

Leadership on the Line

Staying Alive through the
Dangers of Leading

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Introduction

Every day the opportunity for leadership stands before you.

- A father gets drawn into the same old destructive argument at the dinner table, but one day breaks out of the pattern and seeks family counseling.
- An investment banker nearly closes a \$100 billion acquisition, but confounds everyone by putting the whole deal at risk when she asks, “Can these companies create synergies fast enough to satisfy the investors, given the current talent and different cultures within each of the businesses?”
- A politician challenges constituents to accept responsibility for locating a prison in their community, rather than chant the same old slogan, “Not in our backyard!”
- A neighbor watches the nice kid down the street getting lost in his teenage years long after his mother dies, and organizes a weekly coffee for parents in the neighborhood in order to provide support for the father and his family.
- You sit through a meeting, watching people avoid the real issues, and decide that you will be the one who puts them on the table.

Each day brings you opportunities to raise important questions, speak to higher values, and surface unresolved conflicts. Every day you have the chance to make a difference in the lives of people around you.

And every day you must decide whether to put your contribution out there, or keep it to yourself to avoid upsetting anyone, and get through another day. You are right to be cautious. Prudence is a virtue. You disturb people when you take unpopular initiatives in your community, put provocative new ideas on the table in your organization, question the gap between colleagues' values and behavior, or ask friends and relatives to face up to tough realities. You risk people's ire and make yourself vulnerable. Exercising leadership can get you into a lot of trouble.

To lead is to live dangerously because when leadership counts, when you lead people through difficult change, you challenge what people hold dear—their daily habits, tools, loyalties, and ways of thinking—with nothing more to offer perhaps than a possibility. Moreover, leadership often means exceeding the authority you are given to tackle the challenge at hand. People push back when you disturb the personal and institutional equilibrium they know. And people resist in all kinds of creative and unexpected ways that can get you taken out of the game: pushed aside, undermined, or eliminated.

It is no wonder that when the myriad opportunities to exercise leadership call, you often hesitate. Anyone who has stepped out on the line, leading part or all of an organization, a community, or a family, knows the personal and professional vulnerabilities. However gentle your style, however careful your strategy, however sure you may be that you are on the right track, leading is risky business.

This book is about taking opportunities to lead, and staying alive. We ask these fundamental questions: Why and how is leadership dangerous? How can you respond to these dangers? And how can you keep your spirit alive when the going gets very tough? We are both straightforward about the hazards of leadership and idealistic about the importance of taking these risks. Many leadership

books are all about inspiration, but downplay the perspiration. We respect how tough this work is. We know too many people with scars to show for their efforts. We have scars ourselves and harbor no illusions.

Yet we believe that leadership, while perilous, is an enterprise worthy of the costs. Our communities, organizations, and societies need people, from wherever they work and live, to take up the challenges within reach rather than complain about the lack of leadership from on high, hold off until they receive a “call” to action, or wait for their turn in the top job. This has always been true, but may especially be so now, in the post-September 11, 2001 world of uncertainty and vulnerability.

Meeting these challenges need not entail getting put down or pushed aside, personally or professionally. To adapt a phrase from Johnny Cash, we believe you can “walk the line,” step forward, make a difference, take the heat, and survive to delight in the fruits of your labor.

Leadership is worth the risk because the goals extend beyond material gain or personal advancement. By making the lives of people around you better, leadership provides meaning in life. It creates purpose. We believe that every human being has something unique to offer, and that a larger sense of purpose comes from using that gift to help your organizations, families, or communities thrive. The gift might be your knowledge, your experience, your values, your presence, your heart, or your wisdom. Perhaps it’s simply your basic curiosity and your willingness to raise unsettling questions.

So, first and foremost, this book is about you, about how to survive and thrive amidst the dangers of leadership. It’s also about getting more out of life by putting more into it. We’ve written it for those of you who play it safe because you can’t imagine stepping out or speaking up without getting burned, as well as for the risk-takers among you who know what it’s like to get shot down when you challenge people to change. This book is about putting yourself and your ideas on the line, responding effectively to the risks, and living to celebrate the meaning of your efforts.

This book is about our times, too. We live in a period in history when taking on the risks of leadership in your individual world is both more important and more complicated than ever before. Globalization of the economy, the necessary interaction of cultures, and ready access to information and communication through the Internet make interdependence palpable. Hierarchical structures with clearly defined roles are giving way to more horizontal organizations with greater flexibility, room for initiative, and corresponding uncertainty. Democratization is spreading throughout organizations as well as countries. All of these movements create new opportunities for you to make a difference.

This book is also about us, Ron and Marty. We have been colleagues and friends for nearly twenty years, working and teaching together; sharing our research and experience; and exploring, testing, and refining our ideas about the demands of leadership in modern life. The more we talk and work together, the more we find our experiences and insights overlap. Ron draws inferences about how the world works from music and psychiatry, and Marty from media and politics. What do these four diverse fields have to do with leadership? Music is about moving people, about striking chords that resonate deeply in the hearts of listeners. It provides a language for elusive but central qualities like harmony, resolution, timing, improvisation, creativity, and inspiration. Politics teaches that no one can accomplish anything of significance alone; the more challenging the problem, the more the people who will bear the consequences of its solution must take responsibility for working on it. Psychiatry opens up a greater understanding of the way humans contend with challenges, individually and collectively, and the media make us aware that the way the message is delivered and the identity of the messenger can often seem as important to making progress as the message itself. Perspectives and lessons from these and other disciplines will, we hope, add depth and color.

As consultants, we work with clients from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. As teachers, we work in and out of the classroom with hundreds of students at the John F. Kennedy School of Govern-

ment at Harvard University, where each of us has served on the faculty for two decades. From these experiences, we have come to understand that many people operate at the frontiers of leadership in their personal, civic, and professional lives. We've been inspired repeatedly by those who take responsibility for mobilizing people to seize new opportunities and tackle tough problems. From the stories of our students and clients around the world, we have distilled and captured lessons that we now offer, not as brand-new ideas, but as guides to help you name, organize, and make sense out of your experience.

A number of the ideas in this book were first introduced in Ron's earlier book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*; and indeed, this book grew out of the last section entitled "Staying Alive." In our subsequent teaching and consulting, people have found this issue compelling, calling for much fuller consideration. *Leadership Without Easy Answers* was intended as a theoretical framework for understanding leadership and authority in the context of adaptive change; *Leadership on the Line* is very different in voice and character. We wanted this second book to be more focused, more practical, and more personal. We hope this book will be accessible, eminently usable, and inspiring in your life and work.

Leadership on the Line builds upon our years of listening to people from many nations and walks of life: from workers, managers, and activists; presidents of countries and multinational corporations; homemakers and parents working outside the home; generals and admirals as well as lieutenants and privates; senior and junior executives within businesses and governments; teachers and principals; and trustees and clergy.

None of these people sat content on the sidelines day after day. They take pride in their successes, but most carry wounds from the times they gave voice to a point of view that disturbed people. They all wanted their lives and their work to matter.

In Part One of the book, we discuss why leadership is so dangerous and how people get taken out of the game.

In Part Two, we offer a series of action ideas designed to reduce the risk of getting pushed aside.

In Part Three, we discuss ways that people contribute to their own demise. We offer ideas about critical, though often neglected, aspects of exercising leadership: how to manage your personal vulnerabilities, care for yourself, and sustain your spirit.

Leadership opportunities beckon daily. We hope these lessons will help you put yourself on the line and stay alive, not only in your job, but also in your family and community, and in your heart and soul.