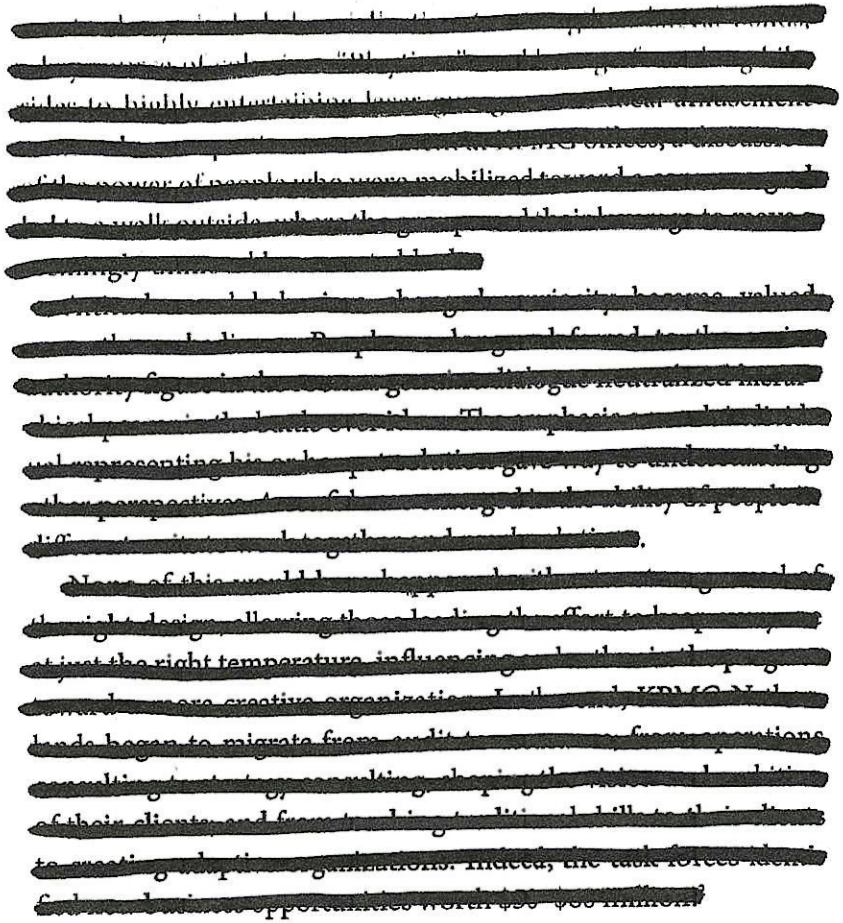
"Regulating the Heat" from
Leadership on the Line
by Ron Heifitz



Control the Temperature

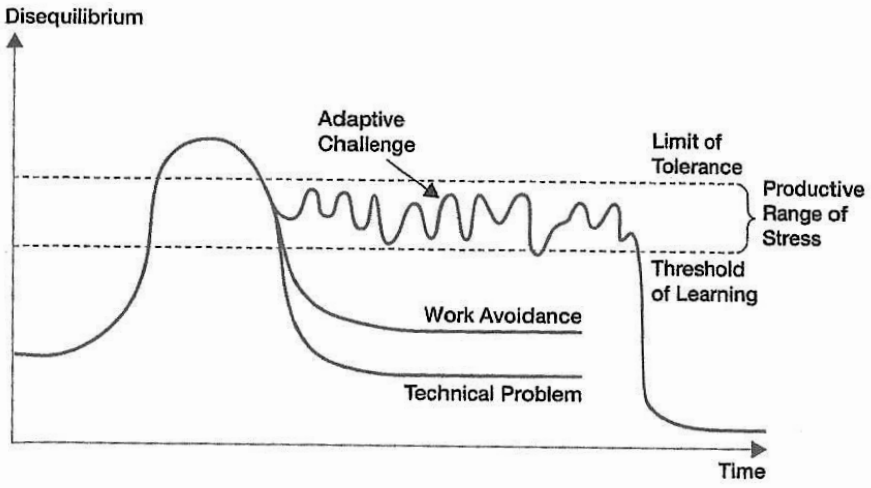
Changing the status quo generates tension and produces heat by surfacing hidden conflicts and challenging organizational culture. It's a deep and natural human impulse to seek order and calm, and organizations and communities can tolerate only so much stress before recoiling.

If you try to stimulate deep change within an organization, you have to control the temperature. There are really two tasks here. The first is to raise the heat enough that people sit up, pay attention,

and deal with the real threats and challenges facing them. Without stress, there is less stimulus for people to tolerate difficult change. The second is to lower the temperature when necessary to reduce a counterproductive level of tension. Any community can take only so much pressure before it becomes either immobilized or spins out of control. The heat must stay within a tolerable range—not so high that people demand it be turned off completely, and not so low that they are lulled into inaction. We call this span the productive range of stress. (See the figure "Technical Problem or Adaptive Challenge?")

Of course, you can't expect the group to tolerate more stress than you can stand yourself. When you develop your own capacity for taking heat, you raise the tolerance level of the organization or community. But if you lose your poise and turn down the flame, people will take that as a cue that the passions generated cannot be contained. The stress will appear intolerable. In political campaigns, people often look to the candidate to set the standard for the

Technical Problem or Adaptive Challenge?



Source: Ronald A. Heifetz and Donald C. Laurie, "Mobilizing Adaptive Work: Beyond Visionary Leadership," in Jay A. Conger, Gretchen M. Spreitzer, and Edward E. Lawler III, eds., *The Leader's Change Handbook: An Essential Guide to Setting Direction and Taking Action* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998).

tolerance of stress. If the candidate blows, it's unlikely that anyone else on the staff will be able to focus on the campaign. The same is true when you are in an authority role in any realm: as project manager, coach or captain of a team, or lead investor in a high-risk venture. There is tremendous pressure on you to control your own natural emotional responses, which may be entirely appropriate and normal to express, except within the role you are trying to play.

People expect the boss to control the temperature, but those without formal authority can do some of this work as well. If you are leading without or beyond your authority, you must assess how far ahead of people you are and then adjust how hard and fast to push for change. As we suggested in chapter 3, one way you make that assessment is to carefully monitor the response of the authority figure to your actions. If the authority figure starts to act precipitously to calm things down—for example, by firing "the troublemakers" or taking action to squelch deviant voices—it probably indicates that you have pushed too hard. The level of social disequilibrium is too high.

You can constructively raise the temperature and the tension in two ways. First, bring attention to the hard issues, and keep it focused there. Second, let people feel the weight of responsibility for tackling those issues. Conflicts will surface within the relevant group as contrary points of view are heard.

By contrast, there are many ways to reduce the heat, since organizations are more practiced at cooling things down than intentionally heating them up. Any method for reducing the heat may also be used as an indirect way of increasing the upper limits of tolerance for it within the organization. To reduce heat you can start on the technical problems, deferring adaptive challenges until people are "warmed up." A little progress on a partial, relatively easy problem may reduce anxiety enough that the tougher issues can then be tackled. Negotiators commonly use this tactic: Strengthen the relationships—the holding environment—by creating shared successes. You can provide structure to the problem-solving process, by breaking down the problem into its parts, creating working

groups with clear role assignments, setting time parameters, establishing decision rules, and structuring reporting relationships. You can frame the problem in a less threatening way, or speak to people's fears. You can temporarily bear more of the responsibility yourself. You can use humor or find an excuse for a break, even a party, to provide a temporary release. People may then be able to return to the tough questions. You can separate the conflicting parties and issues, pacing and sequencing the rate at which people challenge one another. Finally, you can speak to transcendent values so that people can be reminded of the import of their efforts and sacrifices. (See "How to Control the Heat.")

Be mindful that the organization will almost always, reflexively, want you to turn down the heat. Therefore, you need to take the temperature of the group constantly, trying to keep it high enough to motivate people, but not so high that it paralyzes them. When people come to you to describe the stress you are causing, it might be a sign that you have touched a nerve and are doing good work.

When the heat hits the ceiling and the system appears on the verge of melting down, you need to cool things off. History provides some striking examples in which people in authority believed that the level of chaos, tension, and anxiety in the community had risen too high to constructively mobilize people to act on difficult issues. As a result, they first acted to reduce the anxiety to a tolerable level, and then made sure enough urgency remained to stimulate engagement and change.

Franklin D. Roosevelt came to power in 1933 amidst the deepening crisis of the Great Depression. After more than three years of economic collapse, with millions unemployed and the nation's banks approaching insolvency, the country had reached a very high level of anxiety and, in many regions, outright despair. The United States faced adaptive work of a magnitude that strained even its boisterous confidence and ingenuity.

The unprecedented level of distress reached during this national crisis, and the resulting conflict and disorientation, called forth all sorts of distorted schemes to calm the country and restore a firm footing, from the demagogic initiatives of Father Coughlin to the

HOW TO CONTROL THE HEAT

Raise the Temperature

1. Draw attention to the tough questions.
2. Give people more responsibility than they are comfortable with.
3. Bring conflicts to the surface.
4. Protect gadflies and oddballs.

Lower the Temperature

1. Speak to people's anger, fear, and disorientation.
2. Take action. Structure the problem-solving process—break the problem into parts, and create time frames, decision rules, and clear role assignments.
3. Slow down the process. Pace and sequence the issues and who you bring to the table.
4. Be visible and present—shoulder responsibility and provide confidence.
5. Orient people—reconnect people to their shared values, and locate them in an arc of change over time.
6. Low-hanging fruit—make short-term gains by prioritizing the technical aspects of the problem situation.

platform of the communist party. As the nation's preeminent authority figure, Roosevelt embodied the country's hope for a restoration of order without distorting its core values and institutions. All eyes were on him for direction and protection. His first priority had to be to reduce disequilibrium, to lower the distress so that the nation would be less vulnerable to demagogues and could make progress toward economic recovery.

To do this, Roosevelt had to speak to emotional realities. He had to calm the nation down, both in words and in action. In words, he spoke to people's anxiety ("the only thing we have to fear is fear

itself"), to their anger (calling the bankers "money changers"), and to their disorientation (with intimate and reassuring fireside chats). His actions conveyed the same message, providing hope and calming fears. Roosevelt's decisive and authoritative action—the famous "one hundred days" in which he pushed an extraordinary number of bills through Congress—provided direction and helped reassure the American people that they were in capable hands. Roosevelt knew he was no savior—people would ultimately have to save themselves. But through his words and actions, he lowered the temperature just enough that people could focus constructively on the work ahead.

On the other hand, Roosevelt also knew that accomplishing the adaptive work facing the nation required improvisation, experiments, creativity, and conflict, and he fostered these all around. He orchestrated conflicts over public priorities and programs among the large cast of creative characters he brought into the government. For example, by giving the same assignment to two different people (driving them crazy over the lack of clear role definition), he provoked new and competing ideas, and gave himself more options with which to work. As hard as this improvisation must have been, he got the horns, the drums, and the flutes making music together.

Roosevelt displayed both the acuity to recognize when the tension rose too high and the emotional strength to permit considerable anxiety to exist. He had to resist the strong impulse toward quick fixes. Procrastination and delay were as much a part of his repertoire as decisive action. As Arthur Schlesinger points out, "Situations had to be permitted to develop, to crystallize, to clarify; the competing forces had to vindicate themselves in the actual pull and tug of conflict; public opinion had to face the question, consider it, and pronounce upon it. Only then, at the long, frazzled end, would the President's intuitions consolidate and precipitate a result."[3]

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"Giving the Work Back"
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by Ron Heifitz

Make Your Interventions Short and Simple

Exercising leadership necessarily involves interventions. Obviously, these need to be tailored to the particular situation, but generally, short and straightforward interventions are more likely to be heard and to be accepted without causing dangerous resistance.

Four types of interventions constitute the tactics of leadership: making observations, asking questions, offering interpretations, and taking actions. In practice, they are often combined with one

another. Which you choose will depend on your own skills, your particular purpose, and your assessment of which intervention is most likely to move the organization's work forward and leave you unscarred. The interventions you make will of course be calculated to have different effects. Some are meant to calm and others to disrupt; some will attract attention and others deflect it. And there will always be unintended effects.

When Franklin Roosevelt said during the depth of the Depression, in his first inaugural address, "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself," he was making an interpretation of the emotional state of the nation and its paralyzed economy. He intended to calm the nation and, followed by an action-filled 100 days, he succeeded. On the other hand, in his famous "malaise" speech at the height of the 1979 oil crisis, Jimmy Carter said the nation was also suffering from a crisis of confidence. Carter was making an interpretation that the problems of the country lay in the attitudes of the people themselves. But then he followed up by taking this moment of high tension and turning up the heat even higher. In facing both of these crises, the country needed more than ever for the president to be a rock of stability. If the people were going to take up his challenge, they needed to have confidence in him. Yet the next day he fired his cabinet, which suggested that he had no confidence in his own administration. If he didn't, why should they? Carter was vilified.

Observations

Observations are simply statements that reflect back to people their behavior or attempt to describe current conditions. They shift the group momentarily onto the balcony so that they can get a little distance from and perspective on what they are doing. For example, when a heated argument breaks out in a meeting, someone might say: "Wait a second. It seems to me the tensions are getting really high here. Everything was going fine until Bob made his comment."

In and of themselves, observations are no more than snapshots from the balcony. For that reason, observations tend to be less

publisher had to make a very public apology to calm the waters. The criticism focused on whether the Staples Center deal was the inevitable result of Willes's aggressive drive to smash the separation of news and advertising domains. The public critics included Otis Chandler, scion of the family that started the paper and Willes's predecessor as CEO.

Less than six months later, Willes was out of a job. The Chandler family, which controlled the board, sold the company out from under him without even letting him know that negotiations were underway. Even though they had rewarded him when the stock rose, he didn't realize how his strategy—or, more precisely, how he implemented his strategy—might make him expendable when the heat rose. Willes had allowed himself to become the issue. He never placed the issue of the relationship between the business and editorial sides of the organization in the newsroom. He never made collaboration with business employees a subject of debate among the news employees, forcing editors and reporters to come to grips with current realities, to question each other and explore their own conflicting assumptions. He did not even try to orchestrate the conflict between the news and business factions, in order to generate greater mutual understanding. As long as he was willing to take it all on himself, most people on both sides were happy to sit back and watch the war between him and the traditional journalists and see who would survive.

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policemen during the 1968 Democratic National Convention did not help the cause of the anti-Vietnam War protesters. Inadvertently, it probably helped the more hawkish presidential candidate, Richard Nixon, win the election. It made the Democratic Party look chaotic and unable to manage its followers, a party of rioters and overzealous police, especially since Democratic stalwart, Mayor Richard Daley, was responsible for law enforcement in the city.

As attempted leadership interventions, the protests failed to highlight the issues clearly and place the work where it belonged. The protests took place in a political context in which the president who was held responsible for the war, Lyndon Johnson, had already withdrawn from the presidency. The Chicago police used violence unnecessarily and outrageously, but both sides acted provocatively, and neither side was directly connected to the issue: Chicago cops versus a group of kids led by adults, most of whom were beyond military draft age. Rather than draw attention to the tough issues facing the society, the protesters created a side issue, law and order. The actions were easily misinterpreted and the work easily displaced, as the television audience watched the proxies battle it out on a side issue. In other words, the protests failed to instill in the American public a sense of responsibility for the war.

Not all actions send ambiguous messages. When Martin Luther King, Jr., and his strategists marched from Selma, they sent a clear message illustrating the brutality of racism in America. Black people would have to choose between passive compliance and protest. White people would have to face the contradiction between the values the country stood for and the values it actually lived. In this case, action as intervention spoke far more powerfully than other modes of communication. Televised scenes of white police beating peaceful black men, women, and children forced images into the national consciousness. Millions of citizens in their living rooms across the country got the message.

Actions draw attention, but the message and the context must be crystal clear. If not, they are likely to distract people and displace responsibility.

. . .

You stay alive in the practice of leadership by reducing the extent to which you become the target of people's frustrations. The best way to stay out of range is to think constantly about giving the work back to the people who need to take responsibility. Place the work within and between the factions who are faced with the challenge, and tailor your interventions so they are unambiguous and have a context. In the ongoing improvisation of leadership—in which you act, assess, take corrective action, reassess, and intervene again—you can never know with certainty how an intervention is received unless you listen over time. Therefore, just as critical as the quality of your actions will be your ability to hold steady in the aftermath in order to evaluate how to move next.