Risky Business

Leadership today requires new skills to navigate a rapidly changing world.

BY MARTY LINSKY

e are living in complex times, complicated and uncomfortable for many people, but especially challenging for politicians.

I was a state representative in Massachusetts eons ago when we could attack challenges one by one and the arguments were mostly about where we were going to spend the next dollar, not where we were going to find it.

At the time, it all seemed difficult and contentious enough. But those days were child's play compared to what state lawmakers deal with today.

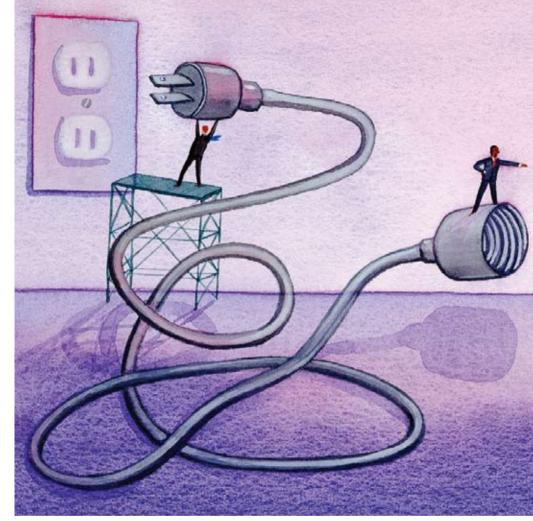
In the current turmoil, legislators must develop initiatives and make choices under conditions of great uncertainty, where everything is interconnected, change is a constant, and resources are, to say the least, hugely constrained. Every big decision seems a political nightmare. No matter what the legislator does, some of the people counting on her or him to do the right thing—and on whom the legislator is counting to get re-elected—will be upset.

Every politician knows how much fun it is to stand in front of an angry crowd of opponents and take a strong stand. It makes you feel even more puffed up and self-righteous than you did the day before. But today's turmoil is forcing politicians to spend more time than they bargained for standing in front of crowds of angry supporters.

That brings me to my favorite definition of leadership: Leadership is disappointing your own people at a rate they can absorb.

Whether it is immigration, taxation or environmental protection, whether you are

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on the right or on the left, it is easy to do what your own people want you to do, to take a strong stand that is supported by the vast majority of those to whom you are accountable or to whom you feel obligated. That's pandering, and every politician, me included, has done a robust amount of it.

But pandering to your own people has nothing to do with leadership; pandering is the antithesis of leadership.

A SEA CHANGE?

Leadership is always difficult and risky. That's why we see so little of it. It is even more difficult and riskier today. That's why lawmakers who demonstrate leadership are so noteworthy.

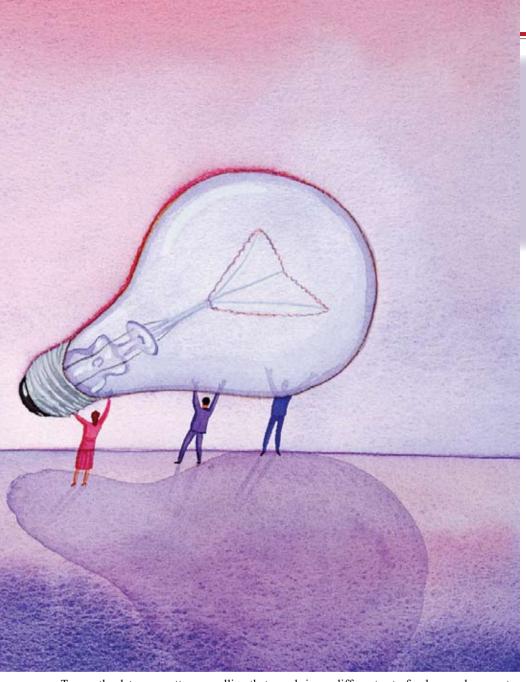
We are living in a period of unpredictability that is unlike any in our lifetimes. That means leadership will have to change, to look different than it has in calmer waters.

In thinking about leadership under the current circumstances, the first question is whether we are in the midst of some fundamental transition or just a temporary glitch.

Is the current turmoil simply a bump in the road or a sea change? If it's a bump in the road, we can all hunker down and wait until it is behind us.

If it's a sea change, then we have to think about how we are going to be different going forward, how we can be effective in pursuing our deepest purposes in the face of a new reality.

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To me, the data are pretty compelling that this is a sea change.

- ◆We are in the midst of economic uncertainty unlike any we have seen since the Great Depression.
- ◆ Environmental challenges threaten sustainability for millions of people and perhaps for the livable planet.
- ◆The technological revolution has flattened the Earth and turned those of us who were once typists and telephoners into technophiles and technophobes, social networkers and tweeters.
- ◆ The generational divides are more palpable than they have been since the 1960s. The baby boomers are retiring—or were until the stock market crashed—and the millenniums

bring a different set of values and norms to the workplace and to the family, creating conflict, miscommunication and huge succession issues.

- ◆ The era of U.S. hegemony is ending. Americans who became accustomed to power and privilege now are waiting in the long "Other" line when crossing international borders. The power of the U.S. military, culture and economy are all less certain than they were a decade ago. If 9/11 wasn't evidence enough, then the global economic meltdown ought to be conclusive on the question of our interconnectedness. We are all related to each other. And all problems are shared.
- ◆And the world of nations is facing a new kind of international threat, from loosely con-

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nected factions undefined by national boundaries or 20th century modes of warfare.

NEW NORMAL

If we are in a sea change, the new normal will be characterized by three qualities: future uncertainty, inadequate information and constant change.

How will leadership look different under these conditions?

Six skills will be essential, partially replacing those with which we are more familiar and comfortable: adaptation, experimentation, collaboration, orchestration, imagination and self-preservation.

For every politician, the challenge will be to give up some of what you know how to do and do well, some of what has enabled you to be elected, and learn something new.

ADAPT, DON'T JUST EXECUTE

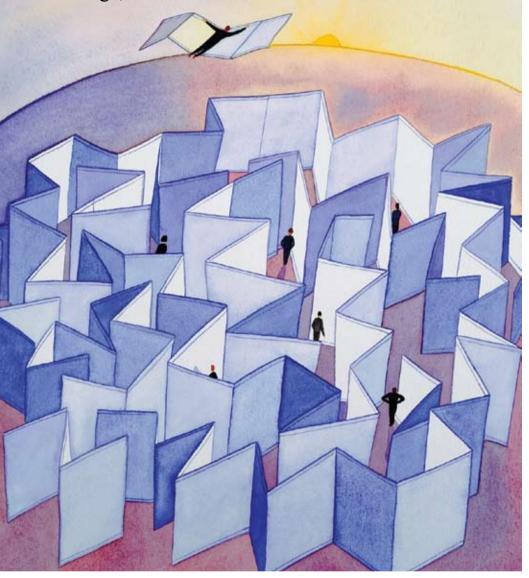
For decades, organizations have focused on executing well. But in the new normal, the skill of adaptation will be equally important. Adaptation requires making the hard decisions about what is essential and what is expendable in order to make progress.

RUN EXPERIMENTS, DON'T JUST SOLVE PROBLEMS

In a world of uncertainty and interconnectedness, problems are not discrete and do not get "solved." Every initiative has unintended consequences. Today's "solution" is just a temporary resting place. We now need to bring an experimental mindset to problem solving. Thinking that way allows you to run multiple initiatives at the same time to see what works, to monitor closely, make mid-course corrections, and to treat a lack of success as a learning opportunity rather than a failure.

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PRACTICE INTERDEPENDENCE, NOT JUST SELF-RELIANCE

In a flat world, practicing interdependence, internally and externally, will be imperative. Internally, it means the future will be invented by people at all levels of the organization, not just those at the top. Externally, it means alliances will be the norm, especially unusual ones with former adversaries and factions who previously seemed unconnected to your work.

ORCHESTRATE CONFLICT, DON'T JUST RESOLVE IT

In a time of uncertainty and rapid change, conflict will typically represent underlying,

unresolved value issues. Increasingly, it will be the role of bosses, parents and, yes, politicians to expose those issues, rather than to resolve them. Remember this phrase: "Let's talk about what kind of an organization, what kind of a state, what kind of a family we want to be." In a conflict of values, once the authority figure takes a stand, then she becomes the issue.

LOOK FOR NEXT PRACTICES, NOT JUST BEST PRACTICES

The challenge is to invent the future, rather than have it invented for you. Best practices are always useful, but when you are going where no one has ever been before, what has worked in the past is of limited use.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF. DON'T SACRIFICE YOUR BODY FOR THE CAUSE

Uncertainty breeds anxiety and stress. People who depend on you need you to be at the top of your game. Taking care of yourself is an imperative, not a self-indulgence. Getting enough sleep, exercising regularly and eating right are the easy parts. More difficult sometimes, and certainly more sensitive to talk about, is the importance of getting love and affection from the right people to make you feel like a whole and valued person.

FROM HERE TO WHERE?

So what does this all mean for exercising leadership as a state legislator?

Cross-boundary coalitions will be more productive in addressing issues. Politicians always have been comfortable with unusual alliances. In an interdependent world, however, it is even more critical to have the support of a wide range of voices. The typical political lines of party, race, ideology, gender, geography and tenure will be less meaningful if progress is to be made.

Lawmakers increasingly will have to invent, rather than copy. Because we are all where we have never been before, lawmakers will have to be courageous, trying new ways of approaching problems, rather than looking to what has worked in other jurisdictions.

Leaders will also find a larger role in helping their constituents adapt to new realities rather than pandering to their expressed wants and calming their anxieties. One way to do this would be to frame new ideas for solving problems as experiments, rather than solutions. This approach allows you to try several initiatives at the same time, make mid-course corrections and learn from the results.

Leadership in the legislature will look less like taking a strong stand and more like ensuring that the toughest issues are addressed.

The future is as unclear as ever. Yet it is uncertainty that creates the opportunity for leadership. Taking advantage of the moment will require unusual courage and leadership skills, adapted to meet the current challenge.

This is a great time to be a lawmaker. It is also an extremely difficult time. But what an opportunity to make a difference.

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