

PROLOGUE

What's Been Lost?

WHAT'S BEEN LOST in the discussions on leadership—in the infinite number of discussions on leadership—is context. I refer not to context that is proximate, such as a particular group or organization, but to context that is distal, to the larger context within which leadership and yes, also followership, necessarily are situated.

This book will fill in that all-important missing piece. It is not a “how-to” book—a book about how to be a leader. Instead it is a how-to-think-like-a-leader workbook that provides a clear, cogent corrective to the thousands of other instructions already available.¹ *Hard Times* is a checklist of what you need to know about context if you want to lead in the United States of America in the second decade of the twenty-first century. It is not a handy-dandy manual on what to do and how to do it, for the specifics of the situation determine the particulars. What it does do is make meaning of leadership in America in a wholly new and different way. What it does do is provide every American leader with a framework for seeing the setting within which work gets done.

Anyone who knows my work knows that sometimes I am a contrarian. I have written extensively about leadership, but deviated from the norm in at least four ways. First, I focus as much on bad leadership as on good leadership. Second, I think followers every bit as important as leaders. Third, I am skeptical of what I call the “leadership industry”—my catchall term for the “now countless leadership centers, institutes, programs, courses, seminars, workshops, experiences, trainers, books, blogs, articles, websites, webinars, videos, conferences, consultants, and coaches” claiming to teach people, usually for money, much money, how to lead.²

Finally, frankly, I take issue with America's relentless leader-centrism, with America's obsessive fixation on leaders at the expense of followers and at the expense of the context within which both necessarily are situated. Instead I argue for a more complete conception of how change is created. I have come to see leadership as a *system* consisting of three moving parts, each of which is equally important and each of which impinges equally on the other two. The first is the *Leader*. The second is the *Follower*. And the third is the *Context*—the focus of this book.

If we accept the proposition that leadership is a system, the leadership industry should be as invested in followers as it is in leaders, and as focused on context as on only some of the leading actors. But it is not. Instead it is fixated, still, laser-like, on leaders. This explains why leadership learning is biased toward self-improvement, skill development, and self-awareness—toward instilling competence and, possibly, character in a single individual. We attempt to develop individual capacities such as communicating and negotiating, and we attempt to develop individual characteristics such as authenticity and integrity. The relentless implication is that what matters most is internal, individual change, not external, collective change. Put another way, our study, practice, and promotion of leadership are inner-directed, not outer- or other-directed.³ They are leader-centric and solipsistic.

It's not that we ignore context altogether. Quite the contrary: leaders are taught to take context into account. But the context they are taught to take into account is circumscribed. It is context as proximate—context of interest and importance to the leader, not context of interest and importance more generally. Some prominent leadership experts have, for example, properly and pointedly stressed the value of diagnosing the situation, of stepping back to gain perspective. But still, they keep close. Their eyes are trained on the context that immediately pertains—which is “your company's structures, culture and defaults”—rather than on the more expansive context within which the organization (the “company”) itself is located.⁴

Followers, when they even enter the picture at all, are drawn similarly narrowly, as opposed to more broadly. Wharton School professor

Michael Useem has written smartly and sensibly about what he calls “the leadership template.”⁵ The principles of his template include fostering teamwork, building interdependence, and coaching individuals to reach the next level. However his principles are drawn from his particular population—large companies, financial institutions, and his classroom at the Wharton School. They are not drawn from the larger context within which people in the private sector also are situated.

Let me be clear: I have no quarrel with this sort of proximate approach. The question I raise is not whether it is necessary, but whether it is sufficient. The leadership industry has a problem—a screamingly obvious one. It has failed over its roughly forty-year history to in any major, meaningful, measurable way improve the human condition. In fact, the rise of leadership as an object of our collective fascination has coincided precisely with the decline of leadership in our collective estimation. Private sector leaders are widely viewed as greedy to the point of being corrupt. Public sector leaders are seen as hapless to the point of being inept. And leaders previously regarded as virtually sacrosanct—religious leaders, for example, and military leaders—have been diminished and even demeaned.⁶ The numbers tell the tale. In 1964, 74 percent of Americans thought that their government could be depended on “to do what is right just about always or most of the time.” By the late 1970s this number had dropped to under 50 percent; in another thirty years it would fall to an alarmingly low 19 percent.⁷

What is to be done? Can the leadership industry improve? Can it do a better job of teaching leadership, of educating, training, and developing leaders so that they are prepared to lead wisely and well? And how can leaders themselves—or those who aspire to be leaders—become autodidacts?

The answers, of course, must be preliminary. But in this book I provide a response that should be integral to leadership education and development at every level. I keep it simple. I focus here on a single corrective: *contextual expertise*. Up to now I too have concentrated mainly on leaders and, later, on followers, and on the changing balance of power between them. I too have paid less attention to the third component of

the leadership system—context.⁸ Here this will change and context will get its due. Here I will remedy what social psychologists call the “fundamental attribution error,” which consists on the one hand of an “inflated belief in the importance of personality traits and dispositions,” and on the other of a “failure to recognize the importance of situational factors in affecting behavior.”⁹

Again, the context I consider is not proximate. It is not specific to any single individual or institution, any group or organization. Rather it is distal, it is general. It is the larger circumstance within which all Americans are situated in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Think of context as a series of concentric circles. The inner ones are your own immediate, proximate, context. The outer ones, the ones that constitute the core of this book, speak to questions such as, What are the larger forces that impinge on us all? And what are the overweening circumstances with which leaders across the board—American leaders—need be familiar if they are to be effective? When leaders come to understand this more expansive environment, they will similarly come to understand those other, less accessible components of context—ideological, political, economic, cultural, technological, and financial, among others—with which, inevitably, they have also to contend.

I use the term *contextual expertise*—as opposed to *contextual intelligence*—to distinguish what I provide in this book from what has come before.¹⁰ My focus is not on how well leaders are able to address whatever it is the situation requires. My focus is on what they need to know first, on what they need to know before they can even begin to act. My interest in this book is not, in other words, in developing a leadership trait. Rather it is in developing a body of knowledge, in pointing to a part of the leadership system that up to now has been entirely ignored.

The impact of context is something that I learned, finally viscerally as well as intellectually, from becoming a regular blogger. It became easy to see that the so-called crisis of American leadership is much less about leaders themselves and much more about the complex context within which they are expected to operate.¹¹ Let me give an example—John Boehner. Boehner, a Republican, became speaker of the House of

Representatives in January 2011. Beginning on day one he found it difficult to do what he was elected and expected to do—to lead. He found it difficult if not impossible to collaborate with both the Senate and the president. More to the point, he found it difficult if not impossible to lead even House Republicans, his own putative followers in his own chamber. Was this because Boehner was himself so woefully inept, so utterly clueless that he lacked the capacity to get his House in order? Was this because his putative followers refused under any circumstance to follow? Or was there another reason? Was it due instead, or at least in addition, to the circumstance within which Boehner found himself? Was it due instead, or at least in addition, to Washington's inordinately discordant political culture?

This raises the hypothetical question of whether Boehner would have been more effective if he had had a deeper and richer understanding of the context within which he was embedded—if he had had contextual expertise. I don't honestly know—there is no proving the point. But this I do know. Boehner was not new to the House when he became speaker.¹² To the contrary; he had previously served as congressman from the state of Ohio for twenty years. Yet right around the time he was elected speaker the context changed. The emergence of the Tea Party, seemingly out of nowhere, altered the Republican Party in ways that Boehner was not prepared for or equipped to contend with. In other words, by 2010 Washington had changed and the House had changed right along with it. What seems clear, certainly in retrospect, is that neither Boehner nor for that matter hardly anyone else grasped just how profoundly these changes would diminish his capacity to lead. The old ways of doing business no longer sufficed—and he, speaker of the House, had no real conception of what other ways of leading might look like.¹³ Had he better understood how America was changing, better understood the populist anger that made Tea Partiers so formidable a congressional foe, he would have, or at least he could have, adjusted accordingly. He could have, for example, been far less accommodating than he was for so long, and far more initially resistant to the extremism that was consuming both his party and his speakership.

I hasten to add that this lamentable lack of contextual expertise is shared equally, by Democrats as well as Republicans. Not only was Barack Obama comparatively new to leading when he was elected president, he was comparatively new to Washington. Notwithstanding his naiveté, his obvious lack of sophistication about the ways of the nation's capital, there is ample evidence that he did not care to familiarize himself with the larger political and social contexts within which the White House itself was embedded. By and large Obama remained cocooned in the Oval Office, reluctant to leave it either to socialize or to wheel and deal in ways that near certainly would have been politically advantageous. In fact, he was reluctant even to invite the outside in, to bring into the Oval Office, to the White House, members of Congress, say, who could have helped grease the wheels of the political process beginning day one.

The context that constitutes the stuff of this book is no less than, and no more than, the *United States of America in the second decade of the twenty-first century*. To be sure, the American context is in many ways similar to contexts in other countries. Everywhere leaders are finding it difficult to lead without using or threatening to use force because everywhere followers are making their lives difficult—and because everywhere context is both a cause and an effect of this power dynamic. Still, to say that there are overarching similarities, worldwide trends, is not to say that what is happening in one country is the same as what is happening in another. There are differences, from one place to the next, and from one decade to the next, which is why here I confine context to the U.S. at this particular moment in time.

What I provide is a checklist of what you need to know about context if you want to lead. In his recent bestseller, *The Checklist Manifesto*, Atul Gawande argues that the deceptively simple strategy of employing a checklist improves performance. It's a way of managing the unmanageable—of taming information and decoding context. Gawande is a physician whose initial interest was in managing information and complexity in hospitals. However, quickly he realized that checklists have far broader applications, across different industries and institutions. And

quickly he realized that there were bad checklists and good ones, the former being long and imprecise, the latter efficient and easy to use. Gawande also found that checklists are limited in their uses. They can remind whoever is in charge of how to cope with a complex process, and what particularly to watch out for. But they cannot compel anyone to use them to maximum advantage, or to adapt. Still, on the basis of his research, Gawande became a convert, arguing passionately and persuasively for “the simplicity and power of using a checklist” whatever the specifics of the situation.¹⁴

Gawande’s checklist is action-oriented. Mine is not, not directly. It is a compilation of information, an iteration of items that constitute context. My checklist is more detailed than Gawande’s. Still, each of the sections is brief and to the point, and each is efficient and easy to access. This being said, the checklist is neither all-inclusive nor engraved in stone. To the contrary: it is intentionally fungible. It can be tailored by anyone, anywhere to whatever the circumstance. Nevertheless the items themselves—such as history and ideology, media and money, class and culture, risks and trends, leaders and followers—are transferable and transportable. They pertain to the United Kingdom and to the United Arab Emirates, as they do to the United States.

The content that this book comprises is what leaders need to know to develop contextual expertise. I do not, however, claim that leaders need to know everything there is to know about, say, the law. What I do claim is that leaders in twenty-first-century America—political leaders, corporate leaders, nonprofit leaders, educational leaders, religious leaders, all leaders—are situated in a litigious, regulatory context that likely as not will have an impact on how they lead and manage. While it might seem to some that the law is an abstraction, something in the distance that has little or nothing to do with how leadership ordinarily is exercised, it is not. In fact, it is a stark example of what I mean by the importance of distal as opposed to proximate context. And it is a vivid example of the sorts of things that you need to know to lead smarter and better.

Consider this. In the old days, principals of elementary schools were primarily concerned with how to lead and manage their particular

teachers and students in their particular schools. Now these same principals are situated in a larger context that mandates, among other things, that their schools follow relatively new rules and adhere to relatively new regulations. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), for example, is a major piece of federal legislation, enacted in 1990, intended to protect the civil rights of individuals with disabilities. As parents and other advocates for children with disabilities have come to understand the ADA, and appreciate what it can do for their children, school principals have been required to respond to requests for services to which disabled students are now legally entitled.

The ADA is obviously well-intentioned. Still, it has enormously complicated the task of leading and managing the nation's public schools. As various websites make clear, school leaders nationwide struggle to comply with the federal law: "In responding to requests for technical assistance, the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) has determined that school officials would benefit from additional guidance concerning the effects of the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008 (Amendments Act) on public elementary and secondary programs."¹⁵

Of course, public school leaders are scarcely alone in having to cope with the law in new and different ways. The threat of being sued for malpractice has changed the way hospitals are administered and medicine is practiced across the U.S. And, as the explosive growth in the numbers of legal compliance officers testifies, leaders of all sorts of groups and organizations have been similarly tasked with warding off the threat of litigation. So while the law does not and should not, in and of itself, dictate how leaders lead, it is nearly impossible to lead wisely and well in twenty-first-century America without being aware of the law as a component of context. And I might say the same about every other component of context, each of which similarly impinges.

As suggested, the checklist itself is simple, and so is the brief discussion of each of the items. Though I do not explicitly connect all of the dots—this book is intended to be short and to the point; it's a checklist, after all—the ways in which the components of context complicate the

exercise of leadership in twenty-first-century America nevertheless will be immediately apparent.

To delineate the various relationships I divide the book into six parts. The first, “Foundations,” is a discussion of the basics, of history and ideology and of their impact on how leadership in America is exercised, to this day. The second, “Evolutions,” paints a picture of how times change, which implies obviously that leadership and followership change as well. It looks at components of context including religion, politics, economics, institutions, organizations, the law, and business, and suggests how they constrain the capacity to lead. The third part of the book, “Revolutions” also paints a picture of how times change. But in some areas—technology, media, money, innovation, and competition—change has been and continues to be so swift that leaders who fail to keep pace risk being undone by the very context within which they are doing their leadership work. Part Four—“Populations”—is about us, the American people. The question is how who we are shapes the American leadership experience. How, more specifically, do class and culture, divisions and interests, have an impact on the capacity of leaders to lead? Part Five, “Futures,” peers into the distance. I anticipate how the environment, risks, and trends will in time affect agents of change. Finally, in Part Six, “Inversions,” I return to the role reversal to which I regularly allude: how leaders in democracies increasingly are demeaned and diminished and followers increasingly are emboldened and empowered. I conclude the checklist on context *within* America by pivoting to context *without*. I place the U.S. itself in the larger international system within which U.S. leaders necessarily are located.

Finally, a few words about the title of the book: *Hard Times*. It signals my bias, my strong bias. Leadership in America has always been difficult to exercise. But, for reasons that will become clear, *leadership in America is more difficult to exercise now than it has ever been before*. Context changes over time—and so do leaders and followers. All three are different now from what they were five hundred years ago, fifty years ago, even five years ago. So while leadership in the U.S. has been

problematical since the beginning of the republic—there is an inherent tension between leadership and democracy—changing times, hard times, continue to complicate the task. In fact, the contemporaneous context makes leading and managing so challenging that I would argue they should be looked at in an entirely new way.

The contextual checklist that follows is, then, a series of signposts. Each is an indicator of why leadership in twenty-first-century America is so fraught with frustration. Each is an indicator of why leadership in twenty-first-century America will continue so complicated a charge. And each is an indicator of why leadership in twenty-first-century America is more likely to be mastered if it is better understood. This book is not by any stretch a theoretical exercise. It is instead as indicated—a how-to-think-like-a-leader workbook intended to instill the importance of time and place.