

YOUR LEADERSHIP

# EDGE

LEAD ANYTIME, ANYWHERE.

ED O'MALLEY  
AMANDA CEBULA

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**THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO:**

Ed's favorite people:

Joanna, Kate, Jack and Lizzie

*and*

Amanda's examples and support:

Rich and Lyn Hoffman and Alan Cebula

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## INTRODUCTION BY ED O'MALLEY

I was sitting across from a retired Army colonel. The last several years of his career had been focused on developing a new approach to building leadership in the Army. Experience in Iraq and Afghanistan suggested new approaches might be needed.

For eight years I had been on a mission to build leadership too. Not leaders. Not people with fancy titles. But people who understood how to get stuff done. And not just any stuff. Leadership is mobilizing people to tackle the most pressing, daunting, wicked challenges: *the tough stuff*.

**IN OUR OWN WAYS, IN OUR OWN CONTEXTS, THE COLONEL AND I HAD STUMBLER UPON SIMILAR IDEAS.**

- ▶ *Leadership is an activity, not a position.*
- ▶ *Anyone can do it, anytime and anywhere.*
- ▶ *It starts with you and must engage others.*
- ▶ *Your purpose must be clear.*
- ▶ *It's risky.*

We both understood leadership is about mobilizing people to make progress on adaptive challenges\*, the types of problems that —as opposed to technical ones —defy simple solutions and require us to change our own behavior and how we relate to others.

The colonel slid a thick, spiral-bound book across the table. It must have contained 300 or more pages. It described a new way of thinking about leadership he and his colleagues had developed for the Army. As I thumbed through the pages, with their small font, graphics and charts, I immediately felt a kinship to the ideas. We had taken two paths to similar conclusions about leadership.

He had “shown me his” and now I had to “show him mine.” In a sheepish way, I pulled a small card out of my pocket and slid it across the table. He gave me a 300-page manual. I gave him a card that fits in your pocket.

The small card contained a simple framework for thinking about leadership. The card listed four competencies along with supporting ideas under each.

The man across the table had parachuted behind enemy lines, led men into combat and dedicated his career to our armed forces. I didn’t know him well, but I was humbled in his presence. And I wanted him to give me an “atta boy!”

\* *The good people of Kansas and my dear friend  
Marty Linsky introduced me to this way of thinking.*

I waited as he looked the card over, afraid he might politely dismiss both it and me.

*Then he looked  
up and said,  
“You nailed it. This is it.”*

**SO WHAT WAS ON THAT LITTLE CARD?**

**WHAT HAD WE NAILED?**

**WHAT HAD MADE THE COLONEL LOOK UP AND TAKE NOTICE?**

First, KLC and the colonel’s team share a similar definition of leadership. It’s based on the work of Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky. We agree that “leadership is mobilizing people to make progress on deep, daunting, adaptive challenges.”

Second, KLC had whittled down 300 pages of Army doctrine to the five guiding principles listed earlier and the following four leadership competencies.

- ▶ *Diagnose Situation*
- ▶ *Manage Self*
- ▶ *Energize Others*
- ▶ *Intervene Skillfully*

The four competencies allow us (and you once you've finished this book) to turn a definition of leadership into clear and purposeful action. They allow us to see our leadership edge and, rather than be afraid of it, embrace it in our pursuit of making progress.

### YOUR LEADERSHIP EDGE?

It's the title of this book, and by now you might wonder just why we call it that. Leadership is rare, but it's a skill, an advantage even, that can be developed through learning and practice. The principles and competencies we cover here can help you hone that skill and develop the leadership edge needed to successfully confront problems that exist for your organization, company or community.

The four competencies were born out of an intensive listening process used to create the Kansas Leadership Center — a unique endeavor I started in 2007. (My first book, “For the Common Good: Redefining Civic Leadership,” co-authored with David Chrislip, tells the story of KLC.)

That listening and discernment process, along with insight from countless participants and colleagues since then, gave birth to the ideas explored in this book. Working in concert, these competencies and the dimensions within them create a way of being for anyone wanting to be successful at mobilizing others around daunting challenges as they explore their leadership edge.

## HERE ARE SOME KEY IDEAS TO HAVE IN MIND AS YOU EXPLORE THIS BOOK.

### LEADERSHIP AND AUTHORITY ARE DIFFERENT THINGS.

Leadership is an activity. Authority is a role. Sometimes those with authority exercise leadership. Often they don't. This doesn't mean authority isn't important or doesn't have a distinct purpose, but this book is about the activity of leadership. Our fondest hope is the ideas help you — whether you are an authority figure or not — mobilize others.

### LEADERSHIP REVOLVES AROUND CHALLENGES AND

OPPORTUNITIES. You need to know what the challenge or opportunity is that you're trying to mobilize people around. You'll hear us reference "your challenges" a lot. You might spend some time thinking about what these might be. (Need help? Just think about whatever concerns you the most about your organization, community, company, etc. Those are the things crying out for leadership.)

### LEADERSHIP AND ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES GO HAND IN HAND.

Adaptive challenges exist in our hearts and guts. Adaptive challenges linger. Solutions are elusive. Progress on adaptive challenges requires people themselves to change. And helping (motivating, encouraging, inspiring, cajoling, etc.) people to change is what leadership is all about.

So, the colonel was impressed that we'd managed to boil leadership down to one pocket-sized card. Granted, with this book we move beyond that little card (although contact us if you want one; it's so great, it fits in your pocket!). Still, we are keeping it simple, complete with cartoons. We like cartoons.

Leadership isn't complicated; it's just hard to do. But the ideas are simple enough to illustrate with cartoons. You could read dozens of thick leadership books or attend countless seminars. Or you could think about the cartoons and ideas here. Our experience suggests keeping it simple is the way to go.

Enjoy the journey.

Don't take yourself too seriously.

Lead.

Onward!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ed O'Malley". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

**P.S.** – You can join our community at [www.yourleadershipedge.com](http://www.yourleadershipedge.com). For a subscription, you get access to all sorts of additional information as well as the invitation to weekly video chats facilitated by Amanda Cebula, our faculty and me. More information is located in the back of this book. We hope to see you there!

The mind is capable of taking in extraordinary amounts of information. But too often we think we have a better understanding of a situation than we actually do. We give the data a cursory scan and then jump into action. Few people probe deeply enough to identify the smart risks that will lead to real progress.

We diagnose situations on two levels: surface and profound. Most of us spend our time on the surface, clarifying what we think we know and then reacting to these preconceptions.

It's hard to resist jumping into action. It's expected. We've trained a lifetime for it. We are proud of what we've learned. We are hired and paid for our expertise. But expertise is not enough when facing adaptive challenges. We have to observe and understand the situation from all angles.

PART 1

# DIAGNOSE SITUATION

CHAPTER 1

DIAGNOSE SITUATION

# *Distinguish Technical and Adaptive Work*

**Try to slay an adaptive challenge with a technical solution and you'll find yourself facing a bigger challenge than before.**

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Our friends Ron Heifetz, Marty Linsky and Alexander Grashow believe the single biggest mistake when trying to exercise leadership is treating an adaptive challenge as a technical problem. We couldn't agree more.

Ron, Marty and Alexander wrote the books on the difference between adaptive challenges and technical problems. Read their great books to learn more or spend some time with Cambridge Leadership Associates, the firm Ron and Marty founded.

Technical problems live in people's heads and logic. They are susceptible to facts and expertise. Adaptive challenges live in people's hearts and stomachs. They are about values, loyalties and beliefs. Progress on them requires the people with the problem to do the work, because the work involves refashioning deeply held beliefs.



Back to the cartoon. Wielding a technical solution solves a technical problem. The same technical solution applied to an adaptive challenge just exacerbates the problem.

There is always pressure in a community, company or organization to see challenges as technical problems. We want to believe things can be solved quickly, easily and with as little time and energy as possible. In reality, most complex problems are really a mixture of technical and adaptive elements. By distinguishing between the two types of problems, we collect clues about how to address them.

Adaptive challenges require leadership. Technical problems require well-exercised authority and expertise. Adaptive challenges are those things that concern you the most, the issues that linger. Solutions are elusive. Even agreement on the problem is elusive. Adaptive challenges are about values and culture, security and vulnerability.

### HERE ARE SOME EXAMPLES:

- ▶ A new manager is told to reorganize her department, which will mean layoffs for some, new responsibilities for others and fewer supervisors overall. The previous manager, although well liked in the department, was demoted for being unable to accomplish a successful reorganization.

**THE TECHNICAL ELEMENTS INCLUDE:** imagining new organizational charts, changing where people sit, creating new processes, crafting termination agreements, etc. These elements are important, challenging and far from the complete picture.

**THE ADAPTIVE ELEMENTS INCLUDE:** shifting loyalties from the old manager to the new, helping the staff see their part in the failed reorganization, raising morale despite shrinking the department, and increasing productivity in the face of significant disruption.

- ▶ A professor is frustrated with being a part of a long-stagnant department with declining enrollment, little collaboration between faculty, a shrinking budget and little recognition on campus.

**THE TECHNICAL ELEMENTS INCLUDE:** sharing the department successes more broadly on campus, creating an electronic newsletter to keep faculty up to date on the work of their colleagues, etc.

**THE ADAPTIVE ELEMENTS INCLUDE:** creating a true aspiration among enough faculty for something greater than now exists, cultivating a shared vision, generating commitment to work for the success of the department rather than just for individual success, etc.

DISTINGUISHING TECHNICAL AND ADAPTIVE

	TECHNICAL WORK	ADAPTIVE WORK
THE SOLUTION	... is clear	... requires learning
THE PROBLEM	... is clear	requires learning
WHOSE WORK IS IT?	experts or authority	stakeholders
TYPE OF WORK	efficient	act experimentally
TIMELINE	ASAP	longer term
EXPECTATIONS	fix the problem	make progress
ATTITUDE	confidence and skill	curiosity

## HERE'S A BASIC WAY OF THINKING OF THESE TWO ELEMENTS:

### TECHNICAL PROBLEMS:

can be solved by experts or authorities. Few people may be needed. Someone, somewhere has solved the problem before and a roadmap for the next steps exist. Best of all, many technical problems are quickly and easily solved.

### ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES:

have a totally different feel. The conversation is circular. Movement on an issue is difficult to track. We usually need to learn exactly what the problem is and then how best to proceed. Stakeholders, not just authority figures, must work on adaptive challenges. With no clear roadmap, you must experiment to test possible ways of moving forward. Even the timetable is elusive.



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**WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT TELLING  
TECHNICAL AND ADAPTIVE WORK APART?**

Read "Leadership on the Line" by Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky or visit [www.cambridge-leadership.com](http://www.cambridge-leadership.com).

## Need help identifying the adaptive challenges?

### Ask your people five questions:

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- 1.** When you think about the future of your organization, department, team or community, what concerns you the most? (By focusing on “the most,” people tend to articulate adaptive challenges.)
- 2.** What makes progress difficult on this concern? (This identifies the big process challenges — hallmarks of adaptive work — which often need to be the real focus of acts of leadership.)
- 3.** What type of leadership (attitudes and behaviors) will it take from all of us to overcome those barriers?
- 4.** What makes that type of leadership difficult for you? (This helps drive home that exercising leadership on adaptive challenges isn’t easy, and no one does it well all the time.)
- 5.** What will it take to build more of that type of leadership within our group? (Implementing the answers to this question could bring significant progress on the adaptive challenges concerning people the most!)

## **What gets in the way of telling technical and adaptive work apart?**

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### GIVE ME SUCCESS NOW!

Our culture drives us to produce quickly, clouding our judgment and leading us to treat most things as technical problems that can be solved quickly.

### I WANT TO BE A HERO

Taking the time to distinguish technical and adaptive work means I might be seen as someone just sitting around and not saving the day.

### IGNORANCE

Many of us are simply unaware of these distinctions, so we can't even contemplate distinguishing between the two.



We're trying to establish an employee wellness program at work. Our company is committed to its success, but we're struggling to get started because we know there will be a lot of elements involved in implementing it. Where do we begin?

-WORRIED WILLIAM IN THE WELLNESS DEPARTMENT

Dear William,

Start by writing down the technical and adaptive elements of setting up a wellness program. The adaptive challenges are the ones that involve people's values and behaviors. At the top of the list of adaptive elements could be "discovering how employees currently approach wellness" and "finding out how open employees are to engaging in workplace wellness." If this were my project I'd also put "developing a team of champions" in the adaptive column. Our advice: Don't roll out a company-wide program until you have a group of influential people at all levels committed to success.

Onward!