

Practicing Change Series

**Tod
Bolsinger**

Foreword by Marty Linsky

The Mission Always Wins

**Quit
Appeasing
Stakeholders**

Illustrated by
Mark Demel



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Taken from *The Mission Always Wins* by Tod E. Bolsinger.

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FOREWORD BY MARTY LINSKY

I am writing this flying home to New York after four days in Los Angeles with my fifty-two-year-old son, Sam, and his wife, son, and mother-in-law.

The weekend ended with a long unplanned, intimate conversation between Sam and me in front of a fireplace in the lobby of my hotel. Without naming it, we talked about what we both needed to do in this last chapter of my life to enrich our already deep relationship and make the best use of whatever time we have left together.

I experienced it as a hard, complicated, important, and generative conversation, requiring us each to voice and then try to let go of perspectives and assumptions—“truths” that we were inured to and had worked for us. We agreed to individually abandon some habituated ways of thinking and being, and to experiment with some new behaviors.

Then I read Tod Bolsinger’s *How Not to Waste a Crisis*.

Sam and I were modeling the very process Tod describes.

Tod brings a spiritual anchor and a lifetime of addressing concrete problems to the connective work of applying the tools and frameworks of adaptive leadership to the vagaries

of everyday personal and professional life, especially relevant in times characterized by constant, rapid change.

No matter who you are, where you are, how you spend your days, or how old you are, Tod Bolsinger's practical

guidance and probing reflective ques-

tions are a vehicle for you and your

organization, family, or com-

munity to get off the dance

floor, get on the balcony, bring a

new perspective to the chal-

lenges and opportunities in

front of you, and begin to make

more progress than you have in

the past in closing the gap be-

tween your most noble aspira-

tions and your current reality.

He has given us a gift. I am

already a beneficiary.



ABOUT THE PRACTICING CHANGE SERIES

The **Practicing Change** books are about learning skills for leading in a time of deep disruption and change. Together, through them all, we will learn to recognize and then reset our leadership skills for a world that is constantly being upset and reset.

First, we will learn to see the out-of-date habits that have been cultivated through our successes. Then, we will work on new skills necessary for leading in times of change. Those new skills will enable us to embody a different form of leadership—what is called “adaptive leadership.”

Adaptive leadership, as developed by Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, is an approach to organizational problems that is needed when your old best practices no longer work. Adaptive leadership starts with diagnosis: Is this problem something that our expertise can solve or not? Is this something that requires us to apply a solution that already exists, or does it fall outside of our current knowledge and ability? Will it require learning and making really hard no-win choices?¹ As we shall repeatedly see, developing adaptive capacity—

that is, the capacity to apply and adapt an organization's most sacred core values so that its mission will thrive in this new environment—is the greatest challenge of leadership.²

Most communities are hardwired to resist this kind of adaptation. They believe that survival means reinforcing the way we have always done things in the past. The result is that instead of undergoing transformation in order to be more effective in their mission to serve the world, organizations unconsciously reinforce the very status quo that is not working.

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Schools want to attract students to maintain the faculty who have come to do research within the safety of tenure and the resources of an academic community. A nonprofit's work that was once an innovative solution to a real problem becomes, after a time, an institution whose own survival is now the core purpose for being. In order to restore their flagging attendance or lagging donations, churches double down on the programs that people have historically loved most and will fill the facilities that they invested in building. And established businesses get disrupted by upstart

startups while they are busy picking out new furniture for a bigger corporate office.

When a changing world or changing needs require an organization, institution, or company to itself change in order to keep being relevant to the challenges that are arising around them, it becomes clear that the internal organizational transformation needed—and the losses that must be faced—is an even more difficult leadership challenge than the external reason for changing.

This requires learning a new set of leadership practices.

In these four books (*How Not to Waste a Crisis*, *The Mission Always Wins*, *Leading Through Resistance*, and *Invest in Transformation*) we are going to reexamine four “mindsets” that have resulted in bad habits for most leaders. We’ll take on one of them through each book:

1. Trying harder at what has been successful in the past
2. Focusing on pleasing our historical stakeholders
3. Doing whatever we can to eliminate resistance
4. Confusing trust with transformation

These mindsets are so ingrained within most leaders that they are usually never questioned. Shouldn’t we work hard, take care of our most loyal members, manage resistance to change, and be trustworthy?

Yes. But also no. Not primarily.

Your primary work as a leader is to develop your own capacity to lead your people through the transformation necessary to face the challenges of a changing world.

And that takes practice. Lots of practice. Hours of deliberate practice.

Feel free to read these books in any order, starting with the “old mindset” that is most familiar or potentially most challenging for you. In each book, we will start with a problem area, and then instead of trying to learn a new intellectual concept, we’ll focus instead on a new *skill*—trusting that the new skill will help us both see and think differently.³ If we can keep practicing the new skill (and reinforcing the new insight), eventually we’ll develop new habits that will become second nature.

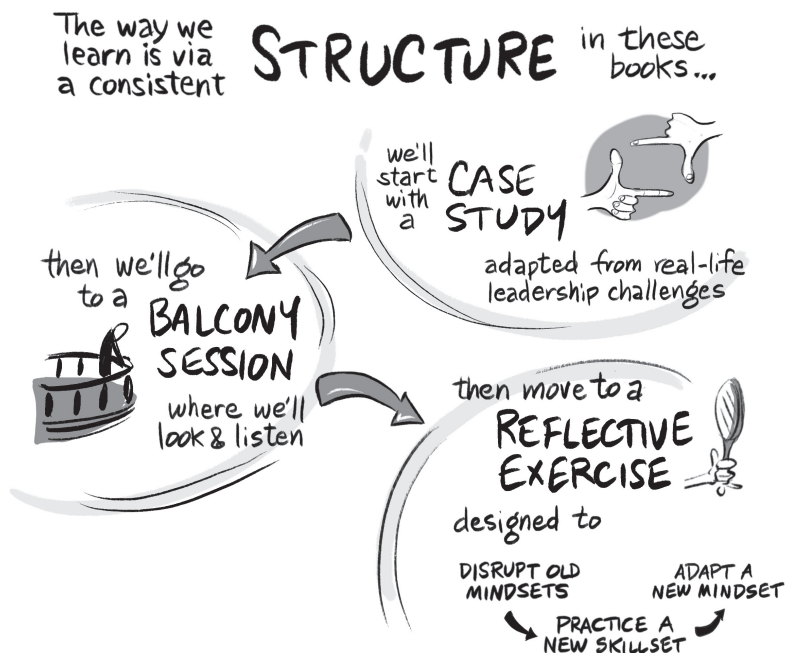
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The pattern that we will use in these books will be the same. We will start with a case study adapted from real-life leadership challenges.⁴ After the case study (and throughout the book) we will pause and engage in some

reflective exercises that are very similar to the kinds of coaching conversations that my team and I have with leaders all over the world.

These are called “balcony sessions.”⁵

While the “dance floor” is where the action is, the “balcony” is where leaders try to get some larger perspective amid the swirl of the challenges in front of them, decisions foisted on them, opinions and desires of everyone around them, and even their own conflicting internal feelings.⁶ Good leaders



learn how to toggle back and forth between “listening on the dance floor” and “looking from the balcony” and begin to see a different way of approaching a new challenge.

After the first balcony session, we will proceed through a reflective-practice learning process:

1. Disrupting an old mindset (which leads to)
2. Practicing a new skillset (which leads to)
3. Embodying an adaptive reset (a new habit for adaptive leadership)

The Practicing Change books—and the process that they teach us—are the ultimate survival guide for leaders in chaos. Together we unlearn bad habits, master adaptive skills, and embrace a leadership style that offers genuine change and transformation—to our people and ourselves.

INTRODUCTION DISAPPOINTING LEADERSHIP

For more than fifteen years now, I have started nearly every presentation with the same quote—a definition of leadership—from Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky. It always gets a laugh and triggers head nods and knowing glances: “Leadership is disappointing your own people at a rate they can absorb.”¹



For those with even the smallest amount of leadership responsibility and experience, it captures perfectly the unexpected burden that most of them stumbled into when they stepped into the corner office or took on the new portfolio.

Disappointing?

None of us took on leadership roles to disappoint anyone. In fact, many of us were asked to step into leadership with the hope and expectation that we could rally the team around a specific problem, bringing a solution that would make everyone happy.

As faith leaders, most of us became leaders because there is a God that we love, and there are people that we love, and we want to introduce the people we love to the God we love by building a church, a ministry, a school, or an organization that they would love.

What could possibly be disappointing about that?

What we soon found out was that to bring the changes necessary for any organization to accomplish the goals put before us (including helping people we love experience the love of God in a tangible way) requires renovating an organization that previous generations have already loved—and continue to love just as it is!

Even if it is a school that is struggling with lower enrollment, a nonprofit that has lost donors, a congregation that is aging, or a business that is fighting to recover from a disruptive

world event, there are always stakeholders who are deeply committed to keeping things the way they have always been.

Unconsciously, we who are stakeholders have expectations for the leader to make our lives better, easier, more productive, and more successful. Stakeholders expect leaders to solve all of the problems, to balance the budgets, to raise money, to bring a compelling vision, and to energize the team for good, hard work. We stakeholders expect the leader to “turn the ship around,” without causing any seasickness—with the least amount of pain possible.

In other words, we stakeholders generally expect that a good leader will make things better for, well, . . . us.

There are always stakeholders who are deeply committed to keeping things the way they have always been.

But when changes are needed to help our beloved organization thrive or even survive in a changing world, leaders are required to make hard decisions and tough choices that often cause pain and howls of protest. Oh, we know we need things to change; we just don't want to have to change. Alan Deutschman's research supports this fact. He discovered that 90 percent of people who were told by their doctors that they needed to change their lifestyles or they would die would choose to risk death rather than change.² Seventy-five

percent of venture capital-backed Silicon Valley start-ups fail.³ Seventy percent of all organizational change efforts also fail.⁴

But why? Why is change so hard?

Certainly, some of it can be associated with needing to learn better change processes, but the biggest enduring challenge is our personal resistance to it. Heifetz and Linsky explain it in terms that all of us can understand: "It's not that people resist change, per se. People resist loss."⁵



Loss. That is what is at stake for the stakeholders. Because in a changing world where "what got you here won't take you there," leaders often have to help their people let go of the very program, tradition, strategy, or resource that made the biggest difference in their lives. The people who have the most personal resonance with and commitment to an organization experience the loss of having to let go of what has made the organization so meaningful to them. Facing losses and taking stakeholders through those losses to a new, fruitful expression

of the organizational mission is at the top of the leadership job description.

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This is especially true in what is called “adaptive change.” *Adaptive change* is, by definition, organizational change that requires the organization itself and the people who are part of it to adapt or change themselves. Which is why I define *leadership* as “energizing a community of people toward their own transformation, in order to accomplish a shared mission.”⁶

Adaptive change does not come about because a great leader solves a hard problem with resolve and a clear plan. Adaptive change comes because a group *takes responsibility for their own transformation and begins to change their own behaviors, attitudes, and sometimes even cherished values*. They cast off old beloved programs, they set new priorities, they embrace a new strategy that will further the mission while deprioritizing parts of the organizational legacy. As Heifetz and Linsky write, “To meet adaptive challenges, people must change their hearts as well as their behaviors.”⁷

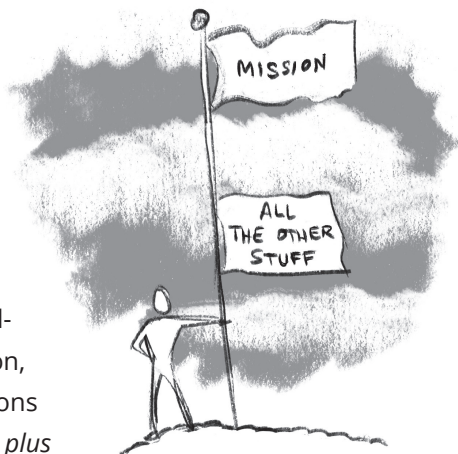
Adaptive change comes because a group takes responsibility for their own transformation and begins to change themselves.

“Changing hearts and behaviors” captures perfectly the crux of adaptive leadership. Adaptive challenges require us to bring change at the intersection of personal and organizational life—at the overlap of personal transformation and shared mission. Like a Venn diagram that captures with utter clarity the necessity of change and the urgency of mission, adaptive change requires a laser focus on the challenges facing an organization and how the necessary shifts of behaviors, attitudes, and values enable the group to face their biggest challenges and thrive.

For the adaptive change leader, the goal can never be pleasing stakeholders by solving their problems, but leading the organization through personal and shared transformation in order to accomplish its mission in a changing and often disruptive world. What an adaptive change leader must do without fail, then, is to help the organization make necessary adaptations that bring transformation for the sake of the mission. The mission is the ultimate “trump card” that always wins the hand.

At one level, this seems obvious. (“Isn’t that what every leader does?”) But in reality, with real groups of real people

with complex motivations and reasons for joining an organization, it is far more difficult than it seems. When most of us take a job, join a team, become members of a congregation, or volunteer with an organization, it is for a mix of motivations that is about the mission *plus* [fill in personal desire here].



We want to be part of a church that will share the love of God with our community *plus* provide me with a place to make friends.

We take a job to help a company or institution accomplish its purpose for being *plus* we need secure employment.

We volunteer with a nonprofit that we believe in *plus* we want something that will be fun to do.

There is nothing inherently wrong with these mixed motivations. They are normal and natural and should be expected. Good leaders understand that the people who make up their organizations have a number of often unspoken needs and desires that comes with joining a group on a mission. Which is why whenever possible, good leaders will find a way to both

accomplish the mission *and* please the stakeholders. And whenever possible, they will look for win-win solutions.

This is natural for leaders, and certainly what we leaders prefer. We would much rather please our key stakeholders than disappoint them. We want our leadership to inspire accolades and appreciation, and affirmation.

Good leaders often find themselves negotiating multiple—even competing—values.

But when an organization is facing an adaptive challenge where the past strategies and approaches are no longer working, when the organization must adapt and experiment and learn on the way into the uncharted territory in front of them, leaders find themselves negotiating multiple—even competing—values. And one of the most painful realities is that they can no longer rely on win-win solutions.

In fact, when facing adaptive challenges, win-win is lose-lose.

So how do we lead a team through that most disappointing leadership challenge?

That's what this little book is all about.



CHAPTER 2 OLD MINDSET: THINK WIN-WIN

Almost every leader I know will tell you that among the first leadership books they ever read was Stephen Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. For most, the book was recommended to them right after they led a project or engaged in an initiative that *wasn't* effective. Sometimes they read it after a big flop. And for many, this book was a career saver.

All it takes is a glance at the table of contents to see why it has sold tens of millions of copies and is lauded by everyone from business leader Tom Peters to personal growth guru Tony Robbins; from Senator Mitt Romney to Olympic Champion Michael Phelps and poet laureate Maya Angelou. The chapter titles are now maxims that are embraced by leaders around the world:

"Begin with the end in mind."

"Put first things first."

And especially, "think win-win."

A "win-win" mentality is perhaps one of the most treasured pieces of advice for the new leader. It reminds us that whenever possible—for the good of the team, in order to

foster collegiality and collaboration—we should look for solutions to the problems that keep everybody engaged in and invested in the outcome. In a world that often feels so competitive (even among colleagues!), “win-win” solutions are like a ray of light in the darkness. They offer both hope and a way forward.

But what if that ray of light is actually blinding you from seeing and facing a difficult but necessary way ahead? What if instead of a win-win solution that pleases everyone, the moment calls for a hard decision that requires stakeholders to let go of something that has been important or dear to them? What if the only way forward really requires one of the teammates to take a back seat, play second chair, or let go of one of the personally motivating factors behind even taking on the challenge?

When Lewis and Clark’s Corps of Discovery made it to the top of the Lemhi Pass on the border of Montana and Idaho in 1805, the immense mountain ranges spanning the horizon in front of them forced them to acknowledge that their expectations of finding a water route that would span North America and connect the Pacific and Atlantic oceans was a lost cause.¹ The expectations of the geography that they were facing had been profoundly mistaken. The maps that had for three hundred years predicted a gentle grade with a river running through the continent had been wrong. What they believed they were doing and what they had left their farms and families

to accomplish was now vastly different than they had expected. Even their identities would be challenged: they were no longer going to be expert water navigators who had invented their own boats and made them by hand, but just men carrying gear on foot over the most terrible terrain they could imagine.

They now faced a difficult choice. Would they drop the canoes and continue exploring on foot? Or would they abandon the exploration and return to familiar waters? There really was no win-win. There was only a hard choice to make. And searching for a win-win solution would not only be a futile waste of time, but—in the case of the Corps of Discovery—a deadly distraction from the reality facing them.

In cases closer to our own situations, win-win solutions often mask the deeper organizational problem of a lack of missional alignment among various stakeholders. I was in a trustees meeting at the seminary where I served as a senior administrator when one of the trustees, himself a retired



president of a university, shared the struggle of trying to bring a unified vision to an academic institution.

“That university,” he said, “was 28,000 faculty, students, and staff all unified together around a common parking problem.”

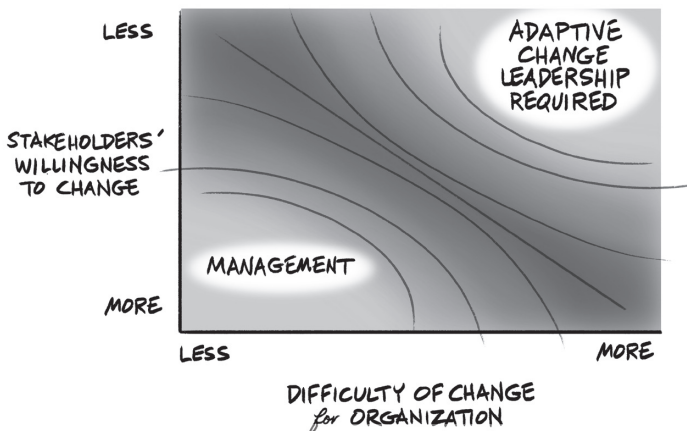
That line got a huge roar from the other trustees and the executive team in the room. He was reminding us that it didn’t matter if we were a mid-size seminary or a large, nationally ranked university; the same mental model often existed in academic institutions. They weren’t created because of a unified strategy, but for uniting multiple constituent “schools” or “colleges” into one larger entity.² Because of that, different constituents of faculty, staff, administrators, parents, and even students often had vastly different agendas, with different motivations, that had never been reconciled in one shared mission.

At those times, the desire to find a win-win solution was not actually a solution to a real problem but a way that leaders unconsciously tried to lower the conflict of the moment. The result was that the different factions came to feel better about the decision, but often didn’t actually make progress.

Because many of us are people pleasers, often a win-win solution can simply be a way of pleasing those stakeholders that a leader can’t stomach disappointing. And in the worst scenario, the compromises of win-win solutions that make everyone happy momentarily further the actual conditions for continued decline.

Leadership, then, isn't so much skillfully helping a group accomplish what they *want* to do (that is *management*). Leadership is taking people where they *need to go and yet resist* going. It's challenging, encouraging, and equipping people to be *transformed* more and more into the kind of community that can accomplish the mission set before them. And very often the very people who called us to lead them are disappointed when we do.

Transformational leadership, then, is always a two-front battle: On one side is the challenge of a changing world, unfamiliar terrain, and the test of finding new interventions that will enable the mission to move forward in a fruitful and faithful way. On the other side are the stakeholders who resist the very change that is necessary for the mission's survival. If adaptive leadership is "enabling a people to grow so



they can face their greatest challenges and thrive,” then it is crucial to acknowledge that a significant part of the “greatest challenge” is *internal*. Deftly handling resistance and the disappointment that comes along with it so that a community of people can accomplish a goal for the greater good is the core capacity of adaptive leadership.

So, if win-win doesn’t work in the face of adaptive challenges, what does?

A simple-to-understand but difficult-to-implement mantra:
The mission always wins.

Always. Every. Time. In every conflict.

Not the leader.

Not the donors who pay the bills.

Not the most loyal and long-suffering teammates.

Not the new people who have been recruited and up-rooted their lives to join the cause.

Not those who scream the loudest or who are most in pain.

In a healthy organization, the mission wins every argument. The *focused, shared, missional purpose* of the organization wins over every other competing value.

It’s more important than my preferences or personal desire.

It’s more critical than my leadership style, experience, or past success.

It’s the grid by which we evaluate every other element in the organization.

It's the criterion for determining how we will spend our money, who we will hire and fire, which programs we will start and which ones we will shut down.



It's the tiebreaker in every argument and it is the principle by which we evaluate every partnership.

Every time, in every decision, the key question is: *Does it further our mission?*

The mission always wins.
Every. Time.

If the mission always wins, then a leader must develop the clarity and conviction to live out that mission no matter the circumstance (especially when the leader's own personal opinion or priorities do *not* win). If the mission always wins, then a leader must be prepared to protect that mission no matter whether the challenge comes from the context or the very community we serve.³ And if the mission wins, then having a team that can embrace and embody that mission in the face of every challenge is the core skillset.

Which is where we turn now.



BALCONY SESSION

1. THINK of a TIME WHEN YOU UTILIZED a WIN-WIN SOLUTION to a PROBLEM that WORKED. WHAT ABOUT THAT PARTICULAR PROBLEM MADE IT SOLVABLE by a WIN-WIN SOLUTION?



2. NOW THINK of a TIME WHEN a WIN-WIN SOLUTION to a PROBLEM DIDN'T WORK. WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES of that PROBLEM DIDN'T LEAD THEMSELVES to a WIN-WIN SOLUTION?

3. IN WHAT WAYS WAS YOUR DESIRE to FIND a WIN-WIN SOLUTION an ATTEMPT to MINIMIZE LOSSES & PLEASE KEY MEMBERS of YOUR TEAM or COMMUNITY?



MISSION



4. WHAT WOULD CHANGE in YOUR LEADERSHIP if the GOAL of EVERY INITIATIVE or DECISION WAS NOT a WIN-WIN SOLUTION, BUT to IMPLEMENT the PRINCIPLE, "THE MISSION ALWAYS WINS"?



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