

# THE WORK OF LEADERSHIP

## RONALD HEIFETZ

**Technical problems** are those that can be remedied by quick and easy solutions, such as replacing executives or implementing a new policy. *Unfortunately, the most important and difficult problems organizations face **cannot be solved with technical fixes**.* They are **adaptive challenges**, which require changing values, behaviors, beliefs, roles, relationships, and approaches to work. A different kind of leadership is needed to meet adaptive challenges. When facing adaptive challenges, leaders must avoid providing solutions—especially if people are demanding quick action. Adaptive change is distressing, yet leaders must resist the urge to remove people’s distress. Heifetz and Laurie offer these six principles for leading adaptive work:

### 1. GET ON THE BALCONY

- *Go back and forth between local and global views to see how organizational habits sabotage adaptive change; avoid becoming a prisoner of the system*

### 2. IDENTIFY THE ADAPTIVE CHALLENGE

- *Is this an adaptive challenge or merely a technical problem?*

### 3. REGULATE DISTRESS — not too much or too little

1. Establish a holding environment
  - *Temporary place where diverse groups can talk, frame debate and clarify assumptions*
2. Frame the key questions and issues
  - *Protect people by managing the rate of change*
  - *Orient people to new roles and responsibilities*
  - *Expose conflict; it is the engine of creativity*
  - *Maintain necessary norms; challenge obsolete norms*
3. Maintain presence and poise
  - *Pressures to reestablish equilibrium are enormous*
  - *Develop and maintain your own emotional capacity to tolerate uncertainty, frustration and pain*

### 4. MAINTAIN DISCIPLINED ATTENTION

- *Counteract distractions from the adaptive issues (e.g., scapegoating, denial, turf battles)*
- *Deepen debate; unbundle polarized issues; focus people on what they’re responsible for*

### 5. GIVE WORK BACK TO THE PEOPLE

- *People tend to look up the chain of command for someone to take control*
- *Get people to assume responsibility; support them but don’t control them*
- *Instill confidence in people — back them up when they make mistakes*

### 6. PROTECT THE VOICES OF LEADERSHIP FROM BELOW

- *Don’t squash them; provide cover for the person pointing out internal contradictions*

Source: Ronald A. Heifetz & Donald L. Laurie, *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 1997, Reprint 97106.

