FEATURE

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"THE CLASS OF THE FORKING PATHS": LEADERSHIP AND "CASE-IN-POINT"

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"It sounds like some of you feel you're getting no value from this class or think that we are wasting time. Some would like for me to leave. I'm open to that possibility and thank you for your honesty. What do you think we should be doing now?"

This is not a simulation, a test, or an experiment. This is a real question I asked in one of my leadership workshops where I use a teaching methodology called "case-in-point." An integral part of the theory of Adaptive Leadership™ developed over the past 15 years by Ronald Heifetz, Marty Linsky, and their colleagues at the Harvard Kennedy School, case-in-point is a methodology for teaching leadership experientially.

According to the Adaptive Leadership framework, leadership is the practice of "mobilizing people to tackle tough issues, adapt and thrive." With case-in-point, the facilitator use situations and events present in the classroom to illustrate real-world concepts. In front of our eyes, the group dynamics of the class provide powerful material for reflection in real time, helping participants in a day class, leadership retreat, or university course to develop their ability to innovate and adapt to changing circumstances in their organizations.

In this article, I would like to share my learning about the use of this methodology and explore its potential for leadership work in 21st-century organizations.

TEAM TIP

The next time people engage in a heated exchange during a meeting, with the permission of other participants, facilitate a brief reflection. Ask, "Can someone describe what is happening right now? What are the positions being debated? What interests do these positions express?"

A Call to Congruence

Carl Rogers once said, "I realize that I have lost interest in being a teacher. . . . I am only interested in being a learner, preferably learning things that matter." Leadership is something that matters to me.

Have you ever been taught emotional intelligence with the instructor using PowerPoint slides? Or taken a time management course where the instructor shows up late for class? How about learning yoga poses from an angry and mean practitioner? When I started teaching leadership, I vividly remember facing the challenge of how to make my content match my way of teaching. When teaching leadership, this call to congruence—how *what* I am teaching is demonstrated in *how* I teach it—was the major headache of my work and a fateful question. I discovered that teaching leadership is in itself an act of leadership.

When you prepare to teach leadership, you face a pedagogical bind: You need to determine which learning tasks will get across the material effectively to other adults—who are not necessarily less "leaderful" than you—and what content to select. I knew what I *didn't* want to do: that was teach leadership "in the third person," through mere descriptions and explanations or five-step slides. I struggled with how to create a space for my students where leadership was lived in the first person rather than studied like a theoretical concept.

I am a World Café host. The World Café is a methodology that allows large groups to deepen their inquiry through important questions in a setting that promotes informal conversations and authenticity. From that methodology, I learned the art of hosting conversations that matter. From Action Learning, I also learned how to leverage the power of great questions in order to learn in real-time as individuals, as a team, and as an organization. So when asked to design a leadership course, I decided that, rather than teaching or preaching, I would rely on evoking, naming, reminding, recognizing, questioning, acknowledging, and affirming. I stopped asking "how can I teach?" and instead started asking "what if leadership is already in the room, and my work is to give it the space and freedom to manifest itself?" I became familiar with the concepts of the Adaptive Leadership framework, in which a leader comes to a group armed with the strong belief that creativity and innovation are the product of interpersonal and intergroup relationships, and that leadership is about engaging differences for positive outcomes. I learned that leaders must pose difficult questions, knock people out of their comfort zones, and manage the resulting distress. According to Heifetz, they expose

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their followers "to the painful reality of their condition and demand that they fashion a response."

The experiment started, but I failed to read the signs: I hadn't remembered yet that the words "experiment" and "peril" come from the same root, with the peril being the courageous act of trying this leadership pedagogy in a real class.

A Daring Way to Teach Leadership

"Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth." —Mike Tyson

I knew it was bad. After that first day, the program director wanted to meet me after hours. She started our conversation saying, "So, how did it go today?" She continued, "What's going on with those evaluations?" and finished with, "You have to do something for next class; we can't have the same problems tomorrow."

I couldn't say that I hadn't been warned. My contact at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government had suggested that I not use case-in-point; she said I didn't have enough of a "name" or reputation to do it. But I pressed on. People had complained to the program director about the class, and now I had to change something or risk repercussions. Or did I really need to? It was time to step into the unknown.

The decision that night was the beginning of a new phase for me as a leadership educator. I realized that, in my own way, I was dealing with the adaptive challenge of teaching leadership, taking risks, stepping into my aspirations to elevate the discourse in the class, and tapping into a bigger call beyond evaluation forms. I had reached a deeper awareness of myself as an educator, of my impact, and of the system I was part of.

I could have gone a different direction; instead, I reaffirmed my commitment to case-in-point and made only two adjustments to the session. I owned my role as a leader and modeled the behaviors I wanted my students to learn by practice. The results were encouraging. Here are a few excerpts from my students' evaluations that day:

- "I now lead with questions and have been able to unleash my team's potential as well."
- "This will likely prove to be the most important course of the program in the next stage of my career."
- "The idea of the majority of problems being an adaptive challenge was an epiphany, and the open-ended questioning has been extremely helpful in reorienting the way I think about things, particularly my own behavior."
- "I missed the point, assuming that there was one."
- "I disagree with the fact that taking responsibility is what we should do in all our life events."

(This student called me two months later. He had second thoughts about the evaluation forms he filled out after the class.)

I was off the hook with the program director and in for the ride—regardless of my many mistakes—with this risky and yet powerfully invigorating way to teach. Case-in-point had allowed me to learn and practice leadership experientially in a way that was aligned with my purpose as an educator.

Two Critical Distinctions

According to Heifetz, the Adaptive Leadership framework includes two critical distinctions that are central for understanding case-in-point:

- Authority/Leadership
- Technical Problems/Adaptive Challenges

Authority/Leadership. The first distinction clarifies that having a position of authority does not mean that we exercise leadership; paradoxically, the powerful expectations on the role make us less likely to exercise leadership. Heifetz reminds us that an expert is not necessarily a leader:

> For many challenges in our lives, experts or authorities can solve our problems and thereby meet our needs. We look to doctors to make us healthy, mechanics to fix our cars. . . . We give these people power, authorizing them to find solutions and often they can deliver. . . . Problems that we can solve through the knowledge of experts or senior authorities are technical challenges. The problems may be complex, such as a broken arm or a broken carburetor, but experts know exactly how to fix them.

To determine whether we need to exercise authority or leadership, we need to analyze the nature of the problem we face. That brings us to the second distinction:

Technical Problems/Adaptive Challenges. Rather than being technical problems, many of the challenges we face today are adaptive. Heifetz and Linsky maintain:

> The problems that require leadership are those that the experts cannot solve. We call these adaptive challenges. The solutions lie not in technical answers, but rather in people themselves. . . . The surgeon can fix your son's broken arm, but she cannot prevent your son from rollerblading without elbow pads. The dietitian can recommend a weight-loss program, but she cannot curb your love for chocolate chip cookies. . . . Most people would rather have the person in authority take the work off their shoulders, protect them from disorienting change, and meet challenges on their behalf. But the real work of leadership usually involves giving the work back to the people who must adapt, and mobilizing them to do so.

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The practice of leadership takes place in an authority structure, by those who either have or do not have authority. In an adaptive challenge, the authority structure—the people in charge—can contribute, but others must participate as well. All people involved are part of the problem, and their shared ownership of that problem becomes part of the solution itself.

Reflecting on these two distinctions, it is easy to see how professors, trainers, and consultants end up committing what Heifetz calls "the classic error": treating the adaptive challenge of teaching as a technical problem, and applying the power of expertise by telling people what to do.

We feel as though we are fulfilling our end of the deal; professors, trainers, and consultants are paid for teaching, not for facilitating learning in others. "You are the expert: teach us" seems to be the implicit contract that students expect instructors to uphold. And, indeed, many educators consider teaching a technical problem, exercise authority rather than leadership, and deploy their power or personality to influence student learning. In the process, they avoid conflict, demonstrate resolve and focus in their use of time, and provide decisive and assertive answers to problems through authoritative knowledge built over many years. Learners in the class find comfort in the predictability of the endeavor and by its inevitable output delivered according to the plan. But both the instructor's and the learners' need for control and predictability is a symptom of an inability to trust: the less we are able to trust, the more control we need and the more vulnerable we are to its loss.

The cost of this collusion—of the professor to be a central and predictable authority figure, and of the student to be passive yet in control—is the energy, engagement, effectiveness, and ultimately meaning of the learning enterprise itself. A quick-fix mentality wins, one that shies away from the confrontation, frustration, and confusion needed for learning and unlearning to happen. The result is that people lose their ability to grow through experience, tolerate ambiguity, and use sense-making skills.

Case-in-point supports learning over teaching, struggle over prescription, questions over answers, tension over comfort, and capacities and needs over deficiencies. It is about embracing the willingness to be exposed and vulnerable, cultivating persistence in the face of inertial pushbacks, and self-regulating in the face of challenge or open hostility. Why? Because this is what leadership work looks like in the real world. In the process, students and the facilitator learn to recognize their default responses, identify productive and unproductive patterns of behavior, and test their stamina, resilience, and readiness to change the system with others.

Planning and Facilitating with Case-in-Point

Heifetz describes the challenge in doing case-in-point:

> During this process, the instructor walks the razor's edge between generating overwhelming stress and allowing comfortable passivity. Students learn by example that giving responsibility for problems back to the social system at a rate it can digest may be central to leadership.

In case-in-point, a facilitator must not take reactions toward him personally (that is, he must separate himself from the role) and must encourage the same in participants. Recognize that it is difficult to move out of a role and analyze an event if you are part of it. This may mean not taking offense for disrespectful behavior and later asking the person to reflect on how productive his statements were.

Ultimately, the role of the facilitator in case-in-point is to demonstrate the theory in practice, by acting on the system in the class. Case-in-point uses the authority structure and the roles in a class (instructor, participants, stakeholders) and the social expectations and norms of the system (in this case, the class) to practice in real time the meaning of the key concepts of authority, leadership, adaptive challenge, technical problems, factions, and so on.

Planning. How does a facilitator plan a session where she uses case-in-point? Like in Jorge Luis Borges' novel *The Garden of the Forking Paths*, the text—in this case, the lesson plan—is only the point of departure for many possible learning events and lessons learned. The facilitator follows the emergence of interesting themes amid interpersonal dynamics and investigates those dynamics, in response to the guiding question, "What does this moment illustrate that is relevant both to the learning and to the practice of leadership in participants' lives?" What emerges in the action pushes the class down one path of many possible junctures. For the facilitator, the implicit lesson plan turns into a labyrinth of many exciting yet fierce—and sometimes overwhelming—possibilities.

Facilitating. A case-in-point facilitator's main tool is the question. Questions are the currency of inquiry, and ultimately case-in-point involves ongoing research into the art of leadership that benefits as more people join the conversation. Here a few great questions that I have used successfully:

- "What's your intention right now?"
- "What did you notice as you were speaking?"
- "In this moment, what do you need from the group to proceed?"
- "What happened as soon as you asked everyone to open their books to page 5?"

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- "What have you noticed happens in the group when I sit down?"
- "Am I exercising leadership or authority right now?"

Michael Johnstone and Maxime Fern have expanded on four different levels of intervention for a case-in-point facilitator.

At the individual level: The facilitator may comment on someone's contribution or action for the sake of reflection, trying to uncover assumptions or beliefs. For example, "Mark, could I ask you to assess the impact on the group of the statement you just made?" "What should I do at this point and why should I do it?" "Are you receiving enough support from others to continue with your point?"

At the relationship level: The facilitator might intervene to name or observe patterns that develop between two or more participants. For example, she may say something like, "I noticed that when Beth speaks, some of you seem not to pay attention." Or "What does this disagreement tell us about the different values that are present in the room?"

At the group level: The facilitator might confront a faction or a group with a theme emerging from the conversation, maybe after participants agree with or disagree on a controversial statement. For example, "What does the group propose now? Can you articulate the purpose that you are pursuing?" "I noticed many of you are eager to do something, as long as we stop this process of reflection. Why is that?"

At the larger level: The facilitator might comment on participants' organizations, communities, nationalities, or ethnicities, saying for example, "In light of the large number of foreign nationals in the room, what are the implications of the insistence in the literature that Jack Welch of GE is a model for global leadership?"

Qualities of a Case-in-Point Facilitator

Besides a sense of adventure, here are a few qualities that have helped me in the class in facilitating with case-in-point:

1. Thinking Systemically Under Pressure. With case-in-point, I have relearned systems thinking and finally appreciate what thinking systemically under pressure and acting systemically "live" really look like. Case-in-point aims to re-create in the class the work of leaders in systems—that is, mobilizing the social system so it does the work of dealing with tough problems. This perspective reframes leadership altogether; suddenly, leadership work appears to be what it really is, that is, identifying and acting on the leverage points of a social structure to create reinforcing/balancing loops in service of organizational success. When leaders think systemically, they come to see that people are not right or wrong in their opinions or actions, but simply effective or not effective at influencing the many variables of the complex system in which they operate. In teaching with case-in-point, I have found great value in making those variables explicit for the group to see in action.

2. Being Comfortable with Improvising. I have used case-in-point with participants so accustomed to the traditional "death by PowerPoint" approach that they walk in the room and decide where to sit based on my answer to their question, "Where are you going to project the slides?" What I like about this new approach is that it is improvisational; in case-in-point teaching, what goes on in the classroom itself is "the grist for the mill" for learning and practicing leadership within a social group. As such, it is unpredictable and truly emergent. For the facilitator, this unpredictability means that you have a sense of how the first three minutes will go, but then your trained intuition must lead you in navigating the disequilibrium in the class. And indeed, I had a participant mention to me that the class was annoying because it looked too much like the work he was doing in his office.

It has helped me to have absolute clarity about the key issues that are likely to show up in real time, like students' expectations that the instructor will guide them and take care of their discomfort, factions and the values they represent, people's tendency to leap to action for its own sake, and so on.

3. Holding the Space for the Living Case Study to Emerge. As a World Café host, this concept has been easy to adapt in my leadership development work. I find it critical for case-in-point to create an atmosphere, a setting (Heifetz calls it "a holding environment") where inquiry, questions, and experimentation are welcome.

I find the first few minutes of the class to be critical for setting the context for learning and inquiry. If this phase is successful, within a short time, we have created a space for learning through direct observation. All is there for our reflective learning: acts of deference to authority, conflict between factions, character assassinations, apathy, the inability to act, demagogy, scapegoating, courage, fear. The seemingly abstract concepts we read in the news or in history books—like the rise to power of a dictator, the inability of an organization to deal with a corporate takeover, or the disturbing group dynamics of exclusion—materialize in front of our very eyes in powerful vividness.

4. Using Emotional Intelligence and Conflict Skills. Working with case-in-point has allowed me to analyze with more clarity the misconception I often notice that good decision making or good leadership is dispassionate, rational, and totally unbiased. In fact, I believe the opposite is true: It is not only nearly impossible, it's counterproductive to try to eliminate passion and emotion from decision making. The fact

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is that those feelings are the same ones that will drive the successful implementation of the team's decision. Heifetz calls this "below the neck" work. Frustration and verbal aggression often show up during case-in-point sessions. The trick is to deal with them as data and manage them accordingly. You must be aware of the impact of your teaching. Generally speaking, it is necessary to hold a gentle and compassionate approach toward those in the class who get impatient, angry, or openly confrontational. A key metaphor from the Adaptive Leadership framework, "the pressure cooker," helps in this endeavor. You have to regulate the pressure: not too much so that the situation won't explode, not too little so that nothing gets learned.

If it is true that great leaders do not take "yes" for an answer, then your success as a leader and as a case-in-point facilitator may depend on your willingness to push the inquiry of a group into passionate, conflictive territory. Interpersonal friction, "broken record" ideas, and intolerance for new questions are symptoms of work avoidance that need to be dealt with directly and without hesitation. This is a tricky area where there is much learning potential for the instructor, as disputes are often a positive sign of moving an issue forward and of the beginning of change.

A Way of Being, Not a Way of Teaching

For me, case-in-point has represented a journey of identity. As such, it is rooted in the distinction between an ontological (science of being) versus an epistemological (science of knowing) view of leadership. When we teach using the case-in-point approach, we're helping our students learn how to act their way into knowing what is right for their specific organization rather than bestowing our knowledge for them to apply, whether it fits their circumstances or not. Likewise, case-in-point is a statement of congruity, of "practicing what we preach" and, in the process, learning to be better instructors. At the same time, we introduce our students to an exciting realm of possibility, aspiration, and innovation beyond technique or theoretical knowledge.

Heitfetz says, "Live your life as a leadership laboratory." For educators, doing so means experimenting with it, in small pieces first, then in larger increments, celebrating mistakes, and taking pleasure from the journey. This process seems to me the real gift of case-in-point, and it is the best wish that I can make to those who will dare to start using it. ◘

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For Further Reading

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Heifetz, R., and Laurie, D., "The Work of Leadership" (*Harvard Business Review* 75, 1997)

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NEXT STEPS

Rules of Engagement

Johnstone and Fern provide the following rules of engagement for case-in-point facilitators:

- Prepare participants by warning them that learning will be experiential and may get heated. For example, create a one-page overview to leave on each table that clarifies all the concepts of the class and includes bibliographical information.
- Encourage listening and respect (though not too much politeness). For example, establish a clear rule that participants need to listen to each other and state their opinions as such rather than as facts.
- Distinguish between case-in-point and debriefing events. For example, set up two different places in the room—one for case-in-point sessions and one for debriefs—or announce ahead of time which kind of event will follow.
- Facilitators must not take reactions toward them personally and must encourage the same in participants.
- Recognize that no one, including the facilitator, is flawless. Acknowledge and use your own shortcomings by recognizing mistakes and openly apologizing for errors.
- Treat all interpretations as hypotheses. Ask people to consider their own reactions and thoughts as data that clarifies what is going on in the room.
- Respect confidentiality.
- Take responsibility for your own actions. Invite people to own their piece of the "mess" by asking how they have colluded in the problem they are trying to deal with.

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