



Orchestrate Conflict

Leading Adaptive Change by Surfacing and
Managing Conflict

EXCERPTED FROM

*The Practice of Adaptive Leadership:
Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*

BY

Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky

Buy the book:

[Amazon](#)

[Barnes & Noble](#)

[HarvardBusiness.org](#)

Harvard Business Press

Boston, Massachusetts

ISBN-13: 978-1-4221-3303-3
3282BC

Copyright 2009 Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America

This chapter was originally published as chapter 11 of *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*, copyright 2009 Cambridge Leadership Associates.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior permission of the publisher. Requests for permission should be directed to permissions@harvardbusiness.org, or mailed to Permissions, Harvard Business School Publishing, 60 Harvard Way, Boston, Massachusetts 02163.

You can purchase Harvard Business Press books at booksellers worldwide. You can order Harvard Business Press books and book chapters online at www.harvardbusiness.org/press, or by calling 888-500-1016 or, outside the U.S. and Canada, 617-783-7410.

Orchestrate Conflict

ORCHESTRATING CONFLICT is a discipline. It requires seeing the process as a necessary step in the journey toward a better future, tolerating the moments your people are not working well together, and believing that working through some rough patches will help to solidify their collective effort and commitment.

For example, we have been working with a large school system where the high school teachers say they want the majority of the school's graduates to go on to college. Currently, only small percentages manage to do so, but the teachers union has fought almost every initiative proposed that some people thought might help close the gap, such as longer school days and fewer social promotions (letting students move up into the next grade in spite of poor performance). From the teachers' perspective, they are already overworked and underpaid, and spend too much of their time dealing with disciplinary issues rather than teaching.

To narrow the gap between the aspiration and current reality, the superintendent had to find ways to bring those conflicts to the surface and have the teachers themselves work them through, without her becoming the issue by attempting to resolve those issues for them. Surfacing those value conflicts and holding steady while the teachers did their work took faith, courage, and discipline. After a great deal of angry interchange, even to the point of yelling and screaming, with a restrained superintendent not showing her hand but keeping teachers in the conversation with each other, the teachers began to face the gap

2 Mobilize the System

between their aspirations for their students and the current reality of their union's position by developing some of their own ideas for change.

Everyone has a particular capacity for tolerating conflict. Some people are comfortable working through conflict, while most avoid it entirely or try to get through it as quickly as possible. But surfacing the relevant conflicts is essential when an organization is falling short of its aspirations. To do this well requires an approach to conflict that teases out the *unacknowledged* differences in perspectives on the work issues that may be preventing the organization from reaching its espoused aspiration. It requires acknowledging the many competing visions, values, and views that may be alive in the organization even if they are not articulated.

As you might imagine, orchestrating conflict is not easy. For the orchestrator, it often requires tolerating a lot of hostility. And for many people, sitting in the stew and heat of conflict can be extremely challenging. That is why most organizations respond to conflict, or potential conflict, in other ways that are simpler, but ineffective. For example, they:

- *Do nothing.* This is the easiest response. Organizational systems reward people who do not upset the equilibrium, who do not make things messy by bringing conflict out into the open. But when people allow the conflict to stay unresolved, the organization often remains unchanged.
- *React by flight or fight.* In the high school example, the superintendent had to work hard to keep some teacher factions in the game, the ones that would have preferred to keep things calm and unresolved. Similarly, she had to work with other factions that wanted to avoid any real resolution by blaming without responsibility and arguing without listening.
- *Look to authority.* People in the organization prefer to rely on those with formal authority to resolve the conflict. Authorities are often expected to do what they can to preserve the calm, which does not foster change. If the superintendent in our high school case had decided the issue herself, resolved it as a strong authority person is expected to do, she would have become the issue, deflecting attention to her own behavior and choices rather

than the real work of teachers in getting more kids to stay in school, do well, and go to college.

We borrow the term *orchestration* from music because of the way composers approach the uses of dissonance and consonance in the creation of harmony. Composers treat dissonance as an essential component of harmony. Very few pieces of music or kinds of music use only sounds that are consonant with one another, like Gregorian chant. Using only consonant sounds gives music a timeless, motionless feel to it. Dissonance creates tension in the music, causing the listener to naturally want some kind of resolution. Composers know this, so they put two or more dissonant notes together that do not sound quite right, and then they create different kinds of resolutions to the tension by putting together consonant tones that do sound right. To a composer, the art of harmony is the creative uses of dissonance and consonance, woven together to create tension, a sense of forward motion, resolution, and then tension again until, usually, there is a final resolution.

Forward motion in organizations and communities is also a product of differences that generate creative tension and that, properly orchestrated, will resolve into a more integrated whole. The voices and perspectives that do not sound quite right together, and may never sound quite right together in isolation, are woven into a larger composition, and as part of the whole picture, they become essential. The working through of their differences provides the hope that some new synthesis will emerge, a new experiment and new capacity. People learn by encountering different points of view, not by staring at themselves in the mirror or engaging just those with consonant views.

If you want to generate progress on adaptive issues, you have to seek out, surface, nurture, and then carefully manage the conflict toward resolution, rather than see it as something to be eliminated or neutralized. Think of organizational harmony as the artful use of conflict to produce new resolve. Conflict is an essential resource in getting to the real, as opposed to superficial, harmony.

“Seven Steps to Orchestrating Conflict” describes how to start the process of surfacing and working through conflict in order to move forward on adaptive issues. You can think of the steps as the process agenda for a single event, such as a multiday off-site retreat, or as a process strategy for making progress over a period of time involving multiple, shorter interventions.

4 Mobilize the System

Seven Steps to Orchestrating Conflict

1. **Prepare.** Before bringing your organization's factions together and surfacing the conflict, do your homework. Where does each faction stand on the key elements of the conflict? What do they care about the most? What losses do they fear? Talking to them in advance helps you acquire the informal authority you will need to retain their trust when the rough moments come.
 2. **Establish ground rules.** Propose rules making it safe to discuss the conflict, such as committing to confidentiality, staying in the room with PDAs and computers off, depersonalizing the conflicts, and brainstorming. Set the agenda. Frame the issues with the overall mission and the current adaptive challenge. Tell them that it is up to everyone to keep the work issues at the center of attention at all times. To warm up, you might use exercises and cases from other settings to work the issues by analogy rather than directly.
 3. **Get each view on the table.** Invite each faction to articulate the values, the loyalties, and the competencies that inform each of their perspectives on the adaptive challenge and its various related work issues. What commitments do they have to others who are not in the room, and what perspectives do those people have on the challenge? What do they see as their potential and nonnegotiable losses?
 4. **Orchestrate the conflict.** Starkly but evenhandedly, articulate the competing claims and positions you are hearing. As people begin to appreciate how deeply held the competing values are and how committed each faction is to avoiding taking any losses, the tension will rise. Look for signs that people are seeking to avoid the conflict, such as trying to minimize the differences or change the subject. As orchestrator, keep reminding people of the purpose, why it is that they are going through this hard patch.
 5. **Encourage accepting and managing losses.** Give each person or faction an opportunity to reflect more fully on the nature of the losses they would be asking each of their factions to accept. Tell them that
-

some losses will be necessary, but give everyone time to sit with these losses (maybe hours, but also maybe days, weeks, or months). Ask them to consider how they are going to deal with constituents, and how they might go about refashioning constituents' expectations and loyalties. Ask them to continue to reflect among themselves while maintaining confidentiality.

6. **Generate and commit to experiments.** Discuss individual experiments for dealing with constituents and collective experiments for tackling the adaptive challenge. Generate a consensus to go with several experiments for tackling the adaptive challenge, in sequence and/or at the same time, as it makes sense, with a shared commitment to get back together to evaluate the results of both kinds of experiments when enough data has been generated for lessons and insights.
 7. **Institute peer leadership consulting.** Individual and collective commitments to go forward will be hard to make because they require decisions about who will take what losses, how each of them will bring the agreed-upon next steps back to their own constituents, and what adaptations each of their constituent groups will need to make to implement the collective experiments. To maximize the chances of success, move the members of the group into peer consulting, where they begin systematically to consult to one another on the leadership headache they have just given each other. How can they help each other analyze the sources of resistance each should expect from their own people? How can they redesign some of the experiments and their implementation to take these resistances into account—for example, by pacing, sequencing, or framing cross-boundary projects? People in positions of authority generally hold their leadership issues close to the vest, keeping them private. So asking them to consult to one another establishes a new norm and may be difficult at first. You want your team to have a shared responsibility for the whole in which one person's issue is an issue for everyone.
-

6 Mobilize the System

Orchestrating conflict requires courage, to different degrees for different people. Here are some suggestions based on characteristics we have seen when people have tried to lead adaptive change in this way:

- *Push the boundaries of your own tolerance for conflict.* Orchestrating conflict requires tolerating a high degree of conflict yourself, perhaps more than you are comfortable with.
- *Play with the bad guys.* You will have to interact with hostile or antagonistic factions, and engage them on their own terms, not yours, even when their terms make no sense to you. And that means you will probably take some heat from the people you consider your core constituents, your primary loyalties, perhaps the division from where you came. (“Why are you even sitting down at a table with those guys?”)
- *Accept support from people whose reasoning you would reject.* Bringing antagonistic groups together often means allowing them to voice arguments you may personally find distasteful or even abhorrent. The motives and rationale for factions agreeing to engage or agreeing then to a particular course of action may differ widely. What you are looking for is progress on the issue, and people will get there in their own ways. With one of our clients, a professional services firm, the gap between the espoused values and the current reality was maintained powerfully by the compensation system. Aligning the compensation system with their values was a heated process. There were not only winners and losers in material terms, but some folks were willing to go along with the new system for reasons that we found uncomfortable, such as devaluing certain product lines they did not respect.
- *Adapt your communication style.* Orchestrating conflict successfully can mean having to change your communication style to help adversarial factions work through the issues. For example, you may have to display more confidence or hopefulness than you really feel to keep others from getting up and stalking out of the room. Or you may have to get forceful or even angry even if you do not like to appear that way. If adapting your communication style or demeanor makes you feel manipulative or inauthentic, keep reminding yourself of the purpose: helping the parties

be more authentic so they can identify, examine, and move through their conflicts toward some integrative solution.

The following practices can help you surmount these difficulties and boost your chances.

Create a Holding Environment

A holding environment consists of all those ties that bind people together and enable them to maintain their collective focus on what they are trying to do. All the human sources of cohesion that offset the forces of division and dissolution provide a sort of containing vessel in which work can be done. In fact, every group—from a family to an international organization—provides a holding environment, either weakly or strongly, for its members to collaborate productively. We have used the analogy of a pressure cooker for the holding environment; and as anyone who has ever used a pressure cooker knows, some are stronger than others (domestic versus industrial strength), depending on the strength of the steel and the locking lid.

The term itself was coined to describe the very first holding environment in each of our human experiences: a woman's arms holding a newborn baby and providing food and safety.¹ The bond between mother and child is so strong right from the beginning that even when the child spits up, cries incessantly, and pushes the mother away, she continues to hold the child. If she is tired out, she will pass the child to someone else to do the job. Sometimes children are raised in very weak holding environments and are quickly pushed aside and left alone when they fuss. When that happens, nearly every society has backstop institutions that serve as holding environments, from extended families to foster families, adoption services, social service agencies, and the court system. As a last resort, prisons serve as holding environments, containing individuals and giving them one last chance to take hold of themselves and behave responsibly.

In doing adaptive work in organizations, you need to create or strengthen the holding environment to provide safety and structure for people to surface and discuss the particular values, perspectives, and creative ideas they have on the challenging situation they all face. As members of a group work through a conflict, things can get nasty. People

8 Mobilize the System

may begin distancing themselves from one another, flying apart as they retreat into their own corners. The harder the adaptive work, the stronger the holding environment must be to contain those divisive forces.

What is required for a holding environment may differ from country to country, from firm to firm, and across boundaries of race and gender. A strong holding environment for a bunch of conflict-loving New Yorkers will be different from one for more deferential Japanese. But there are some common elements that serve to strengthen the bonds of cohesion and offset the tensions as they are surfaced in any culture. Some of these are:

- Shared language
- Shared orienting values and purposes
- History of working together
- Lateral bonds of affection, trust, and camaraderie
- Vertical bonds of trust in authority figures and the authority structure
- At the micro level for a working group, a meeting room with comfortable chairs, a round table, and rules of confidentiality and brainstorming that encourage people to speak their minds

To describe more concretely the components of a strong holding environment, we turn again to the off-site retreat as a literal and metaphorical example.

The purpose of an off-site is to get people out of the office into a different place where they can gain new perspectives and focus on an issue they do not usually deal with during their day-to-day work. Off-sites are often used to work through conflicts. These holding environments aim to generate a level of trust and open discussion not usually present in the workplace.

Many considerations in designing off-sites are routine for any such event, such as workspace layout, administrative support, norms of reporting and confidentiality, a pulse-taking at the beginning, and an accountability mechanism to hold people to decisions and commitments made at the event. But some practices, which we suggest below, are particularly relevant when you are dealing with adaptive work.

Before the Off-site

- *Prepare the senior authority for a different role.* During the off-site, all eyes will be on the senior authority for clues to how seriously to treat the event. Does the senior authority leave the room to answer a cell phone after the meeting begins or nod off as someone else is talking? If the senior authority keeps delivering orders or answers, it will feel to others that they have not left the office at all. People will soon stop offering their own ideas and opinions, waiting for the boss to speak. So before the retreat even begins, provide coaching as needed to discourage the senior authority from engaging in these and other conversation-stopping behaviors. We sometimes use the standard that, if someone were to watch a videotape of the off-site, it would be impossible to tell which person was the senior authority in the group.
- *Identify hidden perspectives and conflicts in preparatory interviews.* Ask some or all of the participants in one-on-one conversations what they see as the problem that triggered the off-site. How important do they think this problem is for the organization? (If they do not agree on the problem or see it as important, that itself becomes an issue for the group.) What are their expectations? What key issues are they worried the off-site will ignore? What would success look like?

During the Off-site

- *Establish new processes.* To help people produce a different, less tangible “product” (such as resolution of a conflict) than the more concrete outcomes (sales, strategies, reports) they usually generate at the office, they will need different processes for interacting with one another. New norms send the signal that the retreat has an entirely different goal than the work people normally deal with back at the office. You might ask people to call each other by first names if they do not usually do so at work. Build in time for individual and collective reflection. Explain that adaptive work is messier than technical work. Legitimize conflict. Ask people to stay in the game when the going gets rough. Hire an outside

10 Mobilize the System

facilitator or rotate the facilitation among the participants, to help ensure that they do not fall into familiar roles.

- *Watch the initial event.* Pay close attention to what happens first as the event begins. A joke, a casual comment, a request for information, whatever it is may signal something important about the group's mood and the issues that are alive in the room. If someone makes a joke about the senior authority not being at the head of the table, that may suggest that relations with the authority are an issue in the group, and that people would be surprised if the boss didn't jump in and control things when the going got tough.

Select Participants

Just as you select ingredients to throw into a stewpot before you turn up the heat, you need to select carefully the individuals who will take part in a conversation about the conflict you are seeking to orchestrate on the issue you are trying to work through.

Determining which parties to include is a strategic decision: who should play a part in the deliberations, and in what sequence? Including too many parties can overload people's capacity to learn and accommodate one another. However, when you fail to be inclusive, you may risk devising an incomplete solution, a solution to the wrong problem, or, worse, excluded parties that will sabotage the process of sustainable change. At a minimum, if you opt for a smaller group, you must keep track of missing perspectives.

Here are some key questions to consider:

- Who needs to learn what, to make progress on this challenge?
- Does a party represent a constituency whose changes are critical if the larger community is to make progress?
- Does any party's perspective generate so much distress that including it would disrupt the effort to build any kind of coalition?
- Are there parties whose presence is important in the medium or long term but not in the short term, so that they might be excluded initially?

Selection is never an easy process. In the interests of efficiency and order, you may be inclined to minimize the number of people representing a variety of functions or constituencies. But in the interest of furthering adaptive change, you may want to expand your definition of who should be included. Political considerations are relevant. There will be lots of buzz and interpretations back at the office about who was and who was not included.

In *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, we discussed this dilemma and offered a framework for determining how narrowly or widely you should cast your net while selecting participants to work through a conflict.²

A conflict that requires immediate resolution suggests that you select fewer stakeholders, in the interest of timeliness. But the more the conflict at hand requires adaptive work to be resolved, the more expansive your definition of whom to include should be. However, the more participants in the conversation, the greater the chances that some of them will be intensely impassioned about the subject, and the more the individual agendas that will be in the room will dominate. Stridency, aggressive advocacy, and individual perspectives and stakes can jeopardize the entire effort by triggering other participants to disconnect, leaving the room or refusing to contribute to the conversation. All of this, of course, can be useful data for identifying deeper conflicts in perspective, but you also may have a hard time reassembling the parties into a working group.

The benefits and costs of exclusion and inclusion fluctuate, and in a tactical sense you have to pace the work in part by sequencing when and which parties are brought into the process. Yet a general bias toward inclusion builds adaptive capacity for the long run. Inclusion stresses that people in the network of relationships respect one another and gives you more options for future crises because you have established a firm relationship with people who have struggled through something difficult together. Inclusion is both a means to accomplish immediate adaptive work and a way to cover future bases.

Regulate the Heat

Humans are temperature sensitive. Think about the many things you do each day to be comfortable: put on a sweater if the room feels cold,

12 Mobilize the System

turn up the air-conditioning if it is too warm, and take a cold drink to cool off after exercise.

Similarly, people take steps to lower the “heat” in their organizational lives. You might speak soothingly to an irritated coworker to help him calm down, or raise a particularly touchy issue in the hallway with a friend rather than in the meeting because you know he may get distraught and would not want others to see. These skills are valuable in certain circumstances. But they are not as useful for working through conflict related to adaptive change because they are designed to maintain the status quo.

To orchestrate conflict effectively, think of yourself as having your hand on the thermostat and always watching for signals that you need to raise or lower the temperature in the room. Your goal is to keep the temperature—that is, the intensity of the disequilibrium created by discussion of the conflict—high enough to motivate people to arrive at creative next steps and potentially useful solutions, but not so high that it drives them away or makes it impossible for them to function.

This temperature range will differ depending on factors such as the cohesiveness of the group and members’ familiarity with adaptive work. A group that is cohesive because members share history and values can stand a much higher level of heat without breaking apart than a newly formed group with members from different parts of the community or organization. One that is less cohesive because members have never before worked together or have profoundly conflicting values may break apart at a high level of heat. Table 11-1 shows examples of

TABLE 11-1

Controlling the temperature

To raise the temperature . . .

- Draw attention to the tough questions.
- Give people more responsibility than they’re comfortable with.
- Bring conflicts to the surface.
- Tolerate provocative comments.
- Name and use some of the dynamics in the room at the moment to illustrate some of the issues facing the group—e.g., getting the authority figure to do the work, scapegoating an individual, externalizing the blame, and tossing technical fixes at the situation.

To lower the temperature . . .

- Address the aspects of the conflict that have the most obvious and technical solutions.
- Provide structure by breaking the problem into parts and creating time frames, decision rules, and role assignments.
- Temporarily reclaim responsibility for the tough issues.
- Employ work avoidance mechanisms such as taking a break, telling a joke or a story, or doing an exercise.
- Slow down the process of challenging norms and expectations.

actions you can take to raise or lower the heat in an organization or community.

ON THE BALCONY

- Develop your capacity for assessing the temperature. The next time you are in a meeting, sit back and try to track the temperature in the room. After each comment made by any of the participants in the gathering, notice whether the temperature seems to go up or down. Notice when it seems that the overall group is below the level of productive disequilibrium, in the middle of it, or nearing its upper limit of tolerance.

ON THE PRACTICE FIELD

- If you see the group lowering the heat to make things more comfortable rather than dealing with the conflict, try naming the behavior as soon as you notice it. Say something like, "It feels as if we're moving off the tough stuff; can we stay there for a while?" Try naming the issue being avoided: "How can we move forward unless we discuss why we lost the client last week and how people feel about it?" "I think we're all avoiding the reality of Joe having been let go last week. Don't we need to address that and what it represents to us?" "Look, best as I can tell, Jamal and Mary have not spoken since they almost came to blows at the meeting last Friday. Don't we, as a team, need to better understand what that was all about and think about how to move on from here?"
 - Try to understand the senior authority's willingness and capacity for raising the heat, by tracking what happens to the room's temperature after the senior authority makes a comment or a decision. Does the temperature remain comfortable? Get distressingly high?
-

Give the Work Back

For people in authority roles, one of the most difficult aspects of orchestrating conflict is resisting the temptation to take the conflictual

14 Mobilize the System

elements of the adaptive work off of other people's shoulders and putting it on your own. The pressure to relieve them of that work comes from both them and from you. You have undoubtedly been rewarded for exactly that behavior in the past. People generally get promoted because they are willing to take problems on their own shoulders and come up with solutions. And people both above and below you are expecting, and prefer, that to continue. They want you to make an authoritative decision that "resolves" the conflict.

When she became CEO of Hewlett-Packard (HP), Carly Fiorina saw that the company was facing major adaptive challenges, including its historic dependence on medical technology and challenges to the printer and computer technology end of the business. She came to believe that acquiring Compaq would help solve HP's problems. But it appears that she shouldered a great deal of the decision herself. She may have made a more informed decision and a more widely understood decision if she had orchestrated a debate in the board and among all of HP's key stakeholders about the merits, dangers, and timeline for returns on the investment of the Compaq acquisition as a solution to the challenge. A wider conversation made up of a more diverse array of voices could have generated a shared sense of ownership of the risks and timelines for whatever decision was ultimately made, although she would have risked having to forgo what she thought was the right step. More important, the conflict about the direction the company should take was alive and well in the board and among the stakeholders, and resolving it was their work to do in order to have a united organization on the other side of the decision. By taking so much responsibility for trying to solve HP's problems and becoming the primary advocate of one particular solution, she both relieved them of the work and tied her future to the success of that solution. She made herself the issue. When the acquisition did not work out on the time horizon all had expected, she paid dearly and lost her job.

Giving the work back in organizational life often requires going against the grain of expectations that you're supposed to maintain equilibrium or restore it quickly when people get knocked off balance. When you have authority, people expect you to provide direction, protection, and order, which includes delineating their individual roles and responsibilities. Typically, the more clarity you provide, the more comfortable

they are. What they *do not* expect is for you to give them work you have customarily been doing for them. But to build your team's adaptive capacity, you need to push them beyond their comfort zones. "Giving the Work Back in an Advertising and Sales Company" gives an example of the way this worked in one organization.

Giving the Work Back in an Advertising and Sales Company

We worked extensively with a fast-growing advertising and sales organization in New York City. The founder/CEO was brilliant at client presentations, so much so that no one else on the design staff ever spoke up when he was in the room. One key employee was so reticent that clients lacked confidence in his work. The CEO realized that his own competence was hurting the firm's growth by enabling others to avoid stepping into the uncomfortable, unfamiliar, intimidating adaptive waters of leading client presentations. He knew that if he forced them to take on that role, he would court disaster with clients (as they had not yet developed the required skills) and he would be unable to resist interjecting. He would thus further undermine clients' and the subordinates' confidence in their capacity to do the presentations. So first, he raised the heat by telling them that he was no longer going to do this work for them. Second, to help create a holding environment, he hired presentation consultants to facilitate several two-day workshops on client presentations for his entire team, including himself. And third, he committed to holding back when they were making presentations, no matter how much he thought he could help.

The CEO paced the work, giving time for people to take hold of their new responsibilities and develop new competencies. The change took more than a year. Nearly everyone, including some clients, pushed back. He learned to detect when his subordinates would look to him to rescue them in the middle of a presentation. It took every ounce of his courage and self-command to keep sitting on his hands. But eventually his subordinates were driving most of the client presentations, and he was free to focus on those that only he could do.

16 Mobilize the System

ON THE BALCONY

- Think back over the past few weeks. When have you volunteered to take adaptive problems off other people's shoulders? Were these people subordinates, peers, or your boss? What were the negative consequences of doing so? What else could you have been doing with that time? What steps might you have taken to give the work back to these individuals?

ON THE PRACTICE FIELD

- The next time you are in charge of a meeting and you sense that others in the room are looking to you to shoulder some aspect of the adaptive work the group is discussing, try what we call the *sit down technique*. Without warning, take a seat at the side of the flip chart, lectern, or other structure that's at the head of the room, or take a seat in the back of the room. Notice how people respond to your sudden abdication of authority. Do some leave the room? Do others rush to the front to take over? Do some people quickly form into more intimate, safe subgroups? Do people struggle to restore order without authorizing anyone new to take any responsibility? After observing for a while, debrief the experience: explain why you abdicated. Then encourage discussion of the problems it creates when people fall into a dependent mode and expect authority figures to do the adaptive work for a team and organization.
-

| GLOSSARY |

The definitions in this glossary have been developed and refined over twenty-five years, primarily by Riley Sinder, Dean Williams, and the authors. They are not definitive statements. They are meant to be useful, first-approximation concepts that serve as a resource for thinking more deeply and broadly about the subject and practice of leadership.

act politically Incorporate the loyalties and values of the other parties into your mobilization strategy. Assume that no one operates solely as an individual but represents, formally or informally, a set of constituent loyalties, expectations, and pressures.

adaptation A successful adaptation enables an organism to thrive in a new or challenging environment. The adaptive process is both conservative and progressive in that it enables the living system to take the best from its traditions, identity, and history into the future. See also **thrive**.

adaptive capacity The resilience of people and the capacity of systems to engage in problem-defining and problem-solving work in the midst of adaptive pressures and the resulting disequilibrium.

adaptive challenge The gap between the values people stand for (that constitute thriving) and the reality that they face (their current lack of capacity to realize those values in their environment). See also **technical problem**.

adaptive culture Adaptive cultures engage in at least five practices. They (1) name the elephants in the room, (2) share responsibility for the organization's future, (3) exercise independent judgment, (4) develop leadership capacity, and (5) institutionalize reflection and continuous learning.

adaptive leadership The activity of mobilizing adaptive work.

adaptive work Holding people through a sustained period of disequilibrium during which they identify what cultural DNA to conserve and discard, and invent or discover the new cultural DNA that will enable them to thrive anew; i.e., the learning process through which people in a system achieve a successful adaptation. See also **technical work**.

ally A member of the community in alignment on a particular issue.

ancestor A family or community member from an earlier generation who shapes a person's identity.

- assassination** The killing or neutralizing (through character assassination) of someone who embodies a perspective that another faction in the social system desperately wants to silence.
- attention** A critical resource for leadership. To make progress on adaptive challenges, those who lead must be able to hold people's engagement with hard questions through a sustained period of disequilibrium.
- authority** Formal or informal power within a system, entrusted by one party to another in exchange for a service. The basic services, or social functions, provided by authorities are: (1) direction; (2) protection; and (3) order. See also **formal authority** and **informal authority**.
- bandwidth** The range of capacities within which an individual has gained comfort and skill. See also **repertoire**.
- below the neck** The nonintellectual human faculties: emotional, spiritual, instinctive, kinetic.
- carrying water** Doing the work of others that they should be doing for themselves.
- casualty** A person, competency, or role that is lost as a by-product of adaptive change.
- classic error** Treating an adaptive challenge as a technical problem.
- confidant** A person invested in the success and happiness of another person, rather than in the other person's perspective or agenda.
- courageous conversation** A dialogue designed to resolve competing priorities and beliefs while preserving relationships. See also **orchestrating the conflict**.
- dance floor** Where the action is. Where the friction, noise, tension, and systemic activity are occurring. Ultimately, the place where the work gets done.
- dancing on the edge of your scope of authority** Taking action near or beyond the formal or informal limits of what you are expected to do.
- default** A routine and habitual response to recurring stimuli. See also **tuning**.
- deploying yourself** Deliberately managing your roles, skills, and identity.
- disequilibrium** The absence of a steady state, typically characterized in a social system by increasing levels of urgency, conflict, dissonance, and tension generated by adaptive challenges.
- elephant in the room** A difficult issue that is commonly known to exist in an organization or community but is not discussed openly. See also **naming the elephant in the room**.
- engaging above and below the neck** Connecting with all the dimensions of the people you lead. Also, bringing all of yourself to the practice of leadership. *Above the neck* speaks to intellectual faculties, the home of logic and facts; *below the neck* speaks to emotional faculties, the home of values, beliefs, habits of behavior, and patterns of reaction. See also **below the neck**.
- experimental mind-set** An attitude that treats any approach to an adaptive issue not as a solution, but as the beginning of an iterative process of testing a hypothesis, observing what happens, learning, making midcourse corrections, and then, if necessary, trying something else.

faction A group with (1) a shared perspective that has been shaped by tradition, power relationships, loyalties, and interests and (2) its own grammar for analyzing a situation and its own system of internal logic that defines the stakes, terms of problems, and solutions in ways that make sense to its own members.

faction map A diagram that depicts the groups relevant to an adaptive challenge, and includes the loyalties, values, and losses at risk that keep each faction invested in its position.

finding your voice The process of discovering how to best use yourself as an instrument to frame issues effectively, shape and tell stories purposefully, and inspire others.

formal authority Explicit power granted to meet an explicit set of service expectations, such as those in job descriptions or legislative mandates.

getting on the balcony Taking a distanced view. The mental act of disengaging from the dance floor, the current swirl of activity, in order to observe and gain perspective on yourself and on the larger system. Enables you to see patterns that are not visible from the ground. See also **observation**.

giving the work back The action of an authority figure in resisting the pressure to take the responsibility for solving problems off of other people's shoulders, and instead mobilizing the responsibility of the primary stakeholders in doing their share of the adaptive work.

holding environment The cohesive properties of a relationship or social system that serve to keep people engaged with one another in spite of the divisive forces generated by adaptive work. May include, for example, bonds of affiliation and love; agreed-upon rules, procedures, and norms; shared purposes and common values; traditions, language, and rituals; familiarity with adaptive work; and trust in authority. Holding environments give a group identity and contain the conflict, chaos, and confusion often produced when struggling with complex problematic realities. See also **pressure cooker** and **resilience**.

holding steady Withholding your perspective, not primarily for self-protecting, but to wait for the right moment to act, or act again. Also, remaining steadfast, tolerating the heat and pushback of people who resist dealing with the issue.

hunger A normal human need that each person seeks to fulfill, such as (1) power and control, (2) affirmation and importance, and (3) intimacy and delight.

illusion of the broken system Every group of human beings is aligned to achieve the results it currently gets. The current reality is the product of the implicit and explicit decisions of people in the system, at least of the dominant stakeholders. In that sense, no system is broken, although change processes are often driven by the idea that an organization is broken. That view discounts the accumulated functionality for many people of the system's current way of operating.

informal authority Power granted implicitly to meet a set of service expectations, such as representing cultural norms like civility or being given moral authority to champion the aspirations of a movement.

interpretation Identifying patterns of behavior that help make sense of a situation. Interpretation is the process of explaining raw data through digestible understandings and narratives. Most situations have multiple possible interpretations.

intervention Any series of actions or a particular action, including intentional inaction, aimed at mobilizing progress on adaptive challenges.

leadership with authority Mobilizing people to address an adaptive challenge from a position of authority. The authority role brings with it resources and constraints for exercising leadership.

leadership without authority Mobilizing people to address an adaptive challenge by taking action beyond the formal and informal expectations that define your scope of power, such as raising unexpected questions upward from the middle of the organization, challenging the expectations of your constituents, or engaging people across boundaries from outside the organization. Lacking authority also brings with it resources and constraints.

leap to action The default behavior of reacting prematurely to disequilibrium with a habituated set of responses.

lightning rod A person who is the recipient of a group's anger or frustration, often expressed as a personal attack and typically intended to deflect attention from a disturbing issue and displace responsibility for it to someone else.

living into the disequilibrium The gradual process of easing people into an uncomfortable state of uncertainty, disorder, conflict, or chaos at a pace and level that does not overwhelm them yet takes them out of their comfort zones and mobilizes them to engage in addressing an adaptive challenge.

naming the elephant in the room The act of addressing an issue that may be central to making progress on an adaptive challenge but that has been ignored in the interest of maintaining equilibrium. Discussing the undiscussable. See also **elephant in the room**.

observation Collection of relevant data from a detached perspective and from as many sources as possible. See also **getting on the balcony**.

opposition Those parties or factions that feel threatened or at risk of loss if your perspective is accepted.

orchestrating the conflict Designing and leading the process of getting parties with differences to work them through productively, as distinguished from resolving the differences for them. See also **courageous conversation**.

pacing the work Gauging how much disturbance the social system can withstand and then breaking down a complex challenge into small elements, sequencing them at a rate that people can absorb.

partners Individuals or factions that are collaborators, including allies and confidants. See also **ally**, **confidant**, and the distinction between the two.

personal leadership work Learning about and managing yourself to be more effective in mobilizing adaptive work.

pressure cooker A holding environment strong enough to contain the disequilibrium of adaptive processes. See also **holding environment** and **resilience**.

productive zone of disequilibrium The optimal range of distress within which the urgency in the system motivates people to engage in adaptive work. If the level is too low, people will be inclined to complacently maintain their current way of working, but if it is too high, people are likely to be overwhelmed

and may start to panic or engage in severe forms of work avoidance, like scapegoating or assassination. See also **work avoidance**.

progress The development of new capacity that enables the social system to thrive in new and challenging environments. The process of social and political learning that leads to improvement in the condition of the group, community, organization, nation, or world. See also **thrive**.

purpose The overarching sense of direction and contribution that provides meaningful orientation to a set of activities in organizational and political life.

reality testing The process of comparing data and interpretations of a situation to discern which one, or which new synthesis of competing interpretations, captures the most information and best explains the situation.

regulating the heat Raising or lowering the distress in the system to stay within the productive zone of disequilibrium.

repertoire The range of capacities within which an individual has gained comfort and skill. See also **bandwidth**.

resilience The capacity of individuals and the holding environment to contain disequilibrium over time. See also **holding environment** and **pressure cooker**.

ripeness of an issue The readiness of a dominant coalition of stakeholders to tackle an issue because of a generalized sense of urgency across stakeholding groups.

ritual A practice with symbolic import that helps to create a shared sense of community.

role The set of expectations in a social system that define the services individuals or groups are supposed to provide.

sanctuary A place or set of practices for personal renewal.

scope of authority The set of services for which a person is entrusted by others with circumscribed power.

social system Any collective enterprise (small group, organization, network of organizations, nation, or the world) with shared challenges that has interdependent and therefore interactive dynamics and features.

song beneath the words The underlying meaning or unspoken subtext in someone's comment, often identified by body language, tone, intensity of voice, and the choice of language.

taking the temperature Assessing the level of disequilibrium currently in the system.

technical problem Problems that can be diagnosed and solved, generally within a short time frame, by applying established know-how and procedures. Technical problems are amenable to authoritative expertise and management of routine processes.

technical work Problem defining and problem solving that effectively mobilizes, coordinates, and applies currently sufficient expertise, processes, and cultural norms.

thrive To live up to people's highest values. Requires adaptive responses that distinguish what's essential from what's expendable, and innovates so that the social system can bring the best of its past into the future.

22 Glossary

tuning An individual's personal psychology, including the set of loyalties, values, and perspectives that have shaped his worldview and identity, and cause the individual to resonate consciously and unconsciously, productively and unproductively, to external stimuli. See also **default**.

work avoidance The conscious or unconscious patterns in a social system that distract people's attention or displace responsibility in order to restore social equilibrium at the cost of progress in meeting an adaptive challenge.

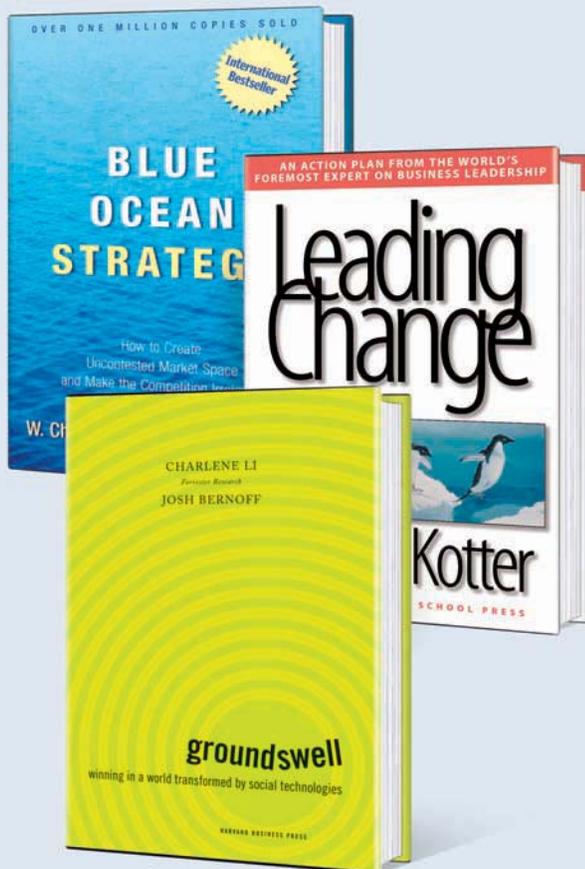
| NOTES |

Chapter 11

1. See, among many others, Donald Winnicott, *The Maturation Process* (New York: International Universities Press, 1965).
2. Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994).

THE ANSWERS YOU NEED, WHEN YOU NEED THEM

DOWNLOAD
BOOK
CHAPTERS
NOW



NOT ALL BUSINESS CHALLENGES ARE CREATED EQUAL.

Some require detailed analysis and others demand a thoughtful solution—but in a quick and easily accessible format.

Now you can get instant access to the answers you need by downloading **individual chapters** from our most popular books, including:

- *Blue Ocean Strategy* by W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne
- *Leading Change* by John P. Kotter
- *Groundswell* by Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff
- And many others

The solutions to your toughest challenges are just a click away.



LEARN MORE ABOUT HARVARD BUSINESS PRESS CHAPTERS:
www.harvardbusiness.org/press