

An Interview with Ronald Heifetz

Interview by **Brianna Riggio**, Claremont McKenna College, '10
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Within moments of meeting renowned leadership professor Ronald A. Heifetz, Co-Founder of the Center for Public Leadership and King Hussein bin Talal Senior Lecturer in Public Leadership at Harvard University, I could tell that I was in for a most intriguing interview. Heifetz greeted me with a warm smile and a firm handshake, but his amiable nature, I soon discovered, was only the tip of the iceberg. As Heifetz revealed to me the story of his life and explained his research and discoveries in the field of leadership, I began seeing what it is that makes him so compelling to his students, his colleagues, and other leadership specialists around the world.

Heifetz did not grow up intending to study leadership; rather, his interest in the field developed over time as a result of various life experiences and observations. During his first years of higher education, Heifetz studied to become a doctor. After finishing medical school, he decided to take a year off before beginning his training as a neurosurgeon. Now facing the real world, he swiftly found himself in need of a job.

“I had to make a living,” said Heifetz with a laugh. He eventually took a moonlighting job working at the prison on Riker’s Island in New York, performing medical examinations on prisoners being brought into the facility. While working on Riker’s Island, Heifetz noticed somewhat disturbing “patterns of social pathology.” For example, most of the prisoners being admitted to jail were poor and many of them were black or Hispanic or of some other minority ethnic group. Heifetz began wondering why these trends existed.

“Those patterns of social pathology rekindled a passion that had started inside of me while growing up in the late 1960s,” he explained. After his time treating patients on Riker’s Island, Heifetz abandoned his plan to become a neurosurgeon and instead began to think about social and public policy.

He next took a job in a fancy Manhattan medical clinic, administering annual health examinations to business CEOs. After spending extensive amounts of time talking with these executives about their health statuses, he began to think about the challenges of leadership and the stresses carried by senior executives. “I saw problems in the practice of leadership among the CEOs and problems of social illness among the inmates, and these two experiences generated my interest in public and organizational leadership. It was 1978, and there were no programs designated for teaching leadership,” Heifetz said, though it was a problem that he would soon be helping to remedy.

In the meantime, Heifetz had been studying the cello part-time at Julliard, and he had begun a nighttime workshop designed to encourage creativity, inspiration, courage,

listening skills, and other “un-teachable” abilities in others. “People who thought they were tone-deaf learned that they could make music,” he informed me with a smile.

A group of businessmen stumbled into Heifetz’s workshop one weekend and, sincerely impressed by what he had designed, told him that he should produce a similar workshop for developing business leadership skills. After Heifetz and his colleague, Riley Shinder, designed and tested that leadership workshop, Heifetz pitched the idea of teaching leadership within the Masters Degree in Public Administration Program to Harvard’s Kennedy School and was hired on as an “experiment.”

“The course I designed was highly analytical and highly experimental,” Heifetz told me, but he apparently stumbled upon success, for his class is now being offered for the twenty-fifth year at Harvard and is one of the most popular courses among the university’s students.

Since then, Heifetz has made a name for himself lecturing all around the world on the nature of leadership and how to teach leadership skills to individuals. On September 27th, 2007, the Kravis Leadership Institute brought Ronald Heifetz to the Athenaeum as a part of the institute’s speaker series, “Governance in the 21st Century,” and Heifetz shared his stories and practical insights on leadership in the world today.

“First of all,” began Heifetz, “I define leadership as an activity rather than a set of personality characteristics. It’s an activity in relationship to certain problems. It’s not an influence process or set of power dynamics, although those are tools to be applied with skill.” Heifetz also claimed to shy away from using the terms ‘leader’ and ‘follower,’ for he believes that people are not always consistent leaders nor are they always considered followers. “There is no such thing as a leader for all seasons,” he proclaimed. “I prefer not to draw a bottom line on anybody. There’s not much justice in that.”

He explained that people tend to equate leadership with authority, but in reality, one does not always equal the other. According to him, not all authority figures lead – and in contrast, not all who lead have the authority to do so. “Leadership is sometimes practiced by people of authority, sometimes people in the middle, sometimes from people outside, and sometimes from people who don’t have any authority at all,” said Heifetz.

People also tend to look to their authority figures to lead them in times of crisis, but often these authority figures can never live up to the expectations of those who authorize them to lead. Consequently, positions of authority can lend a powerful set of tools to individuals, but it can also limit a person’s effectiveness in practicing leadership.

“With authority, people trust you in part for the wrong reasons. When you’re faced with an adaptive challenge, the authority figure needs to readjust to a new situation in which the answers are not yet known, or if they are, those answers cannot be implemented without significant changes in people’s hearts, minds, and habits. But people want answers! How do we manage people’s expectations?” Heifetz asked his attentive crowd.

Issues with trust also arise when discussing authority structures because the person in authority has to be able to garner the trust of those who are authorizing him to lead, otherwise a key component of social structure weakens.

“Most people have mixed feelings about authority,” he said. “Many of us have experienced some violation by people in authority at some point in our lives, or in the lives of our families. Therefore, when we distinguish between leadership and authority, leadership is preserved as something good and exciting, while authority becomes something we don’t want to talk about.”

Despite the apparent pitfalls of trusting people in authority, however, Heifetz asserted that authority structures truly are essential to our society. “To say that it’s better to have a society without authority positions is like saying it’s better to have a society without any trust,” he said.

Dr. Heifetz shared that an effective authority structure has to contain three components to be sufficiently effective: power, trust, and service. Authority figures must possess a degree of decision-making power over those who follow them, but those who follow then must trust the authority figure enough to actually authorize them with power. The authority figure can essentially gain this trust by providing services with competence and good faith to people, as well as letting them know when the collective challenge lies beyond anyone’s authoritative expertise, requiring collective discovery and change.

In his interview, Heifetz also made some interesting points about leadership in the context of undergraduate education. He firmly believes that leaders are not born but made. Talent needs to be harnessed properly. People can be taught how to practice leadership, and he views school as a time for students to practice effective leadership skills both in the classroom and out on campus simply experiencing their everyday lives.

“At school, personal capacities strengthen and develop, giving students a variety of experiences both in and out of the classroom,” Heifetz noted. “Students learn to reflect in the midst of crisis, to orchestrate conflict among multiple parties, to tolerate ambiguity.” Nevertheless, professors and other instructors should also play a role in helping students realize their leadership potential.

“There’s a lot that needs to be taught, for example, about how to move back and forth from the balcony to the playing field in an ongoing practice of reflection and action. That takes emotional discipline. Indeed, there’s a lot to learn in developing emotional capacity,” he further explained. “In teaching leadership, the key is to de-brief sufficiently. The single most common failing in teaching leadership is insufficient debriefing analysis. In debriefing classroom exercises, mentoring experiences, or extracurricular activities on campus, there needs to be an analytical framework and time to teach it so that students take the right lessons from their experiences. Without good frameworks for diagnosis and action, students will pick up a lot of wrong lessons about leadership and how to deploy their talents.”

For all his knowledge in the area of leadership, however, Heifetz admitted that the field itself is still in developing stages. “I think we need to acknowledge that this is a frontier. Because leadership is a hot topic, it’s pretty easy to believe your own leadership sales pitch. A lot of it is good, and a lot of it is not. There are no good methods to evaluate it all yet – some methods are helpful and some are counterproductive.” “If all of us studying leadership approach the topic with humility knowing that we’re all experimenting, we would do better than buying into cultural expectations and what sometimes seems to be hype,” he concluded wisely.