

Pastors on purpose

by [David J. Wood](#) in the [May 22, 2002](#) issue

Leadership on the Line:
Staying Alive Through
the Dangers of Leading.

By Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty
Linsky. Harvard Business School,
252 pp., \$27.50.

Recently I went through the experience of interviewing for a pastoral position. In my round of encounters with search committees, I was questioned about my vision of leadership and how I would implement that vision in the life of a congregation. Behind this line of questioning was the desire for someone who would provide direction, ensure stability, administrate efficiently and instigate transformation in a way that would make all things new with a minimum of disturbance to the status quo. In none of those conversations did the members of a committee say that they were looking for someone who would make them face issues and realities that they did not want to face. None declared, implicitly or explicitly, that they were seeking a leader who would "challenge people's habits, beliefs and values" and "create risk, conflict and instability."

According to the theory of leadership developed by Ronald Heifetz in his earlier book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, these congregations were looking for management to solve technical problems rather than for leadership that would engage them in adaptive work. Adaptive work is demanding and threatening, but it is the defining mark of leadership. People's instinctive resistance to this kind of challenge makes leadership both difficult and dangerous.

At the end of that book Heifetz briefly identifies several strategies intended to help leaders to survive and thrive amidst the dangers of leading: getting on the balcony, distinguishing self from role, externalizing the conflict, identifying partners, listening, finding a sanctuary and preserving a sense of purpose. I suspect that many of my fellow pastors who read this first volume finished it with a hunger to hear more.

Leadership on the Line (coauthored with Marty Linsky, Heifetz's principal colleague at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government) is Heifetz's answer to that yearning.

The authors begin by discussing how leaders can be neutralized and "taken out of the game." They then present an array of strategic moves by which leaders can counter the efforts of their constituencies to "push them aside." The final chapters address the habits of mind, heart and relationality necessary to the character of a leader.

Heifetz's book is best read as a demonstration of the practical import of the theoretical construct that underlies *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. It is decidedly more personal and practical, seasoned with an intriguing array of stories. Many of these stories are about some of the best and brightest leaders in the public and private sectors who nevertheless have failed. Some stories come from their own lives. As I read I found myself comprehending my own history of leadership--in both congregational and institutional settings--with new insight. Few of us have had unqualified success as leaders. All of us have had qualified failures--most of which we relate as stories of the unqualified failure of a community's willingness to be led.

The authors identify four principal strategies that communities and institutions use to resist change and protect the status quo: marginalization, diversion, seduction and attack. As an illustration of how a leader can be seduced, Linsky tells the story of becoming chief secretary in the administration of Massachusetts governor William Weld. A liberal in a conservative administration, Linsky became an important inside voice for more liberal issues that would otherwise have received little attention. His liberal supporters beyond the halls of government were effusive in their appreciation of his advocacy. Their acclamation fueled his sense of indispensability, and he allowed himself to become more and more identified with their concerns and increasingly alienated from the Weld administration, which resulted in his eventual failure as an appointee. "The advocates pushed him to do more and go further, which appeared to him to be the price for their continuing approval. Instead of pushing back on the advocates to depend less on him and broaden their base of support and leverage, Marty opted for the special status he needed to feel significant in his role."

Pastors will not find in this book a few more technical solutions to add to their toolbox of techniques. Rather, leaders (pastoral and otherwise) will find a straightforward, realistic, nuanced analysis of the inevitable resistance (and its

dangerous potential) to leadership, an unsentimental exposure of their own vulnerabilities, and instruction on what it means to respond responsibly to the dangers they encounter.

"Leadership is an improvisational art," claim the authors. "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 be able to respond to what is happening." This understanding of leadership as a complex, hermeneutical engagement with reality (intrapersonal, interpersonal and systemic) is an implicit theme throughout the book and reframes the meaning of "vision" in relation to leadership. "Vision" is a faculty, not a long-range plan. For a pastor, vision is not an idealized version of congregational life that he must somehow communicate to his flock. Vision is the capacity to see--to comprehend what is going on and to discern how it connects and relates to the larger narrative of the Christian tradition. Leadership is forged by vision and discernment and refracted through the subjectivity of the leader and the community.

Heifetz and Linsky conclude by focusing on the care of the leader's body and soul. Among the strategies and practices necessary to sustaining one's capacity to lead are keeping Sabbath, recognizing the importance of allies and confidants and not confusing these relational categories, distinguishing self from role, seeking sanctuary and keeping an open heart in which the virtues of curiosity, innocence and compassion are cultivated.

I eventually cast my lot with one of the congregations that had sent out their search party to find a transformational manager. After a few months on the job, I am realizing that the culture I find myself countering as a pastoral leader is not out there in "the world." It is internal to the congregation. How do I keep from becoming a custodian of that culture and a caretaker of its sentimentalities? At the same time, how do I keep from doing violence to the integrity of this congregation as a gathering of the people of God who, over time and to the best of their ability, have been engaged in the practice of Christian community? In other words, how do I work with and in this congregation to identify and to engage the adaptive challenge? Reading Heifetz is helping me negotiate the dangers and discover the promise internal to the practice of pastoral leadership.