

■ The secret behind good leadership

By Emily Stokes

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Ronald Heifetz teaches the most popular class at the most popular graduate school in the US, Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. He possesses the ability to command his students' attention while remaining calm, even distant, as if watching events from afar. It's a combination that tends to provoke extreme reactions. Norman Anderson, a businessman who took his course in leadership more than 20 years ago, still recalls a class in which Heifetz entered the room and "just stood there, without saying anything, for minutes. And people just went crazy. They started yelling the most awful things at him, but he didn't do anything. He's got a weird personality to be able to do that.

"Some people loved him and thought he was the Messiah, others really hated him. The visceral hate was extraordinary. He's like a blank canvas on which people project all their emotions and insecurities, and he just throws them right back at you."

Heifetz, aged 58, neat and compact, embodies a paradox, distrusting the very charisma that he possesses. Charisma, he argues, is dangerous because it encourages followers (whom Heifetz calls "the community") to trust their leaders too much. On the day after Barack Obama's electoral victory, the 120 students in his course, "Exercising Leadership: Mobilizing Group Resources" (or PAL-101) raised their hands and voices in excitement about the new president – but Heifetz was critical. Obama's victory speech had, he said, suggested that Obama was the answer to America's problems – and he should be more careful. "If this man were assassinated, people would imagine that nobody could replace him," Heifetz said. "And he better quickly disabuse people of the illusion that he's the one, so that people all over the nation can be mobilised to tap into their own resources to do whatever work needs to be done."

Kimberly Leary, Heifetz's head teaching assistant last year, says he is "highly attuned to the pain of leadership – the idea that holding other people's pain doesn't leave you unscathed". This is one of the concepts that has made Heifetz a legend in his field. Leadership scholar James MacGregor Burns called his work "ground-breaking", and Simon London, the FT's former management writer, wrote that his 1994 *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, was "easily one of the best leadership books of the 1990s".

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Theories of what makes a good leader can be divided into three main categories. The most traditional model, dominant up to the late 1940s, posits that the personality of the leader is the most important factor in his or her success; the character traits of great men and women are studied for clues to what made them effective. The second model, which emerged in reaction to the fascist leaders of the 1930s, suggests that leadership success should not be measured by the amount of influence a leader has over followers, but instead by the moral outcome of a leader's actions; "good" leadership is "democratic"; "bad", authoritarian. According to the first model, Hitler was a great and charismatic leader; using the second, he was among the worst in history.

A third approach, dating from the 1960s, which came out of social scientists' arguments against "great man" theories of history, focuses on the social context more than the leader. A more

decisive style, for instance, might suit a leader during an economic crisis, while a democratic style might work better during calmer periods. Heifetz's innovation in the 1980s was to suggest that leadership was not the same as authority or management; instead, it was the activity of mobilising "the community" to tackle tough problems, which he calls "adaptive challenges". This is still controversial; members of the military in the class are often shocked to discover that, according to their professor, they have not been exercising leadership, but only authority. For Heifetz, Hitler was a bad leader because he came up with "fake solutions" to the problems caused by the Great Depression, scapegoating innocent people (Heifetz's own mother, a German Jew, escaped Nazi Germany in 1938); Roosevelt exercised good leadership because he "had people around him, like his wife, to remind him that he had no idea what he was doing".

The Kennedy School began as the Graduate School of Public Administration in 1936, funded by a Harvard alumnus, congressman and glove manufacturer who had a vision of a new professional governing class. But it wasn't until 1983 that the school got its first practical course devoted to the study of leadership – and developed by Heifetz. He was 29, and colleagues remember him as confident to the point of being brash. Some of his students, however, knew him as a peer: he had just completed a three-year mid-career master's degree at the Kennedy School.

Before Harvard, Heifetz had been a young radical (at 17, he worked on Robert Kennedy's presidential campaign and was at the Ambassador hotel the night Kennedy was assassinated there). He signed on to medical training after his undergraduate studies at Columbia and subsequently trained as a psychiatrist, but always felt torn between two interests: medicine and music. After qualifying as a doctor, he enrolled at the Juilliard music school in New York, paying for his "music habit" with moonlighting medical jobs. First, he worked night shifts at the city's main prison, on Rikers Island, examining new arrivals; later he took up a position at the Life Extension Institute, an exclusive clinic. The first job gave him an interest in public policy; the second exposed him to the high stress levels of executives.

During this time, he was also developing a music workshop with Riley Sinder, a former colleague, designed to teach creativity and improvisation. As Heifetz's studies at the Kennedy School were coming to an end, he gave a workshop to a group of professors as part of his pitch to set up a leadership course at Harvard. After two days of singing and improvisation exercises, they agreed to take him on for a year's trial teaching. He developed the course in five weeks, and would often walk into class without any clear idea of what he was going to teach – or how. Composing his own music had, he says, trained him to stomach that sort of confusion.

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In the quarter-century since Heifetz developed his course, leadership has become more than a word; it is now an industry. Books with "leadership" in the title fly off the shelves. The Kennedy School itself offers more than 35 courses in the subject. Some, like David Gergen's "Becoming a Leader", take a more traditional, character-based approach (Gergen uses the biographies of his heroes to help students discover their own "inner fire"). Others, Heifetz suspects, weren't designed to be leadership classes at all, but have hijacked the word to lure students.

There is no consensus – within or outside of the Kennedy School – as to whether leadership is a characteristic or an activity, let alone whether it can be taught. As Heifetz sees it, the confusing proliferation of leadership models on offer these days was not inevitable: it is a product of his own personal leadership failure. In the late 1990s, the number of leadership courses was growing to keep up with popular demand. Heifetz had himself begun working on a deal to create a Center

for Public Leadership at the Kennedy School in collaboration with Les Wexner, chairman and chief executive of retail conglomerate Limited Brands, and the Wexner Foundation. Heifetz was hoping that the centre would develop a coherent leadership syllabus – based on his own framework – which might set the tone for leadership studies worldwide. There was general support for the idea, but Joseph Nye, dean of the Kennedy School at the time, had what he calls more “catholic tastes” and was wary of taking too narrow an approach to such a new field.

In 1999, Nye decided to appoint Gergen, a young politico who had served as an adviser to presidents Nixon, Ford, Reagan and Clinton, to co-direct the centre with Heifetz. The body designed to establish best practice in the teaching of leadership now had two leaders. Heifetz recalls this time like a consultant returning to a difficult case study; his detachment reminds me of his lesson on impersonalising painful situations (what he calls “getting on the balcony”). His enthusiasm worked against him, creating a “dysfunctional dynamic” between himself, Gergen and Nye. He forgot that key part of leading change: pacing. “Rather than using David’s political sensitivity in guiding me how to sequence my actions, I kept pushing, and within a year it became clear to Joe and David that I was pushing too hard,” he says.

After a year co-running the centre, Heifetz stepped down. Gergen recalls: “It was obvious, having two directors of one centre, that one person ought to lead it.”

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Ronald Heifetz: introducing some ‘disequilibrium’ into the lives of his Harvard students

The phrase most often used by Kennedy School students to describe PAL-101 is “life-changing”. Such terms of praise have resulted in accusations from some staff members that it has a cult following – although Heifetz insists that such a phrase should be reserved for “a particular kind of mindless loyalty to a charismatic authority”. In the first weeks of Heifetz’s class each semester, 50 or more students are forced to stand at the back of the hall or perch on window sills. I took the course last year as a visiting scholar to the Kennedy School, and only secured a place due to the “high levels of disequilibrium” that make many students drop out early. Ten minutes into one class early in the semester, Heifetz left the room, as if going on an errand. Without

anyone to chair the discussion, students struggled to make themselves heard – or to make “interventions” (Heifetz’s expression for contributions that help the group learn something). One student stood on his chair shouting at the top of his voice (“the disequilibrium is rising, people!”); another started writing on the blackboard; a third cautiously suggested a vote; most sat with their heads in their hands. This is Heifetz’s way of training his students to “keep the work at the centre” (a term for not losing sight of the ultimate goal) even in the face of “work avoidance” caused by confusion.

Heifetz’s style targets students’ emotions as much as their intellects. They are selected at random to lead unruly class discussions, to recount their personal leadership failures, even to make up songs inspired by their favourite poems. Former student Anderson, who took the course in 1985, still remembers his fear of speaking in class: “I can get up in front of 500 or so people now, no problem, but remembering the class still sends a shiver down my spine.” Anderson is now president and chief executive of a consulting firm focused on global infrastructure. Other past students include the prime minister of Mongolia, a former president of Ecuador, the secretary-general of the UN and the governor of Michigan. Several students, Heifetz says, worked in senior positions on Obama’s campaign.

The success stories seem to back a key Heifetz argument – that, given the right framework, anyone can lead. Gergen is not so sure; the quality or trait that makes someone a great leader, he says, is an “X factor” with more mysterious origins. According to Rakesh Khurana, professor of leadership development at the Harvard Business School, there is a gap between research on leadership (which is lacking) and models (which are not). He says leadership studies are typical of any emerging field in having an excess of “brands” – but this, he thinks, is a necessary stage in the journey to coherence. The field is also typical in having been led thus far by “charismatic entrepreneurs” (“like Ronald Heifetz”, says his colleague Nitin Nohria. “And David Gergen”, Khumara adds).

Whether Heifetz could have changed the course of leadership teaching by better managing his time at the helm of the Center for Public Leadership is unclear. It’s a question that embodies the conflicts surrounding leadership theory itself. Can one person’s actions really dictate the character of an emerging field? Is leadership more about teaching than doing? Should a leader’s role be to persuade or to listen, to push his own ideas or promote all perspectives? Can an individual lead a group wary of change?

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In the weeks leading up to Obama’s inauguration, it became clear that the Kennedy School was once again in the middle of a long-established Boston-to-Washington “brain drain”. Several members of the faculty had left Harvard to work for Obama’s administration, in positions ranging from director of the National Economic Council to director of the Office of Science and Technology. In January, Heifetz was watching the course of events with pride – as much for his colleagues as for his ideas, which were already percolating to the surface in Washington. Obama’s inauguration address, with its talk of a “collective failure to make hard choices” and a “new era of responsibility”, seemed to chime with the Heifetzian notion of “giving the work back to the people”.

More recently, Heifetz spoke to me about Obama’s need to balance “disequilibrium”. Rather than providing the public with targets for their outrage through the “public executions” of insurance companies or banks, he said, the president must remind us all of the need for “adaptive change”

– “not to let all the steam out of the pressure cooker”. “Adaptive work” must be an experimental process: “The president will need many bites of the apple, even big bites, before we’ve discovered how to achieve sustainable change in the next years.” Pacing, as ever, is everything – “so that he doesn’t give the American people indigestion”.

Heifetz’s central message is the same as ever: Obama must restore confidence through his presence while also preparing people for ongoing uncertainty. And in the real world, no one person has all the answers.

Emily Stokes is a journalist currently studying at Harvard as a Kennedy Scholar

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The key leadership ideas of Ronald Heifetz

Leadership

The activity of mobilising the community to tackle tough problems.

Technical problems

Challenges for which we already know the solutions. They generate only temporary stresses and can be solved with knowledge – eg, a faulty car engine.

Adaptive challenges

Problems in which the problem or the solution is not clear-cut. An example would be a patient suffering from heart disease; the patient can be restored to operating capacity but only if he takes responsibility for his health by making appropriate life adjustments. Adaptive work requires learning, and a change in values, beliefs or behaviour.

Equilibrium and disequilibrium

Leaders must balance stability and periods of stress or conflict. Adaptive change tends to require sustained periods of disequilibrium – but it must be carefully paced.

The pressure-cooker metaphor

Used to describe the importance of balancing equilibrium with disequilibrium. If the pressure gets too high, the pressure cooker can blow up. On the other hand, with no heat, nothing cooks.

Work avoidance mechanisms

People often fail to adapt because they want to resist the pain, anxiety or conflict that comes with engagement with the problem. Examples are holding on to past assumptions, blaming authority, scapegoating, denying the problem, jumping to conclusions or finding a distracting issue.

Charismatic authority

In times of distress, the community tends to trust those who appear active, who have a vision, and who promise stability. This can prevent people from engaging with problems when they must. Charismatic authority can generate a mindless following, or can devolve into bureaucratic institutions.

Holding environment

A holding environment is any relationship in which one party has the power to hold the attention of another in order to help them face up to their problems. Franklin Roosevelt and the programmes of the New Deal provided a holding environment for the nation during the Great Depression. The term originated in psychoanalysis to describe the relationship between the therapist and the patient.

