Leadership for the Common Good

The Functions of Leadership
This article examines the functions of leadership and two situations in which traditional leadership fails.¹ Martin Chemers suggests that leadership is a group activity requiring social influence to achieve a goal. The definition seems simple, but organizational leadership is complex:

- Groups and organizations are by nature inefficient and require coordination
- The time and energy spent in coordination cannot be used to produce results.
- Since individuals cannot accomplish most of the productive activities in society, organizations are essential to achieve results.
- Leaders are essential to organizational coordination.

Most organizations need both internal maintenance and external adaptability. Internally, the organization must create reliable, predictable, and accountable standard operating procedures to provide a stable base for productive operation. Externally, organizations must be sensitive, flexible, and responsive to changes in the environment. Unfortunately, maintenance and adaptability are contradictory. Procedures that ensure reliability and predictability reduce flexibility and responsiveness, and vice versa. Effective leadership finds the balance between the two functions.

Structured Problems
Balancing internal maintenance and external adaptability seems easiest when the problem is at least moderately-structured; that is, when the number of decision-makers is small, the alternatives few, and preferences clear. Unfortunately, most of the critical problems confronting American society are ill-structured:

- Many different decision-makers
- Unlimited alternatives
- Conflict among competing goals
- Unknown outcomes

Ill-structured problems cross traditional boundaries, reflect competing definitions, and have no quick fixes or solutions. Under these conditions, Jeffrey Luke suggests that public (or catalytic) leadership has four critical functions:

- Focus: Elevate the issue to the public and policy agendas
- Engage: Convene the diverse set of people, agencies, and interests needed to address the issue
- Stimulate: Identify multiple strategies for action
- Sustain: Maintain momentum by formalizing networks and sharing information

**Predictable Surprises**

Neither traditional nor catalytic leadership will be effective unless the leaders can anticipate predictable surprises. A predictable surprise arises when leaders unquestionably had all the data and insight they needed to recognize a crisis, but failed to respond with effective preventative action. Predictable surprises have several characteristics:

- A problem exists and that the problem will not solve itself.
- A problem is getting worse over time.
- Fixing the problem will cost significantly in the present, but will delay benefits.
- Predictable surprises incur a certain cost, but may avoid a much larger cost.
- Decision-makers, organizations, and nations are caught by surprise because humans prefer to maintain the status quo.
- A small vocal minority benefits from inaction and is motivated to prevent change.

According to Bazerman and Watkins, effective response requires leaders to remove the cognitive, organizational, and political barriers to action:

- Recognition: Should the threat have been recognized?
- Prioritization: If recognized, was the emerging threat prioritized appropriately?
- Mobilization: If prioritized, did the organization mobilize effectively to deal with the problem?

Under these conditions, effective leaders provide focus, energize the organization, exercise judgment, and have the courage to take unpopular stands. However, the organization itself must be responsive and resilient.

**Conclusion**

Effective leadership, then, is more than command and control.

- It requires balancing internal maintenance and external adaptability.
• If the problem is ill-structured, it requires leaders to focus, engage, stimulate, and sustain collective action.
• Most important, it requires the recognition that many problems are predictable, but require energizing leaders and flexible organizations.