Mobilizing Adaptive Work: Beyond Visionary Leadership

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We no longer live in a world where we have the right to expect authorities to know the answers. The adaptive challenges facing businesses demand not merely the application of expertise, but ongoing changes in the habits, attitudes, and values of people high and low in the workplace.

We may know this in one part of our brain, but the rest continues to operate as if the job of top managers were to provide decisive know-how. Indeed, in the crisis and pace of our current age we look even more eagerly and expectantly for deliverance from on high. We fall into patterns of dependency that place impossible burdens on those at the top to pull the next rabbit out of the hat. And if their magic fails, we kill them off. Rarely do we blame ourselves for our unsuitable expectations.

We confuse ourselves in many ways when we analyze the practice of leadership, but especially when we equate leadership with authority. Every day we use the term leader to denote people who have authority or a following; we talk about the leadership of the gang, the mob, the organization, Congress, the nation. At some level, however, we know we confuse leadership with authority, because in the next breath we complain about the lack of leadership by many people in authority.

Exercising leadership requires distinguishing between leadership and authority and between technical and adaptive work. The first distinction provides a framework for developing leadership strategy given one's place in a situation, with or without authority. The second points to the differences between expert and learning challenges, and the different modes of operating that each requires. Clarifying these two distinctions enables us to understand why so many people in top authority fail to lead: they commit the classic error of treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems.

In confusing technical problems with the adaptive challenges we face in business and society; we look for the wrong kind of leadership. We call for someone with answers, decision, strength, and a map of the future: someone who knows where we ought to be going—in short, someone who can make hard problems simple. Instead of looking for saviors, we should be calling for leadership that summons us to face the problems for which there are no simple, painless solutions—the challenges that require us to learn new ways.

To develop an appropriate strategy for leadership that mobilizes adaptive work, we need first to clarify the nature of this classic error—to explain the difference between adaptive challenges and technical problems and the tasks of leadership and authority.

What Is Authority?

Authority is a bargain; people entrust authorities in exchange for service. Indeed, we can define authority as "power entrusted to perform a service." When people in authority meet expectations, their credibility and chances for promotion increase; when they do not, they risk their power and position.

Authority takes two forms: formal and informal. With formal authority comes the various powers of the office; with informal authority comes the power to influence attitude and behavior beyond compliance.[1] Formal authority is granted because the office holder promises to meet a set of explicit expectations (job descriptions, legislated mandates), whereas informal authority comes from promising to meet expectations that are often implicit (trustworthiness, ability, civility).

Take the case of an elected official. Before her election, a candidate focuses on increasing her informal authority—the respect, admiration, and trust of prospective constituents. Her hope is to transform that into the formal authority of office. Yet even after she gains office and the powers that come with it, she still has to monitor her informal authority, because it remains a critical source of leverage for mobilizing people. It determines not only her prospects for reelection but also her ability to influence fellow officials while in office.

Formal authority brings with it the powers of office, but informal authority brings with it the subtle yet substantial power to extend one's reach way beyond the limits of the job description. Formal authority changes in quantum jumps at discrete moments when formal mandates for action are given: swearing-in, hiring, firing, signing of legislation, issuance of a license. In contrast, informal authority changes constantly as one's general credibility and professional reputation rise and fall.

To the extent that practitioners and scholars tried in the past to distinguish between leadership and authority, they merely drew a distinction between two kinds of power: formal and informal authority. Leadership has commonly been associated with informal authority, denoting the ability to gain and deploy noncoercive power—that is, the power to persuade and inspire a following. As we shall see, however, both formal and informal authorities are saddled with expectations that constrain the exercise of leadership. Consequently, equating leadership with informal authority does little to help us develop strategies of leadership, whether with or without authority, to tackle our most important challenges.

Services Authorities Are Expected to Provide

Primate societies provide insight into the five vital social needs that authorities are expected to fulfill: direction, protection, orientation, conflict control, and norm maintenance. Although dominance structures among primates vary from fluid to rigidly hierarchical, dominant individuals across species serve many of these same social functions. Dominant animals take a prominent stance. They dominate the attention of the band; they sometimes reside in the spatial center of the group. By providing a central focus of attention, they often serve as reference points by which the other members of the band orient themselves. By keeping a watchful eye on the location and actions of central figures during the day's activities, they know roughly which direction to travel for food, what position to take in camp, whom to mate with, where to run for protection, and whom to look to for the restoration of order when a fight erupts.

For example, when a silverback gorilla walks at the head of the line through mountain forests, he directs the band toward food and water. When a leopard appears, he coordinates the protective response. When members of the band rest at midday and evening, they orient themselves according to where he places himself. Characteristically, nursing mothers stay close by. When conflicts over resources arise, a dominant individual steps in to restore social equilibrium. When norms are violated—for example, during pairing and mating—the silverback reinforces the norms.

Though these five social needs are served in a myriad of ways by authority systems in human organizations and communities, still these services must be rendered. They are essential to the viability of both simple and complex systems, from the family to the multinational corporation. Indeed, the ability to create societies, from small bands of hunter-gatherers to large organizations, rest on the fundamental ability of humans to authorize one another to do different tasks. Without systems of authorization, we would have neither organization nor civilization. Without trusting one another with power, we atomize.

So it is no wonder that we come to identify leadership with authority in our everyday language and thinking. Every day we look to authorities to coordinate social processes and provide answers to problems and crises as they emerge. And much of the time despite widespread cynicism these days, authorities deliver.

Distinguishing Between Technical and Adaptive Work

When the problem at hand falls within the know-how of those in authority, individuals in communities and organizations rightly depend on them for decisive direction. Consider hospital personnel in the emergency room. Without an explicit hierarchy of authority to orchestrate the actions of a medical staff needing to provide a swift and coordinated response, chaos would ensue. Someone takes charge, usually a physician, and all eyes turn to her for cues and instructions. Information flows to her from all other members of the staff: the one monitoring blood pressure, the one inserting the intravenous catheter and infusing medication, and the one monitoring the EKG. She provides direction; she provides a focus of attention that orients members of the team to their place and role; she stops any disruptive conflict that arises on the team.

The staff of an emergency room faces 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. Their solutions frequently save lives and require great organizational effort. Such problems are technical because the necessary knowledge about them already has been digested and transformed into a set of legitimized organizational procedures guiding what to do and role authorizations guiding who should do it.

In similar situations we reasonably turn to authority; in many social systems our authority structures and the norms they maintain govern thousands of problem-solving processes. Meeting a host of vital everyday problems, they are the products 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 values, purposes, beliefs, norms, and rules. Now that we have them, many of our problems have become routine; our expert systems already know how to respond. And because we know how to respond, the stress generated by these problems is temporary. If a car breaks down a mechanic, an authority on fixing cars, is called in; if a child breaks his arm an orthopedic surgeon, an authority on fixing arms, sets the bone; if a social security check fails to arrive, a local politician is called to "work the bureaucracy" for her constituent. Similarly, if a company's marketing department is caught off guard when a competitor introduces a price cut, the vice president of marketing, or perhaps the company president, intervenes to correct the situation, perhaps by meeting the competitor's price.

For many problems, however, no adequate response has yet been developed. New adaptations are required: habits, attitudes, and values must change, and organizational roles, norms, and procedures have to be learned anew. And because social learning is required, the problem cannot be treated with the mindset of a technical expert and distilled from the people with the problem. Why not? Because the stakeholders are the problem. The locus of responsibility for problem solving must shift from those in authority to the people who have to do the changing.

In medicine, for example, a hard-charging overstressed executive may develop heart disease, and though he looks to his physician for a technical remedy, he often has to face adjustments in his life: in diet, exercise, work habits, and stress management. 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 him. 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; technical answers mean nothing if they are not implemented. 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 become 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 competence—the ability to help the patient do the work that only he can do.

Examples of adaptive work abound in business and public life: globalization, rapidly changing markets, mergers of disparate corporate cultures, the national debt, failing schools, crime, racial prejudice. These adaptive challenges demand learning and the widespread shouldering of responsibility if they are to be resolved. Mere authoritative response is not enough: no clear expertise, no single sage, no established procedure will suffice. To meet challenges such as these, we need to promote our adaptive capacities rather than expect authority to carry us through. We need to reconceive and revitalize the meaning of organizational citizenship.

These are the times for leadership, but ironically we instead look too longingly to authority for answers. Stresses build up and produce a sense of urgency. Yet 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 can't provide.

What happens, then? Authorities, under pressure to be decisive, often fake the remedy or take action that skirts or avoids the issue. They succumb to widespread pressures to restore equilibrium even if that means bolstering patterns of work avoidance. And though they may succeed in the short run to mollify discontent, they lose credibility, often irretrievably, as the problem festers over time into the next crisis.

Not only do we vent our frustrations at the authorities who were supposed to save the day, but also we perpetuate the vicious cycle by looking even more earnestly for someone new offering more certainty and better promises. We may rid ourselves of our current authorities with the false hope that if only we had the right leader our problems would be solved. But the pattern of inappropriate dependency goes unchanged.

The dependency on authority generated by distress has the special advantage of holding a social system together when other cultural constructs fail. Authority relationships become a critical feature of a holding environment. Mismanaged, however, such dependency discourages more adaptive social constructs and behavior. The biological pattern of dependency itself evolved not to enable a given troop to achieve new adaptations (for example, to venture into new ecological zones or address new kinds of challenges), but to enable the troop to function routinely within the ecological zone to which its particular set of social behaviors had adapted already. That is, the alpha male is not designed to invent new norms or role structures, but to direct,

defend, and maintain order within the established routines. If a new kind of predator arrives on the scene, the troop will enact its procedure for routine predators and the alpha will valiantly attempt to fulfill his role, however unsuccessfully. Coalescing into a tight group so that no stray falls prey to a leopard brings devastation when the troop faces a man with an automatic rifle.

It makes sense to equate leadership with formal and informal authority in a world of technical problems in which expertise and well-designed procedures and norms suffice to meet the challenges we face. Authorities can realistically be expected to provide direction, protection, orientation, conflict control, and norm maintenance. Many organizations have thrived for long stretches of time in fairly stable environments due in large part to wise and expert authority.

But when progress requires changes in people's values, attitudes, or habits of behavior, when responsibility, pain, and initiative must be distributed widely, our unrealistic expectations of authority serves as constraints on the exercise of leadership. In the context of adaptive work, leadership often makes demands that frustrate people's expectations for easy answers....

In short, we believe that the prevailing notion that leadership consists of having a vision and aligning people with it is bankrupt because it continues to treat adaptive situations as if they were technical. Like a silverback gorilla in a stable environment, the authority figure is supposed to divine where we're going. Leadership is reduced to a combination of omniscience and salesmanship. Hard to define and even harder to resolve, adaptive situations demand the work and responsibility of managers and workers high and low. They are not amenable to solutions that company "leaders" issue from on high; instead, they require that everyone in the organization address the problems and opportunities they face.

We present five principles of leadership for mobilizing people to do adaptive work:

- Identify the adaptive challenge
- Regulate distress
- Maintain disciplined attention
- Give the work back to people
- Protect leadership below

These are interdependent. Managers cannot subscribe to one while excluding the others. They cannot say, "We will accept all but not give the work back to people," or "Fine, but we can't afford to protect dissidents." Adaptive work is difficult because it asks each manager to tackle business problems, hold people in their work, and be present for everyone as the work goes forward.

In practice, such work tends to be messy, but we suggest that effective leaders apply all five principles simultaneously, mobilizing people to adapt to such complex problems as rapidly changing socioeconomic trends and markets, overnight innovation from competitors, mergers across disparate corporate cultures and industries, new distribution channels, and the globalization of business. Confronting such challenges, people cannot merely look up to an authority for a ready-made solution; no one person, however prescient, has all the answers. It is the people themselves who have to adapt, for they are the problem. They must come to see that the answers to complex problems reside in their collective intelligence and skills.

Note

1. For discussion of the distinction between formal powers and informal influence, see Neustadt, R.E. *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan*. (3rd ed.). New York: Free Press, 1990.

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