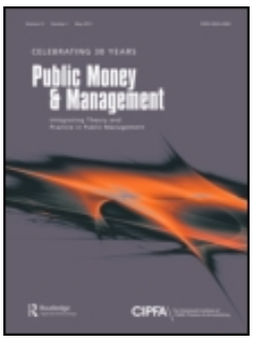

Public Money & Management

ISSN: 0954-0962 (Print) 1467-9302 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpmm20

Debate: Leadership and authority

Ronald Heifetz

To cite this article: Ronald Heifetz (2011) Debate: Leadership and authority, Public Money & Management, 31:5, 305-308, DOI: 10.1080/09540962.2011.598333

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2011.598333

Debate: Leadership and authority

Ronald Heifetz

Basic tools

Most fields borrow from colloquial language taking commonly-used terms and narrowing them down for expert usage. So, for example, professionally a physicist will define the word 'force' precisely so that other scientists will know exactly what is meant by it. However, that same physicist will use that same word in a colloquial way at a party. For instance: 'She is a force of nature' and, by that, the personal force to move people, and not the physical force to accelerate a mass.

So we need to be able to use words in everyday ways, but we also need to create more precise ways of using some of these very same words in order to think more insightfully and analytically about the world of practice. The area of leadership is not as mature as the practices of physics, chemistry or economics and words like 'leadership', 'authority', 'power', 'influence', 'management', 'followers', 'citizens' do not yet have agreed upon clear analytical definitions.

These are key words—the basic tools for studying leadership. Many people use the words 'leadership' and 'authority' synonymously, whereas I would prefer to distinguish them. Many people will make a distinction between leadership and management, but it is not entirely clear what distinction they are drawing. Many people will use the word 'leader' and 'follower' and say that one cannot have a leader without followers. I do not think that is true.

Deconstructing language to understand leadership

It can feel unnatural to use language differently from the way we grew up. Embedded in that language culture, we come to define our reality by its use; yet language is a construct. When we begin to deconstruct the language that we use to conceptualize and think more clearly about the practice of leadership, we immediately bump into some of these cultural assumptions. For example, the assumption that leaders are born and not made. When we begin to deconstruct that we can begin to understand why people carry that assumption, but also why it is mainly untrue and, in fact, why it is counter-productive.

Leadership versus authority

In my first book (*Leadership Without Easy Answers*, 1994), I wrote about one of the USA's leaders: Martin Luther King Jr. During the civil rights movement of the late 1950s and mid 1960s, he had a certain level of formal authority because he had a small organization. This was the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (the SCLC) and within that organization he was the boss. He was the president and he could hire and fire people—he had a variety of formal powers that come with formal authority.

In a much bigger circle of hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of people around the USA, Martin Luther King had informal authority. He had moral authority. He had charismatic authority. He did not have the power to hire or fire these people, but they were authorizing him to champion a point of view. Sometimes they would write him cheques, sometimes they would show up at meetings and sometimes they would simply provide vocal support. This whole network of informal authority, not formalized into any contract or any job description, but nevertheless profoundly powerful, was also a very important set of bases for his action, but neither of these groups were his target audience.

The people King wanted to lead were not in either of these rings—not the inner ring of his formal organization, nor the larger ring of people with whom he had informal authority. The people he wanted to lead were the great many people who couldn't care less about civil rights, or who hated his ideas. These were the people he needed to provoke to rethink their values and their priorities. So he was leading beyond his authority into constituencies over whom he had no authority at all—people who would never have considered themselves followers. Indeed, even within his ring of people with whom he had moral authority, he didn't consider them and they didn't consider themselves followers. He wasn't interested in followers. He was interested in activated, engaged, citizens—people who would themselves provide leadership in their own communities. What he was trying to do was to generate more leadership, not generate dependency; he couldn't accomplish anything by generating dependency. He needed people in the same club to start arguing with each other, people in the same family to start arguing with each other, people in the same church or synagogue or mosque to argue with each other, hoping that those arguments would generate a

DOI: 10.1080/09540962.2011.598333
PUBLIC MONEY & MANAGEMENT SEPTEMBER 2011

dynamism for change. The last thing he wanted was the argument reduced simply to one between everybody else and him.

So there is an important distinction between leadership and authority. Leadership frequently means mobilizing and engaging people over whom one has no authority whatsoever in order to mobilize collective effort to tackle a collective challenge.

Distinguishing leadership from authority is useful first because it enables us to value and analyse the leadership of people without authority who aren't anointed or appointed or elected or promoted, but are leading simply because they care—they see a problem for which they take initiative.

The second reason this is useful is we can begin to analyse how authority can be a constraint. Authority gives one enormous tools to work with, but it also generates problems. Intuitively we know that authority isn't the same as leadership and that leadership is a hard thing to do—we complain frequently about the lack of leadership that we are getting from people in authority. We say the leadership isn't exercising any leadership and we vote them out. But if we really wanted to understand the problems, we would be asking: 'What is it by virtue of being the senior person that may make it more difficult to lead?'

The third reason why it is useful to distinguish leadership from authority is that we can begin to analyse authority on its own terms as a virtue/concept/practice/property in all of our lives. It is not possible to have organizational life—starting with the family unit all the way to the national unit—without authority structures.

Yet many of us have mixed feelings about authority. Sometimes people in authority violate the trust of the power that they have been given and, having violated that trust, they generate significant scar tissue; some of that scar tissue gets carried from generation to generation.

So when we begin to distinguish leadership from authority, we can begin to work with the topic of authority as an important backbone of any social structure with many virtues for any community and when we begin to rehabilitate our capacity to entrust one another with power and heal some of that scar tissue, then we actually can renew our capacity to engage in much more efficient kinds of organizational activity.

For example, one of today's trends is towards teamwork and working in groups. This trend is not based simply on a love of democracy and respect for diverse points of view. There is a shadow side to what compels people towards wanting team meetings and working groups and that shadow side is distrust. People don't trust what's going to happen at that meeting if they are not there. So we have systems that are highly inefficient because of a lack of trust.

The quotient of trust that serves as the basis for civility in a society is not only measured by associational bonds laterally, but also critically by trust in authority relationships. Authority relationships are essentially a contract for services in which somebody entrusts power to somebody else in exchange for service. People are designed to do that—we are designed to be social creatures. We are born into the world expecting to entrust authorities, initially our parents, with power with the expectation for trustworthy care.

Lessons from biology

One of the key design problems in evolutionary biology was how to co-ordinate social life to make it advantageous compared to living alone. The solution was the creation of authority structures; anthropologists call them 'dominance hierarchies'. Social animals create dominance hierarchies—authority structures in which different animals have certain functions on behalf of the larger group. Key among these are direction for food each day, protection from predators, and social order (orientation to role and place, conflict control, and norm maintenance). Apes, for example, are expected to behave properly and, when individuals violate those norms, the dominant individuals will model the proper norms and also punish or reward individuals to reinforce the norms.

This system of looking to authority works so long as the ecosystem remains stable or changes very slowly. In a stable ecosystem you don't really need leadership at all. All you need are people in authority providing authoritative expertise to deal with straightforward problems: where's the food; how do we protect ourselves; how do we maintain order?

We need leadership when the ecosystem changes. Unless we learn a new strategy quickly enough to thrive in our changed environment, we could be looking at extinction. So we need to renew our authority

structures because, as the backbone of all organizational and family life, the proper and trustworthy uses of authority are really essential to any kind of complex co-ordination of people. And renewing our capacity for authority is a major challenge when dealing with a community that has good reasons to distrust authority. Addressing the sources of distrust becomes essential in our being able to rehabilitate our capacity to authorize one another with power in the hope that proper, competent services will be delivered.

Leadership becomes particularly relevant when we go beyond predominantly technical problems to adaptive problems. And nature can teach us a lot about adaptive processes, success and failure.

Adaptive challenges demand some response outside the current toolkit. The current behavioural DNA is not sufficient, so something more is required. In nature, successful adaptations are conservative. This is important because many people in leadership focus on change, rather than focusing on what is essential and precious to conserve. And then they frighten people by telling them that: 'we are going to make a revolutionary change in your life'. To be able to embed any change in the context of what one hopes to honour and preserve from tradition gives people a larger context within which then to place the pain they are about to go through from, for example, austerity measures of any sort.

The next lesson we learn in biology is that the adaptive solution frequently lies within the organism, or at least within the population. The way nature works to generate progress/innovation is sex. The purpose of sex in a biological sense is to create diversity, to generate a lot of variance in a population. If you have a diverse population, the chances are that in a changing environment some individual will have the capacity required to thrive in that environment.

Creativity, or innovation, is a product of bringing together differences. When you bring together a group of people engaging and clashing with different points of view on strategies or tactics in tackling a complex challenge, the conflict actually can be a generator. If you can orchestrate the conflict properly, the odds of generating innovative possibilities quickly go up.

Biology also teaches us that experiments fail. When you are facing an innovative challenge and adaptive pressure—again, economic growth and debt reduction for example—nobody in authority knows exactly what to do. They are going to have to experiment in a variety of directions and many of the experiments will fail.

When we are facing an adaptive pressure, the practice of leadership is an activity that has to mobilize three basic tasks:

- What cultural DNA are we going to conserve? What is essential and precious in our core set of virtues, values, competencies, structure and know-how?
- What do we need to discard? What in our current way of doing things are we going to have to stop doing and dismantle?
- Innovations. What new priorities, competence, and knowledge will enable us not only to survive, but thrive—taking the best of our history into the future?

Ideally, you want to be able to preserve the core aspects of an organization's competence, identity and tradition and still thrive in a new environment. Two hundred years ago that meant a whole new kind of industrial structure; what it will mean in the next 30 years isn't clear. Will it be biotechnology, software technology, wind or green technology? What kind of educational system will be required? How will children need to be taught? Who will support parents in renegotiating the role relationships in their families through these changes so that the kids don't fall through the cracks? It is going to take a lot of experiments to develop a robust adaptation to the current realities we face.

So there are countless questions for which there are not sufficient authoritative answers—not because people in authority are evil or corrupt, but because the problems are beyond anyone's current know-how.

Leadership requires a capacity to honour history but also to challenge the current way of doing things, and to generate a culture of experimentation where conflict is seen as an engine of creativity—where people will operate at the frontier of their current competence and are not ashamed to admit that they have failed again.

In adaptive problem situations, the problems are lodged in people's hearts and minds. One of the key differences between an adaptive problem and a technical problem is that in a technical problem an expert can take the problem off somebody's shoulders

and deliver an authoritative solution.

With an adaptive problem, authoritative experts cannot by virtue of their knowledge solve the problem because the problem frequently remains lodged in the people with the complaint. For example, in medicine (I started off as a doctor), people will come with heart problems for which one can do surgery. Surgeons can stitch new vessels into the heart and, after a couple of months, the patient feels stronger. All over the world, post-cardiac surgery patients get the same sermon—stop smoking, eat better, take exercise. Generally in the USA, however, the compliance rate is only about 20%. Doctors call these 'compliance failures' because they blame the patients—they don't want to call these medical failures. So we know how to fix the heart's plumbing, but we don't know how to change people's hearts and minds, which is what makes this problem in part adaptive.

Similar dynamics arise in the world of business. I have consulted for various big consulting firms, McKinsey and others. Just like cardiac surgeons, they will do a wonderful set of analyses, engage in some procedures, and make terrific recommendations, but after giving their prescription, , perhaps as often as 70% of the time the "solutions do not get implemented. Of course, they were not solutions; they were proposals. They only become solutions when they are lived in new behaviours, in new ways of doing things in that organization. Some of the cultural DNA has to be discarded and innovative DNA has to be developed and internalized.

Leadership to solve austerity

Leadership is rarely a win–win game. One tries to create positive sum or win–win solutions as much as one can, but the odds are that some people are going to have to bear real loss and it is the loss that generates resistance. People only love change when they know it is a good thing. People resist change when there is a loss that accompanies that change, or the risk of loss. Therefore, in leading people in some adaptive process to develop new capacity, you have to engage people. You have to have reverence and respect for the pains that you are going to ask people to suffer because, if you are going to step on their feet, you have got to know how to pace it, how to sequence it, how fast to go. Do you step on three toes at a time, or one toe at a time? Whatever you do, people are probably going to kick because nobody likes loss. In an age of austerity, you are in the business of distributing losses in the hope of generating innovation that will enable you to do even more with less because you have invented a way to do it differently.

There are three kinds of losses to deal with:

- Direct losses of people's jobs, people's money, people's status. This needs to be paced and explained and buffered. Do you do it in a week, or do you do it over three months or three years so that people have time to do their own adaptive work to figure out their own way of thriving even in that more austere setting?
- Loyalty. Many people will feel that they are betraying their teachers, their families, and heritage by changing their way of life to adapt to new realities.
- Competency. People are proud of their competency, but when we are doing adaptive work we are asking people to discard some of the cultural DNA that no longer applies and to move across their frontier of competence into an area of incompetence so that they can develop new competency.

To lead people to develop new capacity to tackle complex problems that cross boundaries requires a long time-frame. Technical problems have a short time-frame because we have the know-how, we know what to do, we know how to respond. It takes time for people to sift through what is essential and what is expendable. It takes time to innovate, to experiment and to capture lessons from failed experiments to run the next one as progress is made, and that means holding people through a sustained period of discomfort during which the innovation, the exploration, the cross-boundary conflicts continue to be orchestrated so that innovation emerges, new capacities develop. Leaders have to be able to hold people in a state of productive discomfort. You don't want people to panic. You want people to keep thinking creatively, even though they are under stress—if you don't build a head of steam why should people change their ways? ■

Ronald Heifetz is the King Hussein Bin Talal Senior Lecturer in Public Leadership and founder of the Center for Public Leadership, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Cambridge, USA.