



WHY CEOS DON'T ALWAYS LEAD

or

WHY CEOS DO NOT EXERCISE LEADERSHIP MORE OFTEN

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The toughest challenges facing businesses at the beginning of the 21st century, such as globalization and the technological revolution, demand that leaders apply their expertise and use the resources of authority well. But that's not enough. Today's challenges require *adaptation*, the managing of the many ongoing and disorienting changes affecting the habits and values of people throughout the workplace. They require that leaders practice what we call adaptive leadership.

What is adaptive leadership?

Adaptive leadership is not a term with which most people are familiar because, frankly, much of the discussion about leadership focuses only on the positive - an exposition of the personal traits or skills needed to get people to follow a leader through good times and bad. People thinking and talking about leadership spend too much time on the inspiration side and not enough on the perspiration side.

Adaptive leadership is different. It makes you sweat. It is not about personal traits or skills. Adaptive leadership looks directly at the dark side: the inevitable attempts to take people promoting real change, i.e., seeking to exercise adaptive leadership, out of the game.



From this, the reader might gather, correctly, that exercising adaptive leadership is difficult and dangerous work. It is difficult; it focuses on the most intractable challenges

of change, the ones that defy easy solutions because they involve deep-seated conflicts, value-laden issues, strongly held loyalties. It is dangerous; people resist dredging up their innermost concerns, surfacing conflicts and questioning long-held assumptions. They push back in an effort to avoid dealing with anxiety-provoking issues, to keep them submerged. These issues are, of course, the very ones that the person exercising adaptive leadership is trying to help the organization or community address.

Leading through loss

Any change that is truly transformational, in a corporation or in any other organization or community for that matter, asks people to give up things they hold dear: their views of themselves, their ways of doing business, their understanding of where they fit in the wider scheme of things. That is why at its heart, adaptive leadership is about loss. People exercising leadership are asking others to abandon something that is important to them for some potential unknown future possibility.

Because such adaptive challenges lie within the people in the organization themselves, these issues cannot be resolved by experts or standard routines. The solution lies with the employees or members of the organization who must learn new ways and give up old, familiar, comfortable habits. The process of developing real solutions is inherently disruptive, causing disequilibrium and distress in the organization as it takes place.

Identifying adaptive issues

How can you tell if you have an adaptive challenge under active avoidance? The most obvious manifestation is treating the problem as if it were a technical issue. For example, when a company lurches into financial difficulty, people in authority often respond with some kind of across-the-board belt-tightening when tackling the true, underlying problem might require giving up certain lines of business, the organization's independence, or even its very existence.

By treating an adaptive challenge as a technical problem, people in authority can do what they know how to do best: meet the expectations of their authorizers by taking the problem off of other people's shoulders and fixing it themselves. The rest of the organization can relax, under the illusion that the problem can go away without any real wrenching or dislocation of their part. .

When people, in or out of authority, do have the courage to raise the difficult issue, to point out the gap between espoused values and behavior, to surface deep-seated conflict that is holding back progress as long as it is not addressed, they put themselves at risk.



Danger lurks in the form of the resistance that exercising leadership inevitably generates.

It's no wonder then that CEOs, others in authority and organizations themselves shy away from the challenges of adaptive leadership.

About Cambridge Leadership Associates LLC

Cambridge Leadership Associates LLC is a leadership consulting practice formed in 2002 after the publication of *Leadership on the Line* by Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky. CLA works with large-scale organizations invested in developing organizational capacity to deliver on growth and strategic objectives.

To learn more about adaptive leadership and how CLA can work with you, please visit our website at www.cambridge-leadership.com

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