself get carried away by the music, your partner, and the moment. When someone later asks you about the dance, you exclaim, “The band played great, and the place surged with dancers.”

But if you had gone up to the balcony and looked down on the dance floor, you might have seen a very different picture. You would have noticed all sorts of patterns. For example, you might have observed that when slow music played, only some people danced; when the tempo increased, others stepped onto the floor; and some people never seemed to dance at all. Indeed, the dancers all clustered at one end of the floor, as far away from the band as possible. On returning home, you might have reported that participation was sporadic, the band played too loud, and you only danced to fast music.

Achieving a balcony perspective means taking yourself out of the dance, in your mind, even if only for a moment. The only way you can gain both a clearer view of reality and some perspective on the bigger picture is by distancing yourself from the fray. Otherwise, you are likely to misperceive the situation and make the wrong diagnosis, leading you to misguided decisions about whether and how to intervene.

If you want to affect what is happening, you must return to the dance floor. Staying on the balcony in a safe observer role is as much a prescription for ineffectuality as never achieving that perspective in the first place. The process must be iterative, not static. The challenge is to move back and forth between the dance floor and the balcony, making interventions, observing their impact in real time, and then returning to the action. The goal is to come as close as you can to being in both places simultaneously, as if you
had one eye looking from the dance floor and one eye looking down from the balcony, watching all the action, including your own. This is a critical point: When you observe from the balcony you must see yourself as well as the other participants. Perhaps this is the hardest task of all—to see yourself objectively.

To see yourself from the outside as merely one among the many dancers, you have to watch the system and the patterns, looking at yourself as part of the overall pattern. You must set aside your special knowledge of your intentions and inner feelings, and notice that part of yourself that others would see if they were looking down from the balcony.

Moving from participant to observer and back again is a skill you can learn. When you are sitting in a meeting, practice switching roles, watching what is happening while it is happening, even as you are part of what’s happening. When you make an intervention, resist the instinct to stay perched on the edge of your seat waiting to defend or explain what you said. Simple techniques, such as pushing your chair a few inches away from the meeting table after you speak, may provide some literal as well as metaphorical distance to help you detach just enough to become an observer. Don’t jump to a familiar conclusion. Open yourself up to other possibilities. See who says what; watch the body language. Watch the relationships and see how people’s attention to one another varies: supporting, thwarting, or listening.

Of course, the observer’s perch can be used to analyze not only small group meetings, but also large political and organizational processes. For example, in the early 1960s, the founder of modern Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, was intrigued by the perspectives of his anticolonial comrades, such as India’s Jawaharlal Nehru, who viewed Western imperialism and capitalism as one and the same thing. Lee left home and traveled widely to see firsthand the progress these other founders had made as they guided their new nations. But what he saw disturbed him. By tying their anticolonialism to anticapitalism, many founding fathers were impeding economic progress in their countries and preventing a decent stan-
standard of living for their people. By stepping back and testing the conventional wisdom of his contemporaries in other emerging nations, Lee gained not only freedom from those views, but also a more accurate and complete picture of reality, which then became the basis for his leadership. Unlike most fighters for independence, he embraced free markets. Between 1965 and 2000, Singapore went from being a poor and racially divided city to an integrated community with one of the world’s most competitive economies. None of Lee’s contemporaries, who were stuck in ideologies based on reactions to colonial trauma and who demonized export-driven free-market economies, achieved anything remotely similar.2

Lee got on the balcony by getting out of town. He shifted his perspective from the Singapore dance floor to the regional and international balcony.

Any one of a number of questions will help you get beyond your own blind spots. The most basic question is always the best place to start: What’s going on here? Beyond that question, we suggest four diagnostic tasks to safeguard against the more common traps that snare people.

1. Distinguish technical from adaptive challenges.
2. Find out where people are at.
3. Listen to the song beneath the words.
4. Read the behavior of authority figures for clues.

Distinguish Technical from Adaptive Challenges

There are many possible interpretations for the Amanda/Brian incident. Why was Amanda rendered invisible?

Style. Perhaps Amanda spoke in a manner different from the style preferred by the group. For example, she might have spoken with such unexpected conviction and power that everyone tuned
out. Demonstrating too much aggressive self-assurance with people who have a high regard for humility could have reduced her credibility.

Track Record. Amanda’s and Brian’s roles and reputations might have influenced the way they were heard. Brian may have demonstrated more consistent insight and competence over time. He might have had a proven track record on the subject.

Ripeness. Possibly, the issue had not “ripened” when Amanda put it on the table. Amanda may have been thinking faster than the rest of the group so that, at the time she spoke, the group lacked enough familiarity with the issue to deal with it. It can take time for other people to catch up to a new idea. By the time Brian made substantially the same comment, Amanda’s insight was “ripe,” and people were ready to take it up.

Status. Brian might have slightly more formal authority in the organization than Amanda. Brian might also be an important person in the community, to whom people tend to listen on a wide range of subjects. In most cultures, people pay more attention to those at the top of the hierarchy, whether or not that attention is warranted. The impact of both formal and informal hierarchies is extremely powerful.

Prejudice. Some interpretations of the Amanda/Brian incident cut directly to deeply held values and norms within the group. The group may not take women’s views as seriously as those of men. If prejudice is a group phenomenon, you may see it only from the balcony and not observe bias by any individual. Similarly, if Amanda is quite a bit younger than Brian, the group may be prejudiced, perhaps unconsciously, against young people. Or, her political leanings might make people uncomfortable, whereas Brian shares the group’s prevailing political views. Amanda may remind people of a problem in the society, and the group may unconsciously ignore
her business suggestions as part of a larger pattern of ignoring the social issue that she brings to mind. These explanations turn on the group's tolerance for “the other,” that is, for any aspect of the non-majority culture Amanda might embody.

Some of these interpretations—style, track record, and ripeness—suggest problems that Amanda can correct herself. A modest adjustment to her intervention style, greater selectivity in choosing when to speak up, or laying a better foundation for her perspective would be enough to forestall a recurrence. With these interpretations, her invisibility represents a technical problem on which she can take corrective action without disturbing anyone.

But the last two interpretations—status and prejudice—go to the heart of how the group, and the individuals within it, see themselves. Speaking to these issues will threaten the group's stability and civility and disrupt the agenda. The group will likely resist if she suggests that it discounts the views of people with lower status, rather than weigh everyone's views on the merits, or that its behavior is racist, sexist, ageist, or prejudicial in any way.

Typically, the group will strongly prefer the technical interpretation, particularly one in which the “problem” lies with an individual rather than the group as a whole. This allows for a simple, straightforward solution, one that does not require any hard work or adaptation on the group’s part.

Amanda might have tested which interpretation was more accurate by watching reactions to the comments of others who had less status or represented a minority voice. She could have observed whether the pattern of response to her contributions continued even after she applied technical fixes to her style, timing, and track record. If Amanda gets to the balcony, collects information, listens carefully, and questions her usual mindset, she may find that her invisibility provides a clue, not to an individual issue, but to a group issue. She may find that she's “carrying the ball” for her team on this adaptive challenge, and being chased down the field accordingly.

Of course, being rendered invisible doesn’t feel like being chased down the field with the fans cheering. On the contrary, you feel
ignored, diminished, or worse, stupid. That’s the point! After investigating the personal, technical reasons for being neutralized and correcting for them, you may well find that you are continuing to be ignored precisely because you have so much to say. In Amanda’s case, she may be carrying the adaptive challenge of valuing diverse perspectives for her whole team, without being asked or authorized to do so. By ignoring that challenge, the team loses a voice that may prove crucial to its future success in situations when it needs her particular perspective.

Most problems come bundled with both technical and adaptive aspects. Before making an intervention, you need to distinguish between them in order to decide which to tackle first and with what strategy.

Our friend Ken worked for AT&T, where he had concerns about the impact of a departmental reorganization plan. Coming from an engineering background, he readily saw some technical flaws in the plan. He believed that it failed to put the right people in touch with each other, replacing one set of silos with a new set. But Ken realized that silos represented an adaptive issue: People in the corporation tended to fortify their own silos and resisted taking responsibility for the broader view.

After working his way through the system, he finally got fifteen minutes on the vice president’s schedule, an unusual event for someone at his level, two layers below top management. He worked hard to get the appointment, and he knew he would be exceeding his authority if he raised the deeper, systemic issue. He worried that the VP might react badly. So he had to choose: He could raise either the technical or the adaptive issue, or both; but if both, in what order? When he finally had his fifteen minutes, Ken began by commenting on the technical aspects of the problem. The vice president politely heard him out, without comment. He kept talking and the fifteen minutes ran out. Ken quickly but belatedly realized his mistake. The VP wanted those technical questions to be resolved below his pay grade. Ken allowed himself to be silenced by the pressures he felt, and served up to the VP the easier of the two interpretations.
Once Ken distinguished the technical and adaptive aspects of the problem, he began to feel the internal and external pressures to stick to the technical issues and avoid the more troubling adaptive concerns. The organization would prefer an easy, nondisruptive interpretation. Often, organizations will try to treat adaptive issues as technical ones in order to diffuse them. The technical face of the issue was comfortable and familiar to Ken, and well within his scope of authority.

These pressures are all to the good if they lead you to challenge without arrogance. On the other hand, the silencing itself is a clue. Had Ken been able to get to the balcony right before the meeting, he might have read his own hesitancy as an indication that, in fact, he was really on to something quite challenging. He might then have taken action to lay the foundation for this challenge as he moved up the chain of command. (We’ll discuss how to do this later.) After all, what’s the point of getting time with the vice president if you’re not going to identify the problems that are worth his attention?

Budget crises provide a good, general illustration of the pressures toward technical interpretations. Typically, a budget crisis in the public or private sector stimulates an effort to find more money. The people in authority might squeeze expenses here, postpone some expenditures there, or do some short-term borrowing. Those solutions deal with the problem as a technical issue. But very often the source of the crisis is a clash of values, a difference in priorities. Finding more money temporarily smooths over the conflict, but does not resolve it. Solving the underlying problem would require the factions with competing priorities to acknowledge the gaps between them and work through the differences. It would require strategic trade-offs, and losses. The result might well deeply disappoint some people, perhaps many. “Balancing the budget” might in fact mean refashioning the organization’s agenda and changing the way it conducts business. Thus, the task of leadership would be to mobilize people to adapt to a world with different constraints and opportunities than they had imagined.
How do you know whether the challenge is primarily technical or primarily adaptive? You can never be certain, but there are some useful diagnostic clues. First, you know you’re dealing with something more than a technical issue when people’s hearts and minds need to change, and not just their preferences or routine behaviors. In an adaptive challenge, people have to learn new ways and choose between what appear to be contradictory values. Cultures must distinguish what is essential from what is expendable as they struggle to move forward.

In South Africa in the 1990s, Marty witnessed teachers struggle in the face of the obvious reality that their students’ hearts and minds needed to undergo a huge transformation. For several years during the transition to a democratic government, Marty worked with professors in a wide range of South African universities to develop new courses, new programs, and, most important, new teaching methods. The teachers all knew they had to adapt, from whatever group in the old South Africa they came. But they had to be pushed hard to face up to the profoundly difficult work of changing their beliefs in order to continue to be relevant to their students in the new South Africa. Accustomed to lecturing in front of classrooms full of homogeneous groups of students with a narrow range of clearly defined career options, professors now had to face heterogeneous groups of students with open-ended futures who brought to the classroom varied and conflicting values, perspectives, and experiences from the days of apartheid and the long struggle to end it. The personal qualities required for progress in the new South Africa would be different from those required in the past. Hierarchically determined roles would give way to fluidity and flexibility. Delivering dry, technical lectures and modeling an authoritarian approach to problem-solving discussions failed to serve students whose future paths were no longer so clearly predetermined by race, class, and ethnicity. All of this presented an adaptive challenge for South Africa and for the professors.

Second, you can distinguish technical problems from adaptive challenges by a process of exclusion. If you throw all the technical
fixes you can imagine at the problem and the problem persists, it's a pretty clear signal that an underlying adaptive challenge still needs to be addressed.

Third, the persistence of conflict usually indicates that people have not yet made the adjustments and accepted the losses that accompany adaptive change.

Fourth, crisis is a good indicator of adaptive issues that have festered. Crises represent danger because the stakes are high, time appears short, and the uncertainties are great. Yet they also represent opportunities if they are used to galvanize attention on the unresolved issues.

Like all problems, sudden crises tend to include both technical and adaptive parts. But in a crisis, the level of disequilibrium is very high. Consequently, you will face a lot of pressure, both external and internal, to see the crisis as a technical problem, with straightforward solutions that can quickly restore the balance. Indeed, most people in authority squander the opportunity of crisis because all eyes are turned to them to restore order, even if it means ignoring the adaptive issues and focusing on only the technical fixes. When facing a budget crisis, for example, many organizations opt for the salami cutter as a way to cut expenses (take an equal 10 percent from each division), rather than face the more difficult strategic questions.

In 1991, when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, former President George Bush Sr. was able to rally a large and diverse coalition around the technical problem of pushing the Iraqi troops back into their own land. When a cry arose to go further, to eliminate Saddam Hussein, his military, and his capacity to create havoc around the world, Bush held back. Wiping out Hussein instead of just pushing him back into his geographical box represented an adaptive challenge that would have threatened the alliance. Finishing the job would have meant the humiliation and likely death of thousands of Iraqi troops—shown every night on television sets in the homes of everyday Arab people in the Arab coalition countries. The authorities of those nations would have had the daunting
challenge of helping their own people adapt to an uncomfortable new reality: that it was in their interest to tolerate and even support the killing of thousands of Arab soldiers by Westerners. Keeping the coalition together through an invasion of Iraq also would have required the Western partners to make a major adaptation. For them, the price of a continuing alliance with the East would have been some serious soul-searching and an acknowledgment that the old fears of Western dominance of the Muslim world were warranted, given the history of colonial and missionary activity going back to the Crusades. Accepting responsibility for that old pattern of behavior and its consequences would have been its own daunting challenge, especially for the European partners in the coalition.

In the short term, you may want to deal with the technical aspects first, as Bush did in pursuing the war. However, many crises manifest issues that have been festering for a long time. Saddam Hussein represented not only an evil individual, but also the more fundamental and unresolved conflict between the Christian West and the Islamic East. To have joined that issue, President Bush Sr. would have put his fragile coalition at risk and unleashed forces beyond his control. In the short term, perhaps he could see no alternative but to stick with the technical issue, and speak of a New World Order primarily as an abstraction. But an unresolved issue does not go away just because it disappears from view, as we have been reminded since that time in Bosnia, Kosovo, Jerusalem, and New York City.

Find Out Where People Are At

Getting people in a community or organization to address a deeply felt issue is difficult and risky. If people have avoided a problem for a long time, it should not be surprising that they try to silence you when you push them to face it. Both your survival and your success depend on your skill at reaching a true understanding of the vary-
ing perspectives among the factions. Learn from them their stakes and fears.

As social workers say, “Start where people are at.” Beyond the capacity to listen, this requires curiosity, especially when you think you already know someone’s problem and what needs to be done. Their view is likely to be different from yours, and if you don’t take their perspective as the starting point, you are liable to be dismissed as irrelevant, insensitive, or presumptuous.

This was perhaps the key step Jamil Mahuad failed to take with his people in Ecuador. He was so focused on providing a short-term remedy that he delayed connecting with the general population, largely poor and vulnerable. They were frightened about the failing economy and angry about unending inequities. By not finding out where they were focused, he put himself at risk—no matter how good his policies may have been.

A Jesuit friend of ours held a series of discussions for a group of government officials about spirituality in the workplace. They were supposed to talk about religion in public policymaking as well as more personal issues, such as how to manage their own spirituality in their professional roles, and how to manage an organization in which people have very different views of religion and its relationship to work. Many of them felt deeply threatened by aspects of the issue, but had never had the opportunity to discuss their concerns in a public conversation with colleagues. They were looking forward to the sessions with a mixture of eagerness and anxiety.

Our friend began in his usual fashion. Seamlessly, he laid out a series of ideas and frameworks about the relationship between religion and the state. Then he took questions. They asked. He answered. He performed smoothly, but there was palpable unease in the room. The relationship between church and state interested them, but the problem that really troubled them was what to do with their own spirituality at work, and how to manage diverse feelings about the place of religion at the office. Impressive as he was, our friend had missed the core of their concerns.
A month later he had the opportunity to give the same series of talks to a similar group. This time he put aside his well-practiced and impressive presentation. He started by simply asking them what they wanted to talk about. They raised the issues. They set the agenda. Working off their ideas, he engaged them in an intense conversation over several hours. The sessions had a huge impact. He caused people to rethink long-held views. The conversations gave some of them the courage to change their own behavior toward coworkers who had very different spiritual orientations than their own. He succeeded where he had failed before because he had stepped back and started where they were instead of where he was.

When Lee Kuan Yew first became prime minister of Singapore, he took precious time from his daily schedule to painstakingly learn Mandarin, the local dialect, and improve his Malay. After more than three years of effort, he arrived at a crucial crossroads for Singapore in which the communists had a significant chance for victory in the elections. Lee’s capacity to listen to and speak with the people in their own languages proved decisive. It gave him the credibility to successfully challenge post-colonial ideology when he asked people to embrace the free market economic policies of their former British masters. If Lee could take years to learn the languages of his constituents, then surely we can take time simply to listen before we intervene.

Listen to the Song Beneath the Words

Observing from the balcony is the critical first step in exercising—and safeguarding—leadership. Despite a detached perspective, though, the observation itself must be close and careful. Once you find out where people are coming from, you can connect with them and engage them in change. But hearing their stories is not the same as taking what they say at face value. People naturally, even unconsciously, defend their habits and ways of thinking and
attempt to avoid difficult value choices. Thus, after hearing their stories, you need to take the provocative step of making an interpretation that gets below the surface. You have to listen to the song beneath the words. In small ways, we do this every day. For example, if you ask someone how he is doing, and he says “OK,” you can hear a big difference between a bright accent on the “K” and a sad emphasis on the “O.”

Leaders are rarely neutralized for personal reasons, even though an attack may be framed in personal terms. The role you play or the issue you carry generates the reaction. When the players chase you down the field in a soccer match, they are not after you personally. They want you because you control the ball. Even though people yell her name and block her way, a fine soccer player would never think of taking it personally. Taking a “balcony” perspective, she sees the game on the field as a whole and immediately adjusts her behavior to take account of the patterns she sees. Great players in any sport can do this.

When the game is highly structured and the goal is clear, interpreting events on the playing field is a matter of technical expertise. But in organizational life, the various players compete by different rules and hold different visions of what it means to score a goal. Successful players in communities and groups need to understand a much more complex reality than do their counterparts on the soccer field. Interpretation, then, becomes at least as challenging as getting to the balcony for a birds-eye view. In political and organizational life, no one finds it easy in the midst of action to step back and interrogate reality. Some people may be better at it than others, but no one has the “playbook.”

Think back to Amanda. If you were at that meeting and had observed the dynamic by which Amanda became invisible and Brian received the credit, you would have to decide whether and then how to intervene. You would determine the course of action based on how you understood the significance of the marginalization. Once you observed it, you would have to interpret it in order to decide what to do.
Beware of making interpretations immediately and aloud, since this can provoke strong reactions. Interpreting other people’s intentions is best done first inside one’s own head, or with a trusted confidant. Interpreting behavior means looking at more than just the way people present themselves. Understandably, then, if you propose alternative explanations for people’s behavior—alternatives to the messages they want you to adopt—they may get upset. Making an interpretation is a necessary step. Whether and how you voice it, however, must depend on the culture and adaptability of your audience.

Miles Mahoney, an economic development specialist, took on the job of heading a large state agency in Massachusetts that suffered a reputation for ineffectiveness. The governor appointed Mahoney because he liked his passion and his commitment to strengthening the state’s role in large housing and economic development projects, although these were not the governor’s top priorities.

Mahoney’s office would have to approve development plans for funding. And Mahoney picked a doozy for his first project. The plan envisioned a huge development in downtown Boston, in an area that needed development but was not in such bad shape that it fell into a category called “blighted.” The city of Boston and its mayor supported the project with great enthusiasm, as did the major newspaper, the unions, and most of the business community. The city chose a developer for the project—a new partnership created by two young real estate entrepreneurs who were friendly with the mayor but had never before tackled anything of this size and scope.

The law required Mahoney to examine the suitability of the project, the developers, and the plan. He could exercise considerable discretion, and the findings relied on judgments about the facts. Mahoney and his staff believed strongly that the project failed to meet the statutory requirements in several respects, including the fact that much of the proposed area was not blighted. Mahoney saw this as the opportunity to demonstrate the state’s willingness to use its muscle to do what was in the public interest. He decided to reject it.
He went to the governor’s key advisors to explain his position and to seek their support. They listened to him and said: “Go ahead and kill it, Miles. But kill it quickly. You have no idea how heavy those people are who are going to jump on you.”

Mahoney heard what he wanted to hear: The governor would support his killing the project. But he missed the song behind the words.

The two most important clues in the advice he received were the words “quickly” and “you.” What the governor’s people were really saying could only be understood by listening beyond the explicit message.

Mahoney failed to hear the very different, almost inconsistent, message communicated with more subtlety. The governor would support Mahoney’s rejection, but only if it happened so fast that the issue did not linger and affect the governor’s more important initiatives. Governors’ agendas are much wider and more dynamic than those of department heads. The governor could promise to stand behind Mahoney, but only for a short period of time, because he knew that his own attention would shift as new crises arose and new initiatives came on line. If the issue lingered and caused continuing trouble, the responsibility would be Mahoney’s alone. The governor would not indefinitely expend his own political capital to make Mahoney’s rejection stick.

Because Mahoney heard only the literal message, he moved ahead. Interpreting the governor to be more committed than he actually was, Mahoney turned down the project, sending its supporters into full battle mode. Six months later, Mahoney lost his job and his successor approved the project.

**Read the Authority Figure for Clues**

Miles Mahoney failed to listen to the song beneath the governor’s words, but even if he had heard it, he might well have interpreted it as the governor’s personal point of view. When you seek to instigate
significant change within an organization or community, focus on the words and behavior of the authority figure; they provide a critical signal about the impact of your action on the organization as a whole.

The senior authority will reflect what you are stirring up in the community. He or she will consider and react to the responses of the factions in the organization. Look through the authority figure as you would look through a window, understanding that what you are seeing is really behind the plate of glass. The trap is thinking that the authority figure is operating independently and expressing a personal point of view. In fact, that person is trying to manage all the various factions, and what you observe is a response to the pressures he or she is experiencing.

In reading an authority figure, you must not only look for shifts of view on relevant issues, but also assess where the authority stands on the ruckus you have created. In general, no one in an organizational system will be more tuned to the levels of distress than the person in charge, because an essential part of that job is to control any disequilibrium and restore order. In other words, authority figures sit at the nodes of a social system and are sensitive to any disturbances. They not only act as indicators of social stability, but will act to restore equilibrium if change efforts go too far.

Paula, a bright ambitious lawyer, had a strong interest in politics and public service. She achieved success as a prosecutor and then as a senior manager in an executive branch agency in the government of her home state. While taking a year off to get her master’s degree in public administration, she continued to nurture her political contacts, particularly with the state’s governor. She completed research projects, organized constituencies, and raised money on his behalf.

When Paula finished her graduate studies, the governor appointed her to head a small and troubled state agency charged with investigating wrongdoing in the state’s welfare program. The unit had been criticized in press exposés that accurately described an
organization fraught with dysfunction, although not guilty of prosecutable corruption.

The governor encouraged Paula to “go in there and clean the place up.” At the time of the appointment, the governor also appointed another outsider to be her deputy. Together they thought they would carry out their mandate to reform the agency.

Paula charged ahead, throwing herself into the job as she always did. She didn’t mind working long hours and was totally committed to the task. She also loved being the head of the agency, enjoying the accoutrements of the position, which included a state car and a large office. But as she pushed for change, she began to feel resistance, both from above and below. Along with the State Police and other law enforcement–related agencies, Paula’s agency was located in the Department of Public Safety. The culture in the agency reflected the values of the larger department: a police-oriented, hierarchical, almost paramilitary, don’t-rock-the-boat bureaucracy. She was seen as a civilian change agent, forcing people to work harder than they were accustomed to working and to adopt new procedures and work conditions. Some people inside the agency and many of those in the umbrella department began to resent her, especially when her successes were reported in the media.

When she experienced resistance from the bureaucrats above and below, she created an alliance with the head of the union representing some of her employees. She confided in her deputy, who shared her agenda, and who had creatively designed and managed some of her early programmatic and media successes. However, she distrusted others in the organization.

Gradually, but noticeably, she became the target of leaks and internal criticism. Her relationship with the union head had turned into a personal friendship. She began to hear reports of gossip that it was sexual as well.

Although she was still getting reinforcement and reassurance from the governor’s office, he himself became less accessible. She knew how busy he was so she didn’t take it personally, and she took the staff’s reassurance as a signal to keep moving forward.
She continued in this unstable and stressful situation for some time. Then the press ran a story about the union head’s unexplained job absences, with the implication that she was aware of the situation, if not approving of it as well. A short time later, the governor’s office began to drop hints to Paula that she consider other jobs. She left soon afterwards, accepting a general counsel’s job in an obscure state agency. Not long after that, she was out of government altogether.

Like all people in authority, the governor responded to a wide range of interests from both within and outside the government. He distanced himself from her as a reaction to the distress she generated in the system. He did not want to oppose her reforms, but he also felt the pressure to reduce the upheaval in the department. If she had read his behavior as a signal of how much turmoil she had stirred up, rather than just as a function of her relationship with him, she might have been able to pull back, let things calm down, regroup, and move forward again.

Politics influence executive behavior in business as well as government. For example, Daniel heads the training program for a financial conglomerate that dominates the fast-moving financial services industry in the mid-Atlantic states. There was a sense in the company that despite their success, they were in danger of being swamped by bigger corporations and displaced at the niche level by boutique firms offering a narrower range of products but greater customization and personal service. The CEO encouraged Daniel to develop training programs that would challenge people and prepare senior management for turbulent paradigm-shifting times ahead.

He took the CEO at her word and created training that pushed people far outside their comfort zones. He made them examine their own habits and question glib assumptions about their capacity for exercising leadership. He put them through training that tested them physically and emotionally as much as it did intellectually. He challenged them with the idea that unless they changed their tried-and-true habits, they might not be with the organization
as it dramatically expanded and reached for a new level. He experienced some negative feedback, but the CEO continued to back him.

Daniel never noticed, however, that she complimented him less frequently in public and did not mention his training program in the annual report. Apparently, she couldn’t help but react to the criticisms of him from some in the first cohort of trainees. What he did notice, finally, was that his training budget got cut for the following year. When he raised the issue with the CEO, she said that it was part of a broader cut aimed at holding down the costs of “non-revenue-producing activities.” Once again, on the individual level she still saw herself as fully supportive. But when at last Daniel began to read her behavior as a reflection of the distress his work had been generating throughout the organization, he realized that he had pushed too fast, too far, creating so much tension that the CEO needed to restore stability by trimming his sails.

He was never again able to get the more dramatic training off the ground. His initiative failed in part because he, like Paula, had not read the authority figure sensitively and systemically, in order to assess the tolerance for the level of discomfort he was creating in the community as a whole.

In times of adaptive stress, groups exert pressure on people in authority to solve the problems that seem to be causing it. Consequently, the behaviors of authority figures provide critical clues to the organization’s level of distress and its customary methods for restoring equilibrium.

For example, in a rapidly growing twenty-year-old company we know well, the new CEO, Jerrold Petrey, quickly began to focus on the budget as the central issue facing the organization. Although the budget problem was quite real, it more deeply reflected the organization’s unwillingness or inability to resolve fundamental questions and disputes about its identity, purpose, and priorities. There were two major factions in the company, each believing that it represented both the core values and the potential for future success. One faction wanted the company to deepen its commitment to its main product line. The product dominated the market and
was responsible for the company’s early success. The other faction wanted to diversify and build on the early success by introducing new products to existing satisfied customers. Rather than resolve the deep, fundamental issues, however, the company tried to do everything without exciting anyone, and growth began to flatten out.

Petrey’s focus on the budget as a technical problem in cost containment exemplified how the community continued to avoid resolving its internal contradictions. Senior management would be let off the hook entirely, while lower levels of administrative staff, as well as frontline employees, would be squeezed.

The more passion Petrey put into dealing with the budget as a technical issue, the more apparent it should have become that the underlying problems were someplace else. Watching people in authority, like Petrey, can provide signals as to both the level of anxiety and the cause of anxiety in the system as a whole.

When the authority figure in an organization or community, even a large community such as a nation, behaves in an unusual way, it is always tempting to personalize the interpretation of his or her behavior. For example, you might think that the boss was simply a rigid person, or you might wonder if something is happening in your boss’s private life to cause the behavior. But we suggest it is just as likely, if not more likely, that the conduct you observe is a response to pressures the authority figure is feeling from key constituents, like senior management in Petrey’s case. When you are seeking to exercise leadership within an organization, observe the authority figure closely. What clues does his or her behavior offer about what is going on in the social system in response to your initiative and other adaptive pressures?

People in authority, like Petrey, Daniel’s boss, and the Governor, want to think of themselves as supporters of innovation, as modern managers who “empower” their subordinates, rather than as political creatures limited by the resistance of factions wedded to the old order. So they often continue to pay lip service to those in the trenches who are tackling tough issues, long after they have begun to respond to the pressures on them to curb the action.
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Watch them closely and interpret their behavior as a reflection of what is going on in the system. You might retreat, engage, or try to outflank the opposition. In any case, a cooling attitude from your authority figure indicates the resistance of the larger organization to your initiative, and therefore provides an essential clue for leading and staying alive.

Leadership is an improvisational art. You may have an overarching vision, clear, orienting values, and even a strategic plan, but what you actually do from moment to moment cannot be scripted. To be effective, you must respond to what is happening. Going back to our metaphor, you have to move back and forth from the balcony to the dance floor, over and over again throughout the day, week, month, and year. You take action, step back and assess the results of the action, reassess the plan, then go to the dance floor and make the next move. You have to maintain a diagnostic mindset on a changing reality.

As General Dwight D. Eisenhower described after leading the successful D-Day invasion on the beaches of Normandy, the first thing he had to do when the troops hit the beach was throw out the plan. On the other hand, he said they never would have gotten onto the beach without a plan. A plan is no more than today’s best guess. Tomorrow you discover the unanticipated effects of today’s actions and adjust to those unexpected events.

Sustaining your leadership, then, requires first and foremost the capacity to see what is happening to you and your initiative, as it is happening. This takes discipline and flexibility, and it is hard to do. You are immersed in the action, responding to what is right there in front of you. And when you do get some distance, you still have the challenge of accurately reading and interpreting what you now observe. You need to hear what people are saying, but not accept their words at face value. Groups want you to take their viewpoint. People want you to understand their motivation and the explanation of their behavior in their own terms. Creating alternative
interpretations, listening to the song beneath the words, is inherently provocative, but necessary if you are going to address the real stakes, fears, and conflicts.

Pay very close attention to senior authority figures. Read their words and behaviors as signals for the effects you are stimulating in the group as a whole. See through them to the constituencies pulling them in a variety of directions. Don't just personalize what you see. Read authorities to gauge the pace and manner to push forward.
Notes

Chapter 3


