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The Intersection of Leadership and Risk

Recently I was listening to Good Life Project podcast by Jonathan Fields. The topic was on taking social risks, and in his podcast, he recounted a story about a time he took a social risk and the positive impact that it had on his life.

During his story, he mentioned the natural orientation of certain people to take social risks. As a leadership coach, trainer and consultant, I've had many conversations with people over the years about challenges they experience in their work, civic and personal lives. I have often been in the position to challenge people to the edge of their comfort zone in the spirit of developing their leadership effectiveness. I have often been surprised by risks, even seemingly small risks, that people seemed unwilling to consider. Anything that feels like risk is often tossed aside as a "waste of breath".

It is easy to assume that some people are oriented more toward risk aversion, that they would rather live with the current situation or complain about it rather than step up or step in to do something differently. In reality, the issue appears to be much more complex than simply whether one is naturally oriented to risk taking.

While social risk is mostly an internal battle played out with mostly internal consequences (in Jonathan's case, should he push against his natural orientation of introversion to sit with a group of strangers while on a backpacking trip in Australia), exercising leadership often requires much bigger risks, with internal and external battles played out with both personal and public consequences.

My curiosity on this topic has been piqued many times over the years, but as I listened to the podcast, it prompted me to dig deeper. I began to interview people that had taken risks to get a deeper understanding and perspective. This process created a whole new dialogue about an uncomfortable truth of leadership that typically people don't speak about openly.

Leading in Ambiguity and Complexity

We no longer live in a world where our technical expertise or skills are enough to see us through. The world context is always changing, there is a political shift occurring in our country, state and local politics are becoming ever more complicated. Our individual and collective ability to address challenges is now more than ever reliant on our ability to collaborate and to create and navigate relationships across multiple groups representing multiple interests.

When the challenge is confusing, when the path forward is unclear, when there are multiple and competing ideas for moving forward, it takes someone to stand up and do something different. Anyone can do that regardless of their title or authority. While anyone can exercise leadership, it can seem more difficult without the protection of authority.

Standing up can feel lonely, isolating and terribly scary. That's why many don't do it and when they do, there is often a very compelling reason to do so. Through my dialogue with others, a message I heard clearly is that leadership, true leadership, *requires* risk. As one person stated, "You can't take risk out of leadership—there will always be risk. It is unavoidable."

Types and Examples of Risk

When I first started talking to people more specifically about leadership and risk, my first move was simply to put out a general call to those in my social network. After responses started coming in and I had the opportunity to talk with people, I realized how salient this topic is to our times.

I asked people to identify an example of a risk they had taken, and we explored it through that lens. Before digging into their stories, I asked people to rank their risk on a scale of 1-10 (1 being low, to 10 being very high). I got responses on the scale anywhere from a 4-5, all the way to 10. From these stories, and from those I've heard over the years, I would like to share with you some of the major lessons and advice.

First, some examples of leadership risk taking across the continuum of low to high. While not an exhaustive list, this offers an idea of the kinds of things people exercising leadership have done to make progress on very important issues. Things like confronting an individual about an interpersonal conflict, challenging a supervisor or manager on his/her idea, challenging a team to think through trade-offs of a potentially dangerous direction, slowing down a process by asking hard questions, exposing the "real" issue that no one else will address, challenging a board member or an elected official, showing up at an open meeting representing a group traditionally viewed as the "outsider", running for office against a heavily entrenched individual, representing an issue or position held in disfavor by a large majority of the population, or exposing deceit by a very important and well-respected government official.

Caring about Something Deeply Matters More than Someone's Personal Orientation to Risk Taking

Remember back to the podcast at the beginning of this article where Fields described a natural orientation to social risk taking. When it comes to leadership and risk, personality seems to be less a factor than believing in something deeply. In all cases, the people I talked with demonstrated what they described as a "very strong moral compass", and the point at which risk became the best option was the moment that fear for the future weighed more heavily than the maintenance of the status quo.

The people I interviewed ranged in age, gender and personality (boldly outspoken to quietly reserved), but what they did have in common was a commitment to a deeply held belief.

When Risk Becomes the Only Option

Themes related to disappointment and courage emerged from those I interviewed. Ron Heifetz and Marty Linksy, authors of the book *Leadership on the Line* say that, "leadership is about disappointing your own people at a rate they can absorb". The people I spoke with learned a lot about disappointing others. This may be one reason we don't talk about this topic much—with risk comes disappointment, an inevitable entanglement that is nearly impossible to prevent.

The reality of disappointing others, especially your own people, can be gut-wrenching. Almost all people I talked with had disappointed someone, and in some cases, their own supporters turned on them viscerally by refusing to talk with them, making negative comments about them privately and publicly, and in many cases, the fallout was quite personal. For them, this was a devastating development in the rubble of risk taking.

Courage to take a risk came from many places. The first being the individual's deeply held belief or value, and the anger, fear and worry of its being violated. Standing on her personal mission, one person told me that she looked herself in the mirror and said, "If I don't do something now, the consequences are too great for me to live with."

To further summon courage, each person I spoke with had a process of weighing risk, and for many this included taking the opportunity to talk with one or many trusted advisor(s). Some people took active steps to mitigate the level of risk ahead of taking it, and some people took steps to leverage it. (In one case, ensuring there were media representatives in the room so that the situation was widely reported.)

Courage was also bolstered by the emergence of unlikely supporters and allies. Despite suffering through disappointing others, many people also experienced support from places that they didn't expect, like old friends, colleagues, and members of the public with shared values. Interestingly enough, everyone I spoke with said the risk they took was worth it. For some, the impact was immediate or fairly immediate. For others, it took longer to see the results. In all instances, there was the perception of a positive outcome.

The kinds of outcomes included better relationships, increased interest in opening dialogue where it didn't exist before, increased government transparency, positive policy changes, shining a light on decision making, and breaking barriers for others.

Advice from Those That Have Been There

Following are some specific tips from those that have taken risks in the name of leadership:

- When you're doing what is right don't let worry or fear get in your way.
- When taking very large risks mitigate them when and where you can.
- Plan. Don't go into risk blindly. Talk to key players when possible.
- Cultivate a network of key advisors and consult with them.
- Know your audience. Know what is important to them, speak to them in their language and connect to their values.
- Don't blindside others. When feasible, prepare people for what's coming.
- Prepare people for collateral damage, especially your own people.
- If you've decided to take the risk, leverage it when appropriate.
- Take care of yourself.
- Develop and cultivate relationships early and often.
- Engage a trained leadership coach, someone who is completely in your corner who will both support and challenge you and will help you uncover any blind spots.
- Assess your level of anxiety. Don't let your anxiety inflate the real level of risk.
- If terror and anxiety are present for you, work on it with a qualified professional.
- Be awareness of numbness. Don't isolate yourself. Develop an inner circle of friends and supporters who will be there no matter what. (This is especially important for individuals whose work requires repeated exposure to risk.)

Leading Outside of Your Comfort Zone

Most of us avoid risk when possible. Lots of things tell us that we should play it safe. We've established however that true leadership requires risk. What hasn't been said explicitly is that every time you take a risk and lead outside of your comfort zone, it makes you stronger.

Despite there being great personal fallout and consequences, no one I spoke with regretted their decision to speak up or act. One particular person I spoke with (someone who rated their risk at an "8" on the 1-10 scale, and someone who suffered great personal and professional consequences related to their action) said to me, "I couldn't sleep the night before I knew it was all coming to a head, but I never once considered backing out. And after all that I went through, I have zero regrets. I knew my personal reputation was at stake, but there was so much on the line for the future. I had no choice. I took the role I had because I believed in what we were trying to accomplish. I knew that if I wasn't willing to take the risk to advance that belief, then it was time for me to step aside."

Risk is inevitable, *and* it's messy and painful, *and* it contributes to a more just, equitable and transparent society from which we all benefit.

Footnote: To those that contributed to this article, *thank you*. While the world may never know of your contributions and sacrifices, be confident in the fact that your actions made a positive impact. To those of you that would like to share your story, or who want to explore this further, please feel free to contact me.