Mobilizing for adaptive work

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THIS STUDY EXAMINES THE usefulness of viewing leadership in terms of adaptive work. Adaptive work consists of the learning required to address conflicts in the values people hold, or to diminish the gap between the values people stand for and the reality they face. Adaptive work requires a change in values, beliefs, or behaviour. In this view, getting people to clarify what matters most, in what balance, with what trade-of, becomes a central task. In the case of a local industry that pollutes the river, people want clean water, but they also want jobs. Community and company interests frequently overlap and clash, with conflicts taking place not only among factions but also within the lives of individual citizens who themselves may have competing needs. Leadership requires orchestrating these conflicts among and within the interested parties, and not just between members and formal shareholders of the organization. Who should play a part in the deliberations is not given, but is itself a critical strategic question. Strategy begins with asking: Which stakeholders have to adjust their ways to make progress on this problem? How can one sequence the issues or strengthen the bonds that join the community of interests so that they withstand the stresses of problem-solving?

To clarify a complex situation such as this requires multiple vantage points, each of which adds a piece to the puzzle. Values are shaped and refined by rubbing against real problems, and people interpret their problems according to the values they hold. Different values shed light on different opportunities and facets of a situation. The implication is important: the inclusion cf competing value perspectives may be essential to adaptive success. In the long run, an industrial polluter will fail if it neglects the interests of its community. Given the spread of environmental values, it may not always be able to move across borders. Conversely, the community may lose its economic base if it neglects the interests of its industry.

Viewing leadership in terms of adaptive work points to the pivotal importance of reality testing in producing socially useful outcomes the process of weighing one interpretation of a problem and its sources of evidence against others. Conceptions of leadership that do not value reality testing encourage people to realize their vision, however faulty their sight. Assessing circumstances is made complex because we cannot always define problems objectively. The methods of science make major contribution to reality testing, yet they cannot reliably define our problems both because the scientific method has limited capacity to make predictions and because our problems can only be diagnosed in light of our values. With different values, we screen reality for different information and put the facts together into a different picture. If a society values individual freedom, it will tend to highlight those aspects of reality that challenge freedom. And as a corollary it will also be inclined to neglect those elements of reality upon which another society with another central value, like shared responsibility, will focus. The aspect of truth each sees depends significantly on who cares about what.

Typically, a social system will honor some mix of values, and the competition within this mix largely explains why adaptive work so often involves conflict. People with competing values engage one another as they confront a shared situation from their own points of view.

Failures to adapt

Our organizations and societies face many kinds of adaptive work that we cannot afford to avoid. The renewal of ethnic strife in the destabilized post-cold war international system requires the invention of new methods for dealing with festering problems of racial enmity. The simultaneous increases in crime, prison population, and prevalence of drugs in the streets require serious differentiation of fact from fiction and close reasoning about causes and effects. Why is this so?

People fail to adapt for several reasons. In some cases they may perceive the nature of the threat. Based on their experience and science, the people of Pompeii made a reasonable but tragic estimate of the risk that Vesuvius might erupt. In our age, "We are fortunate to have discovered already our dependence on the ozone layer."

In some other cases the society may perceive the threat, but the challenge may exceed the culture's adaptive capability. Innumerable human tribes and organizations have disappeared with the onslaught of disease, environmental challenge, invasion, or competition because they could not develop the ability or find the means to adjust appropriately.

Fina1ly, people fail to adapt because of the distress provoked by the problem and the changes it demands. They resist the pain, anxiety, or conflict that accompanies a sustained interaction with the situation. Holding onto past assumptions, blaming authority, scapegoating, externalizing the enemy, denying the problem, jumping to conclusions, or finding a distracting issue may restore stability and feel less stressful than facing and taking responsibility for a complex challenge. These patterns of response to disequilibrium are called work avoidance mechanisms in this study, and they are similar to the defensive routines that operate in individuals, small groups, and organizations.

Diagnostically, an organization or community may experience any one of these difficulties in adapting. But when one takes action, the final cause of adaptive failure - the tendency to avoid distress - holds the key to setting strategy. It frequently provides the ultimate impediment to adaptive change because the learning associated with identifying blind spots and options that others cannot see, or strengthening a community's problem-solving capacity, will generate conflict and distress. Thus, a key question for leadership becomes: How can one counteract the expected work avoidances and help people learn despite resistance?

Though differing in form depending on the culture and complexity of the social system, work avoidance mechanisms seem to operate in any social context. In a small group, less powerful members will sit back and "watch the gladiator's fight" as the chair person and a colleague who represents a challenging perspective engage in an angry exchange that diverts attention from the issues on the table and diminishes a sense of shared responsibility. In an organization, people will follow standard operating procedures even when they know the procedures do not fit the situation. In a community or nation, voters will choose "good news" candidates even when they suspect that progress on pressing problems will require hard adjustments on their part.

Yet though we frequently avoid adaptive work, we seldom do so deliberately. Work avoidance mechanisms are often unconscious, or at least disguised from the self. Sometimes they reflect comforting misdiagnoses of the situation - a social system may scapegoat one of its factions because of a dominant perception that the faction is indeed responsible for the problem. A mob that burns a man in effigy may believe that its problem would be solved if it could burn the man himself. Yet even killing an accused heretic like Salman Rushdie would do little to integrate the traditional and modern strains within Islamic societies.

Reality testing - the effort to grasp the problem fully - is often an early victim of disequilibrium. Initially, people will apply routine practices for realistically assessing and addressing problems. But if these do not pay early dividends, restoring equilibrium may take precedence over the prolonged uncertainty associated with weighing divergent views and facing the need for changing attitudes and beliefs.

Distinguishing work from work avoidance is no science. Each culture will have its own typical patterns of response to stress - work-producing as well as work-avoiding. While more research should clarify the distinction between productive and avoidance behaviors in different social systems, some rules of thumb are useful. One might detect work avoidance when the subject of discussion is suddenly taken off the table (as with diversions); when the level of stress associated with an issue suddenly drops (often following an apparent technical fix); when the focus shifts from attending to the problem itself to alleviating the symptoms of stress; or when responsibility for the problem is displaced to an easy target(as with scapegoating).One ought to take a skeptical stance, at least momentarily, when some action suddenly makes everybody feel good.

Of course, what looks like momentary periods of work avoidance from one vantage point may be part of someone else's strategy. Leadership often requires pacing the work in an effort to prepare people to undertake a hard task at a rate they can stand.

Authority in social systems

Consider the hospital personnel that staff the emergency room. Without an explicit hierarchy of authority to provide a swift and coordinated response, chaos would ensue. Someone takes charge, usually a

physician, and all eye turn to her for cues and instructions. Information flows from all the members of the staff toward her. She provides a focus of attention that orients members of the team to their place and role; she provides direction; she stops any disruptive conflict that arises on the team.

The staff of an emergency room face a kind of problem similar to many everyday situations. These problems are technical in the sense that we know already how to respond to them. Often, they can only be accomplished with mastery and ingenuity. They are not easy, nor 'are they' unimportant. These problems are technical because the necessary knowledge about them already has been digested and put in the form of a legitimized set of known organizational procedures guiding what to do and role authorizations guiding who should do it.

For these situations, we turn to authority, with reasonable expectations. In our various social systems, our authority structures and the norms they maintain govern thousands of problem-solving processes. Meeting a host of vital and everyday problems, they are the product of previously accomplished adaptive work.

Over the course of history, we have successfully faced an array of adaptive challenges by developing new knowledge and organizations with new norms. Now that we have them, many of our problems have become routine. Our authority systems already "know" how to respond. And because we know how to respond, the stresses generated by these problems are temporary.

For many problems, however, no adequate response has yet been developed. Examples abound: poverty at home and abroad, industrial competitiveness, failing schools, drug abuse, the national debt, racial prejudice, ethnic strife, AIDS, environmental pollution. No organizational response can be called into play that will clearly resolve these kinds of problems. No dear expertise can be found, no single sage has general credibility, no established procedure will suffice. Stresses build up and produce a sense of urgency among certain groups within society and sometimes throughout society. In these situations, our inclination to look to authority may generate inappropriate dependencies.

These are the times for leadership. Problems that cause persistent distress do so because the system of accepted dependencies being applied to them cannot do the job. 'We look to our authorities for answers they cannot provide. What happens, then? Authorities, under pressure to be decisive, sometimes fake the remedy or take action that avoids the issue by skirting it. We instigate drug wars across our border instead of facing the ills of our cities. In the short term, of course, this may quell some of the distress at home. If the administration succeeds in shifting the public's attention to a substitute problem in a foreign nation, then the problem at home may cause less discontent. Attention is deflected from the issue, which appears to be taken care of. But in the long term, some problems get worse, and then frustration arises both with the problem situation and with those people in authority who were supposed to resolve it. In response to our frustration, we are likely to perpetuate the vicious cycle by looking even more earnestly to authority, but this time we look for someone new offering more certainty and better promises.

Habitually seeking solutions from people in authority is maladaptive. Indeed, it is perhaps the essence of maladaptive behavior: the use of a response appropriate to one situation in another where it does not apply. Authority relationships are critical to doing work in many routine situations and, applied properly, can be used invaluably in more challenging times; yet misapplied, they serve to avoid work.

The flight to authority is particularly dangerous for at least two reasons: first, because the work avoidance often occurs in response to our biggest problems and, second, because it disables some of our most important personal and collective resources for accomplishing adaptive work.

Distinguishing adaptive from technical work

The practice of medicine illustrates the distinction between technical and adaptive problems, and the dynamics these problems generate. Patients come to physicians with symptoms and signs of illness. They hope that their doctor will be able to "fix" the problem, but they do not know if their hopes are well founded. Often, the physician can indeed cure the illness. If a person has an infection, there are many times when the physician can say, "I have an antibiotic medication that will almost definitely cure you. The medication is virtually harmless." For the purpose of our discussion, we can call these technical situations Type I-situations in which the patient's expectations are realistic: the doctor can provide a solution and the problem can be defined, treated, and cured on the basis of (1) using the doctor's expertise, and (2) shifting the patient's burden primarily onto the doctor's shoulders.

In Type II situations, the problem is definable but no clear-cut solution is available. The doctor may have a solution in mind, but she cannot implement it. And a solution that cannot be implemented is not really a solution; it is simply an idea, a proposal. Heart disease sometimes presents a
Type II problem. The patient can be restored to more or less full operating capacity, but only if he takes responsibility for his health by making appropriate life adjustments. In particular, he will have to consider the doctor's prescriptions for long-term medication, exercise, diet program and stress reduction. He will have to choose among these.

In these situations, the doctor's technical expertise allows her to define the problem and suggest solutions that may work. But merely giving the patient a technical answer does not help the patient. Her prescribing must actively involve the patient if she is to be effective. The patient needs to confront the choices and changes that face him. The doctor's technical answers mean nothing if the patient does not implement them. Only he can reset the priorities of his life. He has to learn new ways. And the doctor has to manage the learning process in order to help the patient help himself. The dependency on authority appropriate to technical situations becomes inappropriate in adaptive ones. The doctor's authority still provides a resource to help the patient respond, but beyond her substantive knowledge, she needs a different kind of expertise - the ability to help the patient do the work that only he can do.

Type III situations are even more difficult. The problem definition is not clear-cut, and technical fixes are not available. Chronic illness and impending death from any cause often fit this category. In these situations, the doctor can continue to operate in a mechanical mode by diagnosing and prescribing remedies (and a "remedy" of some sort can usually be found).Yet doing so avoids the problem-defining and problem-solving work of both doctor and patient.

In Type II and Ill situations, treating the illness is too narrow a way for the patient and the physician to define the task. It applies a technical formulation to a nontechnical problem. When critical aspects of the situation are probably unchangeable, the problem becomes more than the medical condition. For example, if the patient's diagnosis is an advanced stage of cancer in which the likelihood of cure is remote, it may be useless – indeed, a denial of reality – to define the primary problem as cancer. Cancer, in this case, is a condition. To the limited extent it can be treated at all, it is only part of the problem. To define cancer as the primary problem leads everyone involved to concentrate on finding solutions to the cancer, thus diverting their attention from the real work at hand. The patient's real work consists of facing and making adjustments to harsh realities that go beyond his health condition and that include several possible problems: making the most out of his life; considering what his children may need after he is gone; preparing his wife, parents, loved ones, and friends; and completing valued professional tasks.

Table 20.1 Situational types

Situation	Problem definition	Solution and implementation	Primary focus of responsibility for the work	Kind of work
Type 1	Clear	Clear	Physician	Technical
Type II	Clear	Requires learning	Physician and patient	Technical and adaptive
Type III	Requires learning	Requires learning	Patient physician	Adaptive

Unfortunately, neither doctors nor patients are inclined to differentiate between technical and adaptive work. Indeed, the harsher the reality, the harder we look to authority for a remedy that saves us from adjustment. By and large, we want answers, not questions. Even the toughest individual tends to avoid realities that require adaptive work, searching instead for an authority, a physician, to provide the way out. And doctors, wanting deeply to fulfill the yearning for remedy, too often respond willingly to the pressures we place on them to focus narrowly on technical answers.

An authority figure exercising leadership has to tell the difference between technical and adaptive situations because they require different responses. She must ask the key differentiating questions: Does making progress on this problem require changes in people's values, attitudes, or habits if behavior? If people recognize the problem and can repeat a well–worked solution, then she can engage an authoritative response with practical efficiency and effect. In situations that call for adaptive work,

however, social systems must learn their way forward. Even when an authority has some clear ideas about what needs to be done, implementing change often requires adjustments in people's lives.

Hence, with adaptive problems, authority must look beyond authoritative solutions. Authoritative action may usefully provoke debate, rethinking, and other processes of social learning, but then it becomes a tool in a strategy to mobilize adaptive work toward a solution, rather than a direct means to institute one.

As suggested, this requires a shift in mindset. When using authoritative provocation as part of a strategy, one must be prepared for an eruption of distress in response to the provocation and to consider the next step early on. One has to take the heat in stride, seeing it as part of the process of engaging people in the issue. In contrast, the mindset which views authoritative action as a solution to an adaptive problem would logically view an aggravated community as an extraneous complication to making headway, rather than an inherent part of making progress. Operating with that mindset, an authority figure would likely respond defensively and inappropriately when the community retaliates.

Leading with authority

Having an authority relationship with people is both a resource for leadership and a constraint. Authority is a resource because it can provide the instruments and power to hold together and harness the distressing process of doing adaptive work. Authority is a constraint because it I contingent on meeting the expectations of constituents. Deviating from those expectations is perilous.

Authority is also a straitjacket. Constituents confer resources in exchange for services. Power is received in the promise of fulfilling expectations people in authority, we insist, must provide direction, protection, and order. These expectations often make good sense. In technical situations, ad equate preparations for the current problem have been made already. Procedures, lines of authority, role placements, and norms of operation have been established. People have a sufficiently clear idea about what needs to be clone and how to go about doing it. Creativity and ingenuity may be needed, but only to devise variations on known themes, not new themes altogether.

Our expectations of authority figures become counterproductive when our organizations and communities face an adaptive challenge — when the application of known methods and procedures will not suffice. We continue to expect our authorities to restore equilibrium with dispatch. If they do not act quickly to reduce our feelings of urgency, we bring them down.
Sometimes, we kill them.

That we sometimes call these situations "crises in leadership" is symptomatic of the problem of habitually blaming authority. Stymied by our expectation that authorities should provide in adaptive situations what they can and do provide routinely, we blame them for the persistence of frustrating problems that demand our own adaptive work. And so, predictably, our authorities supply us with fake remedies and diversions. We ask for it. If they want to maintain the authorization we give then, they have to deliver, or provide promises of deliverance. When we discover that our authorities have failed, too frequently we expiate our failures by scapegoating them and looking for someone with fresh promises.

Exercising leadership from a position of authority in adaptive situations means going against the grain. Rather than fulfilling the expectation for answers, one provides questions; rather than protecting people from outside threat, one lets people feel the threat in order to stimulate adaption; instead of orienting people to their current roles, one disorients people so that new role relationships develop; rather than quelling conflict, one generates it; instead of maintaining norms, one challenges them.

Of course, real life is fluid. An authority figure, even in adaptive situations, will have to act differently to fulfill each of these social functions depending on several factors, as just mentioned: the severity of the problem, the resilience of the social system, the ripeness of the issue, and time. For example, in an organization one may have to act firmly to maintain norms and restore clear role assignments, while challenging people with questions and raising conflict about direction. But to make tactical decisions to move between technical and adaptive modes along each of these five dimensions, one first needs a clear conception of the differences. Table 20.2 outlines the shifts that adaptive situations require of authorities.

In adaptive situations, fulfilling the social functions of authority requires walking a razor's edge. Challenge people too fast, and they will push the authority figure over for failing their expectations for stability. But challenge people too slowly and they will throw him down when they discover that no progress has been made. Ultimately, they will blame him for lack of progress. To stay balanced on the

edge, one needs a strategic understanding of the specific tools and constraints that come with one's authority.

Yet in either case, an authority figure cuts his feet. When he is the focus of hopes and pains that are beyond his magic, or any magic, some people are bound to attack, at least in words. Even the most agile cannot dodge these attacks completely, nor shield himself, mentally and physically, from an assortment of wounds.

Table 20.2 Leadership with authority in adaptive situations

Social function	Situational type Technical	Adaptive
Direction	Authority provides problem definition and solution	Authority identifies the adaptive challenge, provides diagnosis of condition, and produces questions about problem definitions and solutions
Protection	Authority protects from external threat	Authority discloses external threat
Role orientation	Authority orients	Authority disorients current roles, or resists pressure to orient people in new roles too quickly
Controlling conflict	Authority restores order	Authority exposes conflict, or lets it emerge
Norm maintenance	Authority maintains norms	Authority challenges norms, or allows them to be challenged

1. We have begun to explore the resources that authority brings to directing this process. These tools can be organized according to five strategic principles of leadership:

2. Identify the adaptive challenge. Diagnose the situation in light of the rules at stake, and unbundle the issues that come with it.

3. Keep the level of distress within a tolerable range for doing adaptive work. To use the pressure cooker analogy, keep the heat up without blowing up the vessel.

4. Focus attention on ripening issues and not on stress-reducing distractions. Identify which issues can currently engage attention; and while directing attention to them, counteract work avoidance mechanisms like denial, scapegoating, externalizing the enemy, pretending the problem is technical or attacking individuals rather than issues.

5. Give the work back to people, but at a rate they can stand. Place and develop responsibility by putting the pressure on the people with the problem.

6. Protect voices of leadership without authority. Give cover to those who raise hard questions and generate distress — people who point to the internal contradictions of the society. These individuals often will have latitude to provoke rethinking that authorities do not have.

Leading without authority

We see leadership too rarely exercised from high office, and the constraints that come with authority go far to explain why. In public life, people generally look to their authorities to solve problems with a minimum of pain, and where pain must be endured, they often expect their officials to find somebody else to bear the costs. In the 1990s, we hear across the country, "Cut the deficit — but don't raise my taxes, raise his." "Cut military spending, but don't close my factory or my army base". Many of us want change, "but not in my back yard," a syndrome so common that it has a name: NIMBY. Our politicians find it very hard to raise tough questions at election time because their constituents insist on protection.

When we do elect activists, we want them to change the thinking and behavior of other people, rarely our own. We can hardly blame our public officials for giving us what we ask for.

The scarcity of leadership from people in authority, however, makes it all the more critical to the adaptive successes of a polity that leadership be exercised by people without authority. These people — perceived as entrepreneurs and deviants, organizers and troublemakers — provide the capacity within the system to see through the blind spots of the dominant view point. Often they remain relatively unknown.

Analysts have generally neglected the distinctive problems and opportunities of mobilizing work from positions of little or no authority. Thus, nearly all studies of leadership, in addition to many histories, focus primarily on figures of authority. Just as social systems organize themselves in relation to a structure of authority, focusing attention at the head of the table, our social commentators do so as well. Leadership may more often emerge from the foot of the table, but that is not where we spend most of our time looking. We study the lives and characteristics of heads of state and CEOs of corporations, assuming all the while that we are studying leaders and not simply authority figures who serve the social functions of direction, protection, and order, sometimes in adaptive situations that demand their leadership, and sometimes in routine situations that do not.

That I use the metaphor of the table, with the head traditionally a man and the foot characteristically a woman, is no accident. Leadership without authority has been the domain to which women have been restricted for ages. Even today, Congress remains over 90 percent men, and we are only beginning to imagine seriously the election of a woman President in our time. Having been denied formal authority roles in most societies, some women have learned strategies for leading without authority, and some have learned not to try leading at all. The same can be said of many disempowered groups.

Women who have managed to carve out roles of authority were likely to be ignored by traditional historical and social science scholarship, which focused on the activities of men. In the United States, for example, women have headed social reform movements dating back more than 150 years, but only recently, with the emergence of women's history as an established academic field, have their accomplishments been chronicled.

The question, however, remains, "Can someone exercise leadership from the foot of the table, or even from outside the family without any authority, formal or informal?" I think the answer is yes, and in several ways. Some people, like Gandhi, lead societies without holding formal office of any kind. More frequently, people have a base of formal authority within their own subgroup, like Lech Walesa as head of Solidarity in Communist Poland, Martin Luther King Jr. as founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, or Margaret Sanger as a head of what became Planned Parenthood. In addition, they have a wide network of informal authority in the community at large, as did Gandhi. But these people lead not only within the boundaries of the communities that authorize them, formally and informally, but also across those boundaries, reaching to communities where their words and actions have influence despite having no authorization. In segments of the larger community that these leaders influence, they lack both kinds of authority. In a sense, they lead across two boundaries: the boundary of their formal organization, if they have one, and the boundary defined by the wider network of people with whom they have gained informal authority (trust, respect, moral persuasion).

In fact, many people daily go beyond both their job description and the informal expectations they carry within their organization and do what they are not authorized to do. At a minimum, these people exercise leadership momentarily by impressing upon a group, sometimes by powerfully articulating an idea that strikes a resonant chord, the need to pay attention to a missing point of view. A staff assistant will speak up at a meeting even though she has no authority to do so. Or someone will run an unauthorized experiment and later announce the results. Or in the early hours of a disaster, some people will step forward and mobilize others to face and respond to the crisis.

Furthermore, many people have engaged in various forms of civil disobedience to mobilize adaptive work among communities that were indifferent or hostile. Those they led across formal and informal boundaries gave them no authority whatsoever, certainly not in the early stages of their efforts.

Thus, when we speak of leadership without authority, we are referring to a very large set of stances, from the person operating from the margins of society even to the senior authority figure who leads beyond his pale of authority, challenging either his own constituents' expectations or engaging people across the boundary of his organization who would ordinarily or preferably pay him no mind.

Over time, a person who begins without authority or who leads beyond whatever authority she has may have to construct, strengthen, and sometimes broaden her base of informal authority in order to get more

leverage. She may find that an initial, rebellious leadership puts her in an informal authority position that requires trust, respect, and moral force in order to sustain progress. Such were the beginnings of King, Gandhi, and Sanger. An emerging leader may need a base from which to speak to hard issues without being ignored or cast out altogether. Furthermore, to involve the relevant factions in the community, she may need people across boundaries to believe that she represents something significant, that she embodies a perspective that merits attention. When that happens, she has to respect both the resources and constraints that come with authority, formally from her own group, and informally from beyond. Just as leading with authority requires protecting voices of dissent, a leader without authority will have to "take counsel" from her adversaries, incorporating in her strategy whatever wisdom of theirs connects to her central thesis.

As she seeks informal authority from those across organizational or factional boundaries, she has to place her cause in the context of the values of her opposition. In addition, she may have to learn from her antagonists in order to correct for the possible narrowness of her own views. She is not just teaching; she is being taught.

The benefits of leading without authority

Leadership, as used here, means engaging people to make progress on the adaptive problems they face. Because making progress on adaptive problems requires learning, the task of leadership consists of choreographing and directing learning processes in an organization or community. Progress often demands new ideas and innovation. As well, it often demands changes in people's attitudes and behaviours. Adaptive work consists of the process of discovering and making those changes. Leadership, with or without authority, requires an educative strategy.

Senior authority generally includes the power to manage the holding environment, direct attention, gather and influence the flow of information, frame the terms of debate, distribute responsibility, regulate conflict and distress, and structure decision processes. Yet the constraints of authority suggest that there may also be advantages to leading without it. First, the absence of authority enables one to deviate from the norms of authoritative decision-making. Instead of providing answers that soothe, one can more readily raise questions that disturb. One does not have to keep the ship on an even keel. One has more latitude for creative deviance.

Second, leading without or beyond one's authority permits focusing hard on a single issue. One does not have to contend so fully with meeting the multiple expectations of multiple constituencies and providing the holding environment for everybody. One can have an issue focus.

Third, operating with little or no authority places one closer to the detailed experiences of some of the stakeholders in the situation. One may lose the larger perspective but gain the fine grain of people's hopes, pains, values, habits, and history. One has frontline information.

However, because the benefits and constraints differ, those who lead without authority must adopt strategies and tactics that are a t once more bold and subtle. First, without authority, one has very little control over the holding environment. One can shape the stimulus, but one cannot manage the response: one cannot institute an organizing structure, pick a temporizing side issue, secure a new norm, or provide a calming presence. A leader without authority can spark debate, but he cannot orchestrate it. Without authority, a leader must regulate distress by modulating the provocation.

Furthermore, without authority one may have a frontline feel for a single issue in depth, but not as broad a sense of the multiplicity of challenges facing the community which affect its stance on any particular issue. This may render the leader without authority less aware of the other crucial problems confronting the society and the ripeness of his issue in relation to other pressing issues that may need to take priority.

In monitoring levels of distress, any leader has to find indicators for knowing both when to promote an unripe issue and whether the stress generated by an intervention falls within the productive range for that social system at that time.

Different organizations and societies will have different sources and levels of resilience, and each social system requires serious analysis. But as a general rule, the leader operating without authority can read the authority figure as a barometer of issue ripeness and systemic stress because social systems generally charge authority figures with the particular job of resolving ripe issues.

Second, in attracting and directing attention to an issue, a leader without authority has to take into account the special vulnerability of becoming a lightning rod. Rather than orchestrating the debate among competing factions, one becomes a faction readily targeted for attack. Of course, authority figures frequently get attacked as well, but the resources at their disposal for deflecting attention and letting others take the heat are often unavailable to leaders without authority.

Third, just as people look to authority to solve problems, leaders without authority commonly make the mistake of assuming that only authority figures have the power to affect change. As a result, there is a strong temptation to identify the authority figure as the audience for action: "If only we could bring him around, everyone else would move in the right direction." In general, however, people in power change their ways when the sources of their authority change the expectations. Their behavior is an expression of the community that authorizes them. Thus, a strategy that mobilizes the stakeholders in the community may be quite a bit more likely to get work done than the strategy of "challenging authority."

But without authority, a leader stands relatively naked before the people, often appearing to be not only the identifier of a distressing problem but also the source of the distress itself. All eyes turn to the person who raises disturbing questions, and some of those eyes are hostile. Groups can avoid problems, at least temporarily, by shooting the messenger. Thus, although attention is a major tool of leadership, it also makes one a likely target of attack. If a person lacks authority, people take issue not only with the substance of his point of view but with his right to raise it. Indeed, they often attack the right and ignore the substance.

The mechanisms for killing the messenger are varied and subtle depending on the culture, the organization, and the problem. Yet attacks often follow a general pattern: first a person or faction raises a difficult question that generates some distress by pointing to a potential conflict over values and purpose, norms and organizational relationships, power, or strategy. Second, in response, the disquieted members of the system will turn their gaze to a senior authority figure, expecting him to restore equilibrium. Finally, the authority figure pressed by these expectations to reduce distress, feeling emotionally compelled to act, neutralizes or silences the "problem" faction, directly or indirectly. These moves happen fast. The authority figure may not even be aware of the way others have gotten him to perform the role of executioner on their behalf.

A major challenge of leadership, therefore, is to draw attention and then deflect it to the questions and issues that need to be faced. To do so, one has to provide a context for action. The audience needs to readily comprehend the purpose of unusual or deviant behavior so that it focuses less on the behavior itself, or the person, and more on its meaning.