
The Heart of Danger

Maggie Brooke grew up on a small Native American reservation in which nearly everyone older than twelve drank alcohol. After sobering up in her twenties, she spent more than a decade leading her people toward health. Now a grandmother in her forties and a tribal elder, Maggie counsels a steady stream of visitors in her home throughout the day. One evening, she told her visitor about Lois, the woman who first inspired her to try to do something about the alcohol dependency among her people.

“Twenty years ago I used to baby-sit for Lois, who lived in a neighboring band within our tribe. Once a week I’d go the few miles to her community and take care of Lois’s little ones. But after about two months, I started to wonder, ‘What could Lois possibly be doing every Tuesday night? There’s not much to do around here in these villages.’ So one evening after Lois left to go to the meeting lodge, I packed up the children and went over to the lodge to find out what she was doing. We looked through a window into the lodge and saw a big circle of chairs, all neatly in place, with Lois sitting in a chair all by herself. The chairs in the circle were empty.

“I was really curious, you know, so when Lois came home that evening, I asked her, ‘Lois, what are you doing every Tuesday night?’

And she said, 'I thought I told you weeks ago, I've been holding AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) meetings.' So I asked her back, 'What do you mean you're holding meetings? I went over there tonight with the children and looked through the window. We watched you sitting there in that circle of chairs, all alone.'

"Lois got quiet—'I wasn't alone,' she said. 'I was there with the spirits and the ancestors; and one day, our people will come.'"

Lois never gave up. "Every week Lois set up those chairs neatly in a circle, and for two hours, she just sat there," Maggie recalled. "No one came to those meetings for a long time, and even after three years, there were only a few people in the room. But ten years later, the room was filled with people. The community began turning around. People began ridding themselves of alcohol. I felt so inspired by Lois that I couldn't sit still watching us poison ourselves."

Lois and then Maggie worked on becoming sober themselves, and then challenged their friends, families, and neighbors to change and renew their lives, too. Leading these communities required extraordinary self-examination, perseverance, and courage. Their native history was full of people, some of them with goodwill, who had forced tribes to give up familiar and reliable ways, and now these communities were being asked to change again, with no reason to think that things would get much better. Lois and Maggie were asking people to face the trade-offs between the numbing solace of alcohol and the hard work of renewing their daily lives. There would be no progress until they had put alcohol dependency behind them. But people found it extremely difficult to give up their way of coping, particularly for some intangible idea about the future. They had fought back before when others had made them change their ways, and they fought Lois and Maggie.

The two women were mocked and marginalized. They spent years feeling out of place in their own communities, unwelcome at parties and gatherings where alcohol flowed, so ostracized that even holidays became lonely, solitary events. Indeed, for long stretches of time they spent weekends off the reservation to find people they

could talk to. They had put themselves at risk, as well as key relationships with neighbors, friends, and family. Eventually, they succeeded and survived. But for a long time, they could not know. They could have lost everything.¹

Leadership Is Dangerous

In the early 1990s, Yitzhak Rabin, then prime minister of Israel, had been moving the country toward an accommodation with the Palestinians. Slowly but surely Rabin was bringing a majority of Israelis along with him. But he also had deeply disturbed the right wing in Israel, particularly the religious right, by his success in getting the community to wrestle with the difficult and painful trade-offs between long-term peace and territory. The right wing refused to face the reality that they would have to give up land they considered sacred for peace. They tried to debate the issue, but they were losing the argument. So they began to make Rabin himself the issue, rather than his policies. The result was Rabin's assassination, a tragedy, as well as a terrible setback for his initiatives. His successor, Benjamin Netanyahu, retreated, unwilling to push the Israeli people to face the costs of peace. Indeed, the period before Rabin's death marked a high point in the willingness of the Israeli people to decide, among deeply held values, which were most precious and which could be left behind.

Assassinations are extreme examples of what people will do to silence the voices of frustrating realities. Asking an entire community to change its ways, as Lois and Maggie succeeded in doing and Yitzhak Rabin sacrificed himself in attempting, is dangerous. If leadership were about giving people good news, the job would be easy. If Lois had been gathering people every week to distribute money or to sing their praises, the chairs would not have stayed empty for so long. If Rabin had promised peace with no loss of land, he might have survived. People do not resist change, *per se*. People resist loss.

You appear dangerous to people when you question their values, beliefs, or habits of a lifetime. You place yourself on the line when you tell people what they need to hear rather than what they want to hear. Although you may see with clarity and passion a promising future of progress and gain, people will see with equal passion the losses you are asking them to sustain.

Think about the times you have had something important to say and have pulled back, when you have tried and failed, or succeeded but were bruised along the way. Or when you have watched the trials and successes of other people. The hope of leadership lies in the capacity to deliver disturbing news and raise difficult questions in a way that people can absorb, prodding them to take up the message rather than ignore it or kill the messenger.

As a doctor, Ron faced this challenge every day. Every patient looks to the doctor, hoping for a painless remedy; and every day doctors have to tell people that their health depends on enduring the pains of change—in giving up their favorite foods, taking time out of each overextended day for exercise, taking medications that have side effects, or breaking an addiction to cigarettes, alcohol, or work. Ron saw a few doctors who were artists of the profession as well as technical experts. They had learned how to engage patients and their families in reshaping their values, attitudes, and long-standing habits. But this was demanding and risky. Discussions can backfire if they seem unfeeling or abrupt, and angry patients can find a variety of ways to damage a doctor's reputation. Ron saw many more doctors give little more than lip service to this part of their job, all the while complaining about *patient noncompliance*—a term doctors use to describe people's resistance to taking medicine and advice. In frustration, they would say to themselves, "Why do people avoid facing reality and resist following my instructions?" But then they would take the easy road, playing it safe by pandering to the desire for a technical fix, avoiding the difficult conversations rather than disturbing people in an attempt to change the ways they lived.

Lois, Maggie, and Rabin had to engage people in facing a hard reality. Just as patients hope to receive a doctor's fast and painless

cure, some Native Americans might place all their hopes on a new casino or look for a technical explanation for their pains (a genetic predisposition to alcoholism). And most every Israeli would prefer to have peace without giving up any of their ancient homeland. In each case—the patient, the Native American community, the Israeli people—people must face the challenge of adapting to a tough reality, and the adaptation requires giving up an important value or a current way of life. Leadership becomes dangerous, then, when it must confront people with loss. Rabin, Lois, Maggie, and the best doctors mobilize change by challenging people to answer a core but painful question: Of all that we value, what's really most precious and what's expendable?

The Perils of Adaptive Change

Leadership would be a safe undertaking if your organizations and communities only faced problems for which they already knew the solutions. Every day, people have problems for which they do, in fact, have the necessary know-how and procedures. We call these technical problems. But there is a whole host of problems that are not amenable to authoritative expertise or standard operating procedures. They cannot be solved by someone who provides answers from on high. We call these adaptive challenges because they require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community. Without learning new ways—changing attitudes, values, and behaviors—people cannot make the adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the new environment. The sustainability of change depends on having the people with the problem internalize the change itself.

People cannot see at the beginning of the adaptive process that the new situation will be any better than the current condition. What they do see clearly is the potential for loss. People frequently avoid painful adjustments in their lives if they can postpone them, place the burden on somebody else, or call someone to the rescue.

When fears and passions run high, people can become desperate as they look to authorities for the answers. This dynamic renders adaptive contexts inherently dangerous.

When people look to authorities for easy answers to adaptive challenges, they end up with dysfunction. They expect the person in charge to know what to do, and under the weight of that responsibility, those in authority frequently end up faking it or disappointing people, or they get spit out of the system in the belief that a new “leader” will solve the problem. In fact, there’s a proportionate relationship between risk and adaptive change: The deeper the change and the greater the amount of new learning required, the more resistance there will be and, thus, the greater the danger to those who lead. For this reason, people often try to avoid the dangers, either consciously or subconsciously, by treating an adaptive challenge as if it were a technical one. This is why we see so much more routine management than leadership in our society.

The table, “Distinguishing Technical from Adaptive Challenges,” captures the difference between the technical work of routine management and the adaptive work of leadership.

Indeed, the single most common source of leadership failure we’ve been able to identify—in politics, community life, business, or the nonprofit sector—is that people, especially those in positions of authority, treat adaptive challenges like technical problems.

In times of distress, when everyone looks to authorities to provide direction, protection, and order, this is an easy diagnostic mistake to make. In the face of adaptive pressures, people don’t want questions; they want answers. They don’t want to be told that they

Distinguishing Technical from Adaptive Challenges

	What’s the Work?	Who Does the Work?
Technical	Apply current know-how	Authorities
Adaptive	Learn new ways	The people with the problem

will have to sustain losses; rather, they want to know how you’re going to protect them from the pains of change. And of course you want to fulfill their needs and expectations, not bear the brunt of their frustration and anger at the bad news you’re giving.

In mobilizing adaptive work, you have to engage people in adjusting their unrealistic expectations, rather than try to satisfy them as if the situation were amenable primarily to a technical remedy. You have to counteract their exaggerated dependency and promote their resourcefulness. This takes an extraordinary level of presence, time, and artful communication, but it may also take more time and trust than you have.

This was the box Ecuador’s president Jamil Mahuad found himself in early in January 2000, when he faced the prospect of mass demonstrations, with thousands of indigenous Ecuadorians mobilizing to throw him out of office. His popularity had fallen from 70 percent approval to 15 percent in less than a year. With the country in the midst of a catastrophic and rapid economic meltdown, on the eve of the demonstrations Mahuad said he felt trapped. “I’ve lost my connection with the people.”

One year before, he had been a hero, a peacemaker. In his first months in office, he ended a war with Peru that had lasted more than two hundred years, signing a peace treaty with great excitement in the air. But his heroic accomplishments were to be washed away within less than four months by the effects of numerous natural and economic disasters: El Niño storms, which devastated 16 percent of Ecuador’s gross domestic product, the financial crisis that swept through East Asia and then Latin America, high inflation, crushing foreign debt, bankrupt banks, the lowest oil prices since Ecuador had started to export oil, and a political culture that had brought down four presidents in eight years. On January 21, 2000, a coalition of military officers and indigenous demonstrators forced Mahuad out of office, another casualty of the country’s ongoing crisis.

Mahuad described the contrast between being mayor of Quito and president of the entire country. As mayor, the people welcomed him openly as he walked daily around town. During his walks, he

could often get people to cooperate to solve their own problems, or he could apply a little pressure and resources to help out. As mayor, he had the advantage that people looked for local solutions to local problems, and worked with him. He was in touch with them and they with him.

However, when he became president and had responsibility for the national economic crisis, the people wanted him to find remedies for which other regions and localities would pay the costs. The people did not want him to tell them they had to change. He made several trips abroad to plead for help from the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and U.S. Treasury. He consulted many worthy economic experts at home, in Latin America generally, in the United States, and in Europe. He came to see that any practical solution would require each region and sector of his society to endure considerable pain, at least in the short run.

Mahuad said afterward, "I felt like a doctor in an emergency ward on a Saturday night. And the patient came in with a badly damaged and gangrenous leg. And, from my medical experience, I had to amputate the patient's leg to save the patient's life. The family said, 'You don't have to amputate.' I insisted on amputation to save the patient's life, but I lost the confidence of the family. The family held me responsible for the patient's problem."

As president, he grew increasingly distant from his various publics as he faced rising hostility and focused most of his attention on finding the right economic policy to reverse the downturn. Yet his trips to Washington yielded no assistance. Countless conversations with policy experts prompted a variety of prescriptions, but no clear way out of the quagmire. Meanwhile, poor people in the villages found the price of food rising beyond their reach. Many flocked to the cities, selling their wares on the streets. As inflation soared, the unions became furious at the lost value of paychecks. The business sector lost faith, sending their money north to the U.S. and hastening the insolvency of the banks.

Mahuad made bold moves in response to the crisis. Ecuador would cut government salaries, reduce conscription into the army,

cancel orders for the purchase of military equipment, default on its loans, freeze bank balances to stop the run on the banks and the draining of foreign currency reserves, and finally, convert its currency to the dollar.

Yet the adaptive challenge was enormous. Even under the rosier scenarios, there would be further job loss, more rising prices, and increased uncertainty before people would feel the benefits of an economic turnaround. The most brilliant policy solution, coupled with a rise in the price of oil, would not have stopped the ongoing disruption caused by opening the economy to a more competitive world.

Although Mahuad worked tirelessly to halt the falling economy, ironically, the public felt that he had disengaged. They were right in one sense: He had disengaged from them. To use his metaphor, he had performed the amputation because it was the best of the available options, but he did not prepare the family for what they would have to endure. Many surgeons could have done the amputation, but only Mahuad, as president, could have helped the family face their situation. Spending most of his time working through the issues and options with technical experts and trying every means available to persuade foreign creditors for assistance, Mahuad paid less attention to his political colleagues and to the people on the streets and in the villages. In retrospect, he might have let his technical experts in the ministries do all of the technical work so that he could focus heavily on the political and adaptive work. Instead, looking back at his weekly calendar, Mahuad realized he had spent more than 65 percent of his time working in a technical problem-solving mode and less than 35 percent of his time working with the politicians and public groups with direct stakes in the situation. Rather than using every day as an opportunity to be a visible champion to his people—to provide hope and to explain the process and pains of modernization in a globalizing economy—he devoted most of his time to searching for the right policy solution and then attempting to get the people to be reasonable in accepting the necessary technical fixes. Although he recognized the adaptive

challenges, he hoped to find a short-term remedy that would give him time to deal with them.²

Clearly, the odds were badly stacked against him. But when you focus your energy primarily on the technical aspects of complex challenges, you do opt for short-term rewards. Sometimes by doing so you might strategically buy some time to deal with the adaptive elements. But you might use up precious time and find yourself, like Mahuad, running out of it anyway. In a far less demanding crisis, you may make people happy for a while, but over time you risk your credibility and perhaps your job. Reality may catch up with you as people discover that they are unprepared for the world in which they now live. And though they ought to blame themselves for sticking their heads in the sand and pressuring you to sanction their behavior, it's much more likely they'll blame you.

When you are in a position of authority, there are also strong internal pressures to focus on the technical aspects of problems. Most of us take pride in our ability to answer the tough questions that are thrown our way. We get rewarded for bearing people's uncertainty and want to be seen in a competent, heroic light. We like the feeling of stepping up to the plate and having the crowds cheer us on. Yet raising questions that go to the core of people's habits goes unrewarded, at least for a while. You get booed instead of cheered. In fact, it may be a long time before you hear any applause—if ever. They may throw tomatoes. They may shoot bullets. Leadership takes the capacity to stomach hostility so that you can stay connected to people, lest you disengage from them and exacerbate the danger.

There is nothing trivial about solving technical problems. Medical personnel save lives every day in the emergency room through their authoritative expertise because they have the right procedures, the right norms, and the right knowledge. Through our managerial know-how, we produce an economy full of products and services, many of them crucial to our daily lives. What makes a problem technical is not that it is trivial; but simply that its solution already lies within the organization's repertoire. In contrast, adaptive pressures force the organization to change, lest it decline.

In the twenty-first century, people and organizations face adaptive pressures every day, in their individual lives and at all levels of society; and each leadership opportunity to respond to these challenges also carries with it attendant risks. For example, when your car breaks down, you go to a mechanic. Most of the time, the mechanic can fix it. However, if the car breaks down because of the way members of the family use it, the problem will probably happen again. The mechanic might be able to get the car on the road once more. But by continuing to deal with it as a purely technical problem a mechanic can solve, the family may end up avoiding the underlying issues demanding adaptive work, such as how to persuade the mother to stop drinking and driving, or the grandfather to give up his driver's license, or the teenagers to be more cautious. No doubt, any family member would find it difficult and risky to step forward and lead the prickly conversations with the mother, grandfather, or even the teenage driver.

The terrorism of September 11, 2001, brought home to the United States an adaptive challenge that has been festering for a very long time. With the unthinkable destruction of the World Trade Center, Americans felt a new vulnerability. In response, the initial tendency of the U.S. government was to reduce terrorism to a technical problem of security systems, military and police operations, and criminal justice. But terrorism represents an adaptive challenge to our civil liberties, our mindset of invulnerability, and our capacity to narrow the divide between Christian West and Muslim East that began with the Crusades one thousand years ago. Should we trust government officials with information that we consider private, in the interest of our collective security? Can we accept the undeniable reality that we live in an interdependent world in which safety must primarily be found in the health of our relationships with very different cultures? Can we refashion the religious arrogance that leads people to equate their faith in God with the singular belief that they know God's truth better than anyone else, and that their mission then is to capture the market for people's souls? Nearly everyone in the United States has the opportunity to

exercise leadership in this adaptive context, yet there will be personal dangers in raising the more difficult questions, some of which, like religious triumphalism, go to the root of religious loyalty and dogma.

Going Beyond Your Authority

People rarely elect or hire anyone to disturb their jobs or their lives. People expect politicians and managers to use their authority to provide them with the right answers, not to confront them with disturbing questions and difficult choices. That's why the initial challenge, and risk, of exercising leadership is to go beyond your authority—to put your credibility and position on the line in order to get people to tackle the problems at hand. Without the willingness to challenge people's expectations of you, there is no way you can escape being dominated by the social system and its inherent limits.

Generally, people will not authorize someone to make them face what they do not want to face. Instead, people hire someone to provide protection and ensure stability, someone with solutions that require a minimum of disruption. But adaptive work creates risk, conflict, and instability because addressing the issues underlying adaptive problems may involve upending deep and entrenched norms. Thus, leadership requires disturbing people—but at a rate they can absorb.

Typically, a company faces adaptive pressures when new market conditions threaten the company's business. For example, in the last decade of the twentieth century, innovators in IBM attempted to get the company to wake up to the real threats from small computers running what soon came to be called the "Internet." And the innovators in IBM repeatedly found themselves in Lois's position when she tried to get her community to face up to alcoholism. Their efforts illustrate the perseverance required of leadership until a successful adaptation can take hold.

As an established corporate giant, IBM in 1994 was a master of technical problem solving. The corporation embodied technical proficiency and served as the official technology sponsor of the 1994 Winter Olympics. IBM kept track of the many winter sports competitors, competition areas, timings, and standings that were scattered over a wide expanse in Norway.³

IBM understandably wanted to protect its position in the technical areas in which IBM managers excelled. When the sports standings were reported on television, viewers saw the IBM logo on their screens. This was smart problem solving within the business areas that IBM managers understood well: sports, television, and marketing. Corporate buyers of IBM mainframe systems who watched the Olympics on television probably appreciated the appearance of the IBM logo.

But the markets were changing and business was migrating to the Internet. The companies that did not adapt fast enough would fail. Some dark clouds were hovering over IBM's technological successes in the Olympics. The corporation had suffered \$15 billion in losses over the past three years, reflecting problems in many of their product lines. The financial setbacks made people at IBM vulnerable and even more risk averse than usual. Moreover, they were culturally and emotionally unprepared to make the big leap to the Internet world.⁴ The underlying value structure of the organization as a whole was characterized by a smug parochialism coupled with a resistance to early entry into new markets. Nothing less than the IBM culture and underlying corporate values had to change in order to succeed in the Internet environment.

Watching the Olympics at home near his office at Cornell University's Theory Center, a young IBM Corporation engineer named David Grossman discovered that an enterprising Web site had intercepted the IBM feed to the television networks, diverted the information to the Internet, and was displaying IBM's tabulations under the Sun Microsystems, Inc., logo. Grossman was shocked. "And IBM didn't have a clue . . ." he recalled.

As he soon discovered, the problem, like many tough problems, contained both technical and adaptive elements. After his effort to get managers to understand the technical parts of the problem, IBM attorneys sent Sun Microsystems a letter demanding that Sun stop displaying the IBM data on the Sun site. That effort to protect IBM's work product was resolved with IBM's existing legal and technical expertise.

At the same time, as Grossman pushed IBM managers to deal with the business that the Internet would continue to grab from IBM, he uncovered values and lifetime habits that were unrealistic and dysfunctional in the Internet age. These beliefs about how the business world worked kept IBM from dealing with the reality of the new market challenge. The Internet provided an entirely new channel for marketing products and a vehicle for a raft of potential new products and services, such as consulting services to existing clients on Internet applications and new Internet-friendly software. The speed of change was faster than any of the senior managers had ever witnessed in their long careers. It was as if IBM were depending on continued strong sales of first-rate buggy whips while the automobile was right around the corner. The company was so behind the curve that Grossman could not even find a way to use IBM's primitive e-mail system to send the IBM marketing staff in Norway the screen shots from Sun's Web site as he watched the piracy during the Winter Games.

Luckily, some IBM managers grasped enough of the reality of the problem to come to Grossman's aid when he made his arguments. In particular, John Patrick, who had managed the marketing of the IBM ThinkPad laptop, proceeded to secure for Grossman and other innovators the attention they would need to shift the outmoded values and habits in the IBM corporate culture.

Grossman and Patrick led a struggle inside the company that lasted for five years. Just prior to the new millennium, IBM managers emerged as a team with revamped values, more flexible beliefs, and new behavior patterns designed to make IBM a proactive force in an Internet world.

The change was profound and deep. IBM had a reputation for being a bureaucratic dinosaur. But by 1999, Lou Gerstner, CEO of IBM, could trumpet hard figures on the five-year IBM restructuring to Wall Street investors. Gerstner could show that IBM was a highly profitable Internet company, with internal operations, business processes, and customer responses that compared favorably with even the most innovative of Internet corporations. Approximately one-quarter of its \$82 billion in revenues was now Net related.⁵ The demonstration of the culture change in IBM was so convincing that IBM's stock shot up twenty points.⁶

Rather than frame the Internet as a technical challenge for IBM's experts, Grossman and Patrick presented it as a cultural and values problem that IBM had neglected when it broke into smaller, more manageable departments. CEO Gerstner described the work this way: "We discovered what every large company has. When you bring your company to the Web, you expose all the inefficiency that comes from decentralized organizations."⁷

As middle managers, Grossman and Patrick had the authority to direct only those few who reported to them. And even then, they could not order their employees to act against company policy. They each also reported to a boss. Both Grossman and Patrick went beyond their authority when progress required it. Patrick said, "If you don't occasionally exceed your formal authority, you are not pushing the envelope."⁸

As a lowly engineer, Grossman went around the chain of command, taking the risk of being obnoxious and putting himself on the line in danger of ridicule. Once, he barged into the Armonk, NY, IBM corporate headquarters, alone but for a UNIX computer under his arm, to introduce the senior executive in marketing, Abby Kohnstamm, to the Internet. In the same vein, Patrick saw at an early Internet trade show how much difference it made to have the biggest space in the display. So he committed IBM for the biggest display space in the next year's show, even though it was not his job to make that decision alone. However, if he had waited for the IBM bureaucracy to set aside the money and give him the authorization,

the display space auction would have closed and the opportunity would have been missed.

To act outside the narrow confines of your job description when progress requires it lies close to the heart of leadership, and to its danger. Your initiative in breaking the boundaries of your authorization might pay off for your organization or community. In retrospect, it might even be recognized as crucial for success. Along the way, however, you will face resistance and possibly the pain of disciplinary action or other rebukes from senior authority for breaking the rules. You will be characterized as being out of place, out of turn, or too big for your britches.

The toughest problems that groups and communities face are hard precisely because the group or community will not authorize anyone to push them to address those problems. To the contrary, the rules, organizational culture and norms, standard operating procedures, and economic incentives regularly discourage people from facing the hardest questions and making the most difficult choices.

In the 1990s, when New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani and his police chief, William Bratton, forcefully went after the crime problem in New York City, they were doing exactly what many in the community wanted them to do, and what they were implicitly authorized to do. They were expected to relentlessly crack down on crime without forcing the community to accept any trade-offs the police might have to make in terms of police brutality and people's civil liberties. Like many communities, most people in New York City wanted the crime problem to be solved without having to compromise other values. Going with the grain of public expectations—their informal authorization—Giuliani and Bratton brought down the crime rate. Giuliani was rewarded when a satisfied public reelected him in 1997 by a landslide.

However, just before his reelection, on the night of April 9, 1997, some police officers brutalized Abner Louima with a toilet plunger. The incident came to light very quickly, and the ensuing controversy began to focus the broader community on some of the difficult trade-offs they had heretofore been reluctant to make. The

issue of racial profiling by police had already been percolating as a signal that an erosion of civil liberties was the price to pay for the reduction in crime. Then, a year and a half later, a young, unarmed West African immigrant, Amadou Diallo, was shot forty-one times by four white police officers in a search for a rape suspect that went terribly wrong. Although the four officers in the Diallo incident were acquitted, the incident raised further questions about what had been the social and human costs of the otherwise successful crackdown on crime.

Leadership is not the same as authority. It would have been an exercise of leadership, and not just authority, had Giuliani gone public with the question: "How zealous should the police be, at the expense of individual liberty and increased brutality?" Had the public, and Bratton's police department, been forced to deal with that trade-off, Giuliani would surely have been attacked by the press, the public, and the police department. However, this also might have provoked people to take responsibility for their choices as citizens. Moreover, it might have led to creative thinking and new options—solutions that other police departments across America were finding during those very same years, producing dramatic reductions in crime without such high costs.⁹ Giuliani and Bratton were not authorized to make their constituencies own the issue and resolve those trade-offs.

Of course, exceeding your authority is not, in and of itself, leadership. You may be courageous and you may have vision, but these qualities may have nothing to do with getting people to grapple with hard realities. For example, Colonel Oliver North went beyond his authority in the Iran-Contra affair. Transferring money from Iran arms sales to buy Contra weapons may or may not have had approval from the White House, but it was certainly beyond the authority he had from the Congress. Yet, rather than get U.S. policymakers to tackle the problems posed by Iran and Nicaragua, he tried to engineer secret fixes behind their backs. He failed to lead because he took Congress and the White House off the hook of having to grapple with the issues and make unpopular choices.

Rosa Parks, an elderly black woman, also went beyond her authority when she refused to move to the back of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955. What distinguishes her from North, however, and made her behavior an act of leadership, was that she and other civil rights leaders used the incident to *focus* public attention and responsibility on the issue of civil rights, not to avoid it. Her action provoked an outcry of protest that catalyzed the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Congress, the White House, and the American people were provoked to engage the issues, confront deep-seated loyalties, and make new choices.

At the Heart of Danger Is Loss

Frequently, people who seek to exercise leadership are amazed that their organizations and communities resist. Why should people oppose you when you are helping them change habits, attitudes, and values that only hold them back, when you are doing something good for them?

Ron recalls serving as a medical intern at the King's County Hospital emergency room in Brooklyn, New York, and working with women who had been battered by their boyfriends or husbands. He would ask in various ways, "Why not leave the guy? Surely life can be better for you." And in a variety of ways they would respond, "Well, my boyfriend gets this way sometimes when he's drinking, but when he's sober he loves me so much. I've never known anyone love me more sweetly than he does, except when he's going crazy. What would I do alone?"

To persuade people to give up the love they know for a love they've never experienced means convincing them to take a leap of faith in themselves and in life. They must experience the loss of a relationship that, despite its problems, provides satisfaction and familiarity, and they will suffer the discomfort of sustained uncertainty about what will replace it. In breaking with the past, there will be historical losses to contend with, too, particularly the feelings of

disloyalty to the sources of the values that kept the relationship together. For example, acknowledging the damage from abusive parents earlier in life also means experiencing disloyalty to them. It's hard to sift through and salvage what's valuable from those primary relationships and leave the chaff behind. Even doing that successfully will be experienced somewhat as a disloyalty to those relationships. Moreover, change challenges a person's sense of competence. A battered woman experiences some competence in coping with her familiar setting; starting anew means going through a sustained period in which she experiences a loss of that competence as she retools her life.

Habits, values, and attitudes, even dysfunctional ones, are part of one's identity. To change the way people see and do things is to challenge how they define themselves.

Marty experienced this when he got divorced. He had two young children. He had always told himself that he was deeply committed to their welfare as well as to his own self-actualization. But then he had to choose between the two; he could no longer say truthfully that he was equally committed to both values. His self-identity changed.

People's definitions of themselves often involve roles and priorities that others might perceive as self-destructive or as barriers to progress. For some young people, to be a woman is to be a teenage mother. To be a cool man is to take drugs or father a child. For some, to honor one's family is to be a terrorist. For some rich people, to be somebody is to belong to an exclusive club. For some politicians, satisfaction comes from making constituents happy, even if what they need is to be shaken out of their complacency. To give up those conceptions of self may trigger feelings of considerable loss.

Habits are hard to give up because they give stability. They are predictable. In going through the pains of adaptive change, there is no guarantee that the result will be an improvement. Smokers understand this. They know that the odds of getting cancer are uncertain, while they know for sure that an enormous source of relaxation and satisfaction will be lost when the cigarettes are gone.

But perhaps the deepest influence is that habits, values, and attitudes come from somewhere, and to abandon them means to be disloyal to their origin. Indeed, our deeply held loyalties serve as a keystone in the structure of our identities. Loyalty is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it represents loving attachments—to family, team, community, organization, religion—and staying true to these attachments is a great virtue. On the other hand, our loyalties and attachments also represent our bondage and limitations. Intuitively, people play it safe rather than put at risk the love, esteem, and approval of people or institutions they care about. The experience of disloyalty to our deeper attachments is often so painfully unacceptable that we avoid wrestling with them altogether, or do so by acting out. Witness the turmoil of teenagers trying to grow up and decide what to take from home and what to leave behind.

Refashioning loyalties is some of the toughest work in life. Perhaps one of the most difficult challenges facing the U.S. civil rights movement in the 1960s was that progress required lots of decent people to abandon attitudes, habits, and values that had been handed down to them by their loving parents and grandparents. To abandon those values felt like abandoning their family.

People hold on to ideas as a way of holding on to the person who taught them the ideas. An acquaintance of ours, an African-American woman, once talked to us about her persistent difficulty respecting her friends who saw themselves in a subordinate role because they lived in a society where the mainstream cultural values were white and male. She said that her late father had always told her that she was not subordinate to anyone—that she should never, ever think of herself that way. If she did so now, she added, she would desecrate the memory of her beloved parent.

Another friend told us that her mother had always counseled that “you can get more done with sugar than vinegar.” She now believes that for most of her professional life she held on to that attitude—to her detriment, and despite much contrary evidence—out of loyalty to her mom.

Some of our most deeply held values and ideas come from people we love—a relative, a favored teacher, or a mentor. To discard some part of their teaching may feel like we are diminishing the relationship. But if the first of our two friends were to sift through her father’s wisdom, she might discover that he saw and encouraged only two options: sacrifice your self-respect and defer, or never answer to anybody. With further reflection, and if she’s lucky to have some help, she might see a third option: One can maintain one’s pride and self-worth when taking subordinate roles in authority relationships; also, there may be a host of ways to challenge authorities respectfully and pursue objectives effectively from below.

Our former student Sylvia now understands this disloyalty issue very well. She was part of the group of people who put the first public service announcements on television promoting the use of condoms to protect against AIDS and venereal disease. The ads produced a firestorm of protest from people who believed that they promoted free and irresponsible sex, particularly among young people. Sylvia received death threats. But the protesters’ anger also triggered something in her. At the time, she, too, had teenagers. The values of the protesters were the values that had been handed down to her and that she, in turn, espoused to her own children. She was brought up to believe in responsible sex, in the sanctity of sexual relationships, in people honoring each other by their fidelity. And she knew that handing out condoms was in a way a short-term technical fix for a much bigger adaptive problem about relationships between men and women, about sexual mores, and about individual responsibility. As Sylvia pushed ahead with the condom campaign, the protesters forced her to experience her own disloyalty to her old values. Upon seeing the television ads, Sylvia’s mother felt embarrassed and her children were confused. Sylvia had to engage in a series of charged and uncomfortable conversations as she clarified her priorities and reconstructed some of the expectations and deep understandings in her relationships with her mother and children. She had made some decisions about which

values were more important to her, but getting to the other side of feeling disloyal to her loved ones was a painful process as she moved toward a more deliberate integration of herself.

The dangers of exercising leadership derive from the nature of the problems for which leadership is necessary. Adaptive change stimulates resistance because it challenges people's habits, beliefs, and values. It asks them to take a loss, experience uncertainty, and even express disloyalty to people and cultures. Because adaptive change forces people to question and perhaps redefine aspects of their identity, it also challenges their sense of competence. Loss, disloyalty, and feeling incompetent: That's a lot to ask. No wonder people resist.

Since the resistance is designed to get you to back away, the various forms may be hard to recognize. You may not see the trap until it is too late. Recognizing these dangers, then, becomes of paramount importance.

2

The Faces of Danger

The dangers of leadership take many forms. Although each organization and culture has its preferred ways to restore equilibrium when someone upsets the balance, we've noticed four basic forms, with countless ingenious variations. When exercising leadership, you risk getting marginalized, diverted, attacked, or seduced. Regardless of the form, however, the point is the same. When people resist adaptive work, their goal is to shut down those who exercise leadership in order to preserve what they have.

Organizations are clever about this. Each of these forms has its subtleties. What makes them effective is that they are not obvious. So, people trying to exercise leadership are often pushed aside by surprise. For example, betrayal often comes from places and people you don't expect. Some individuals may not even realize that they are being used to betray you. We know from personal experience that when you are caught up in the action, carrying a cause you believe in, it can be difficult to see the patterns. Over and over again we have heard stories of people exercising leadership who never saw the danger coming until it was too late to respond.