

FES speaker Ronald Heifetz details challenges of leadership

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Adaptability is a key to effective leadership, said Ronald Heifetz, founding director of the Center of Public Leadership and the King Hussein bin Talal Senior Lecturer in Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School.

True leaders, not just those with authority over others, must be willing to keep those they lead in a state of "productive discomfort." It's not easy - or popular.

Heifetz spoke March 11 at Onondaga Community College as part of the Famous Entrepreneurs Series (FES), a lecture series aimed at inspiring more entrepreneurship in the region.

Heifetz has taught on leadership at Harvard for 25 years and regularly consults with senior executives in business, government, and nonprofits.

Here are some of his thoughts on leadership.

- On the difference between leadership and authority: Heifetz said the two are distinct. Being in a position of authority does not mean one is automatically a leader. Leadership can, and should, come from many places within an organization, Heifetz said. In fact, the most effective leaders encourage differentiated leadership from many levels in an organization. Still, it's natural for people to look to those in positions of authority for leadership, he said.

- On the different types of problems leaders encounter: Heifetz broke problems into two types - technical and adaptive. Technical problems can be solved with existing knowledge, he said. Individuals or organizations can solve them by using what they know and what they've learned in the past. That doesn't mean they're easy to solve. It just means the tools to do so are readily available. Adaptive problems on the other hand

require organizations to stretch and figure out new ways of doing things, Heifetz said. Tackling such problems can be valuable as they allow an organization to improve itself. In fact, leaders should try to maintain an environment where adaptive thinking is needed, Heifetz said.

- On the challenges of adaptive problems: In dealing with adaptive challenges, Heifetz said leaders must make decisions that are often unpopular. For example, a company dealing with an adaptive problem may decide an entire department or group of jobs must be eliminated to face a new challenge. That's hardly fair, Heifetz said, but it may be necessary. "The losses are often unequal," he said.

- On the mistakes that leaders make: Heifetz said one of the most common problems leaders make is misdiagnosing a problem - treating it as technical when it's really adaptive. It often happens because problems come bundled together. He also noted that leadership is often more about failure than success. "In leadership, you fail all the time," he said.