

**New York University  
Robert F. Wagner Graduate School  
Of Public Service**

**The Practice of Adaptive Leadership  
Spring 2022**

**Course Information:**

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Dates: Tuesday & Thursday, January 29th to April 16th  
Class Time: 4:35-6:35 PM  
Location: 194 Mercer 308  
Instructor: Michael Thomas Duffy

**Course Goals and Objectives:**

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What does it mean to lead? This course is an exploration of the ideas and theories developed at Harvard University by Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky over the last 30 years about the work of leaders in mobilizing groups to act to solve complex and seemingly intractable problems. We will contrast Heifetz and Linsky's notion of leadership with the more traditional theories of leadership.

In this course, students will: (1) learn how to distinguish technical challenges from adaptive ones; (2) understand group dynamics and work avoidance when it comes to facing adaptive challenges; (3) the tactics of adaptive leadership, including pacing, forging partnerships, acting politically and distinguishing between the view from the 'balcony' and the 'dance floor'; and (4) the risks to those who take on adaptive leadership challenges.

After taking the course, students will have a stronger sense of their own opportunity to lead, regardless of the formal authority that they may or may not possess. *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* will equip students with both a better understanding of how to approach threats that have resisted past attempts at resolution and a set of practical tools that they can employ in tackling those threats.

**Readings:**

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[Leadership on the Line, Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading](#), Ron Heifetz & Marty Linsky

[The Practice of Adaptive Leadership](#), Ron Heifetz & Marty Linsky

[Leadership](#), James MacGregor Burns

[Leadership: Multidisciplinary Perspectives](#), Barbara Kellerman

## About the Instructor:

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Michael Thomas Duffy  
Lecturer in Public Administration  
Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service  
New York University

Office Hours: By Appointment

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Michael Thomas Duffy is a leader with experience in the public, private and non-profit sectors. He now serves as the President of the Great Oaks Foundation where he has spearheaded the launch of a new network of charter schools. Duffy's efforts in education grew out of his work in the civil rights movement, including two terms as the leader of Massachusetts civil rights enforcement agency. While a resident of Massachusetts, Duffy twice was a candidate for public office and has worked or volunteered on dozens of political campaigns. He has also held leadership positions in the non-profit sector: he served on the Board of Directors of the Human Rights Campaign, for several years as its co-chair; he was the Executive Director of the AIDS Action Committee of Massachusetts; and has served two terms on the Vestry of St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church. Duffy has an MPP from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Trinity College in Connecticut with a degree in Economics.

## Assignments & Grades

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Your grade in this course is based on three components:

1. **Class Participation** – 18%

Your active participation is critical for your success in this short, intensive class. Any absences from class without a medical or other serious emergency will result in a loss of 1/6 of your participation grade per class missed. For each class, students will be able to earn up to 3 points for class participation.

On the first day of class, you will sign up to be a discussion facilitator for a small group discussion. You should connect with the other facilitator(s) and develop a list of up to 5 questions that get at the key themes and learning points from the week's reading.

2. **Topic Papers** – 32%

At the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> class meetings students will turn in a paper up to three-pages in length that apply the concepts contained in the reading to either current events or their own professional experience. Each paper will be worth up to 16 points.

3. **Final Paper & Presentation** – 50%

A 5-page paper is due at the beginning of the last class. Students will describe an adaptive challenge that they are facing in either their personal or professional life and then use the framework of the course to outline how they intend to lead a response to that challenge. Students will then present their paper to their classmates for feedback and advice.

## Weekly Topics and Readings:

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### **First Class Meeting – January 29<sup>th</sup>**

### Classical Theory of Leadership

Historically, how has leadership been defined? How do you define leadership? What is the relationship between *leadership* and *power*? What are the Platonic concepts of leadership? What are the uses and limits of these conceptions?

Leadership, Burns, Ch 1, *The Power of Leadership*; Ch 2, *The Structure of Moral Leadership*; Ch 3 *The Psychological Matrix of Leadership*; Understanding Leadership, W.C.H. Prentice, Harvard Business Review, January 2004; Shane, Paramount Pictures, 1953.

### **Second Class Meeting – February 12<sup>th</sup>**

### Defining Adaptive Leadership

Understanding the difference between technical and adaptive leadership challenges. Why is the distinction important in thinking about the work of leadership? Can issues present both technical and adaptive challenges?

Leadership on the Line, Heifetz & Linsky, Intro, Ch 1 & 2; The Practice of Adaptive Leadership, Intro, Ch1, 2 & 3; School Leaders Matter: Measuring the Impact of Effective Principals, Gregory Branch, Eric Hanushek, and Steven Rivkin, Education Next, Winter 2013.

### **Third Class Meeting – February 26<sup>th</sup>**

### Diagnosing the Challenge

Understanding the systems that thwart attempts to resolve adaptive challenges. What are the uses of the metaphor of “Getting on the Balcony” and what is meant by the admonition to “Think Politically” when it comes to adaptive leadership?

Leadership on the Line, Heifetz & Linsky, Ch 3 & 4; The Practice of Adaptive Leadership, Ch 4, 5 & 6; The Wire, Season 3, Episode 4, “*Hampsterdam*”.

### **Fourth Class Meeting – March 12<sup>th</sup>**

### Effective Interventions

What are the tools an adaptive leader can deploy? How does an adaptive leader go about orchestrating conflict towards a productive end? What does it mean to give the work back to the group?

Leadership on the Line, Heifetz & Linsky, Ch 5, 6 & 7; The Practice of Adaptive Leadership, Ch 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 & 12; Grant, Chapter 26, “Swing Around the Circle”, Ron Chernow, 2017. 70 over 70 podcast, “*Prologue: The Balcony and the Dance Floor with Marty Linsky*”

### **Fifth Class Meeting – April 2<sup>nd</sup>**

### Assassination

How and why do groups conspire to neutralize adaptive leaders? Discussion of literal and figurative examples of leader “assassination”.

Leadership on the Line, Heifetz & Linsky, Intro, Ch 8, & 9; The Practice of Adaptive Leadership, Intro, Ch 13, 14, 15, 16 & 17; Yes, You Can: Sheryl Sandberg’s Lean In, New York Times, March 7, 2013; The Times of Harvey Milk, Criterion Films, 1984.

**Final Class Meeting – April 16<sup>th</sup>** Conclusion

How can you begin to implement theories of adaptive leadership in your own community, organization or family?

Leadership on the Line, Heifetz & Linsky, Intro, Ch 10 & 11; The Practice of Adaptive Leadership, Intro, Ch 19, 20, 21, 22, 23 & 24; I am Malala, Malal Yousafzai, 2013; Ghandi, Columbia Pictures, 1982.