

YOUR LEADERSHIP

# EDGE

LEAD ANYTIME, ANYWHERE.

ED O'MALLEY  
AMANDA CEBULA

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## CHAPTER 4

### DIAGNOSE SITUATION

# *Take the Temperature*

Good cooks know all about heat. Too much heat (too hot or for too long) ruins a meal – the stew turns to mush or the steak is too tough. But too little heat is disastrous too. Getting the oven hot enough and cooking just long enough are key to a perfect dish. Cooks benefit from recipes, thermostats, oven knobs and kitchen timers to help get it right.

Leadership requires similar attention to heat. You need enough energy around an issue to motivate people to do something differently. But too much heat can cause people to panic, fight, flee or shut down and ignore the situation. Knowing where people are on a scale of “cold” to “warm enough to do good work” to “things are so hot people are going nuts” is critical. It would be great if – like modern-day chefs – you had a digital readout telling you precisely how ready a group is to make progress.



"NOT YET."

Absent a digital readout, you need to examine the clues and make a diagnosis. It helps to know three common temperature indicators.

- ▶ **ENGAGEMENT.** How many people are working on the issue? The heat might be too low if there are just a few.
- ▶ **PROGRESS.** Is the conversation generating momentum or stagnation? Stagnation means not enough heat. Momentum equals heat.
- ▶ **PURPOSE.** Is there enough of a common purpose to keep people “checked in”? If the answer is no, there’s not enough heat. If yes, there’s plenty of heat.



It helps to be aware of what you might see if it’s too hot or too cold.

#### **FOR INSTANCE:**

- ▶ People leaving the room either because they are bored or overwhelmed.
- ▶ Checking phones, falling asleep, zoning out of the conversation (again either bored or checking out because they can’t handle the ambiguity or conflict).
- ▶ Body language that says people are either not interested (too cold) or angry and frustrated (too hot).

When doing adaptive work, taking the temperature is a full-time job. Don’t let your system get too hot, but don’t let things get so chilly people can avoid the work.

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#### **WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT TAKING THE TEMPERATURE?**

Spend some time on the A.K. Rice Institute website at [akriceinstitute.org](http://akriceinstitute.org). Purchase a book or attend one of the institute’s events focused on understanding systems and group relations.

*There are two different types of leaders. A person can either be like a thermometer or a thermostat. A thermometer will tell you what the temperature is. A thermostat will not only tell you what the temperature is, but it'll move you to the temperature you need to get to.*

— KEVIN MCCARTHY

## How do you take the temperature?

- ▶ **ASK QUESTIONS AND LISTEN DEEPLY TO ANSWERS.** Provocative questions release the heat beneath the polite conversations by revealing diverse perspectives.

### TRY THESE:

- What is on anyone's mind that you haven't said out loud yet?
- What values are in conflict here?
- What worries you?
- If there were an elephant in this room, what would it be?
- What are you most excited about here? Why?
- What's another way of looking at this situation?
- How might an outsider describe what is going on here?
- What would an outsider see that we are missing?
- Are we being as productive as possible here?
- On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate our level of productivity in the last 30 minutes?
- How will we take productivity up to a 10 for our remaining time?

- ▶ **NOTICE BODY LANGUAGE.** Name what you see (e.g., "No one is looking others in the eye.") and ask about the energy or emotion behind what bodies are doing.

- ▶ **OBSERVE TONE OF VOICE.** Is the tone open and exploratory (right amount of heat) or conflicted and reactive (too hot) or apathetic (too cold)?



- ▶ **PROVIDE A PROVOCATIVE INTERPRETATION.** If people ignore a difficult interpretation, you might have hit a hidden hot spot.
- ▶ **MODEL THE TEMPERATURE YOU HOPE TO CREATE.** Give people permission to be vulnerable, passionate or impatient with the rate of change by modeling those qualities yourself. Get hot yourself, and invite others to do the same. If no one follows your example, it may be a sign people don't share your enthusiasm for the issue.
- ▶ **RECOGNIZE THE OUTSIDE FACTORS THAT MAY BE AT PLAY.** People bring a lot of baggage that cannot be observed (e.g., a recent argument with a spouse or co-worker, getting ready for their child's soccer game, good or bad experiences with others in the room, etc.), which affects the temperature of the room.

Effectively taking the temperature allows you to intervene more skillfully to make progress. You'll be wiser and safer. You'll lower the risk level, because your efforts will be smarter and better timed. You'll know whether your first moves are to raise the heat or to work with the heat that's already there.



I just became pastor of a church where the previous pastor had been in the position for more than 20 years. He was well liked but didn't challenge people. He let them do whatever they wanted as long as they didn't rock the boat. How can I start making changes among a pretty complacent group without getting thrown out right after starting?

- PASTOR PAUL

Dear Paul,

You'll find a lot of answers to what you need to do in the Energize Others and Intervene Skillfully sections of this book. However, make sure you take the temperature often!

"Making changes among a pretty complacent group" means you'll be raising the heat. Good for you! But it's a tenuous thing. Raise it too fast or too high and you'll blow the lid. Our advice is to create a small, diverse and informal group of congregation members to meet with regularly. The stated purpose would be an informal advisory board for you, the new pastor. However, you should also think of the group as a thermostat for the church.

Do more than just listen to them. Watch for clues about the temperature. For example, having trouble getting members to come to the meetings could mean the church's overall heat is too low – it just doesn't seem important to them. Or the heat might be just about right if a meeting runs long because of robust discussion and debate.

Onward!

P.S. The well-liked former pastor also might be an interesting gauge of the heat. So cultivate a relationship with him too.