Reset for Regulation and Utilities:

Leadership for a Time of Constant Change

Mark A. Jamison, Ph.D.*
University of Florida

Araceli Castaneda*
University of Florida

Version Date
September 4, 2009

Abstract

This paper describes a process for a reset of regulation and utilities in today's environment of constant change. "Reset" means that we develop fresh perspectives and knowledge about the future, all the while holding in trust the wisdom of the past. The paper examines three juxtapositions. The first is to focus on next practices, not best practices. Best practice is about following in someone else's footsteps, whereas next practice is about going into areas where no one has gone before. The second is focusing on why rather than focus on what. Asking "What should we do next?" emphasizes practice whereas asking "Why have certain practices been successful?" searches for underlying needs and context. The third juxtaposition is between leading and leadership. A leader provides direction, which is proper when the right direction is known. In contrast leadership mobilizes people to tackle difficult and often ambiguous problems and circumstances.

Keywords: Leadership; Change; Utilities; Regulation

* The authors are respectively Director and Assistant Director, Public Utility Research Center, University of Florida. The views presented are those of the authors and not those of the center or the university. The authors would like to thank Sanford Berg, Lynne Holt, and Ted Kury for their helpful advice. All errors and omissions are the responsibilities of the authors. This is a work in progress. Please do not cite or quote without permission of the authors. Please provide comments by emailing the authors at mark.jamison @ cba.ufl.edu or araceli.castaneda @ cba.ufl.edu, or by calling +1.352.392.6148.

Introduction

When GE's stock price fell over 80 percent from October 2007 to March 2009, CEO Jeffrey Immelt told shareholders it was time to rethink the company. "We intend to reset this business to be smaller, less volatile and more connected to the GE core," he wrote in a letter to shareholders about GE Capital, the company's financial arm. "…we are going through more than a cycle. The global economy, and capitalism, will be 'reset' in several important ways….The current crisis offers the challenge of our lifetime. I've told our leaders at GE that if they are frightened by this concept, they shouldn't be here. But if they're energized, and desire to play a part in transforming the company for the future, then this is going to be a thrilling time to be a part of GE."[1]

Immelt followed some important practices for resetting an organization. He changed the stakeholders' expectations, accepted that his context had changed and that the strategies that had made GE so successful in the past could be largely irrelevant for the future, and that the organization and its stakeholders needed to step back and figure out what to do next even while learning about the situation.

Each of us has experienced Immelt's circumstances in one form or another. Several years ago a group of Caribbean utility regulators gathered in Jamaica to discuss how they might support each other as they strived to establish utility reforms, build their new regulatory agencies, and move towards greater regulatory independence. The outcome of their meeting was the Organisation of Caribbean Utility Regulators (OOCUR). The regulators did not know how OOCUR would evolve or what it would become, but they identified their common purpose and chose next steps that enabled them to form an effective regulatory alliance. The European leaders who negotiated and signed the Treaties of Rome in 1957 did not know how far the new European unity could go or how influential it might become, but they knew that the status quo had become unworkable and that they had to reset their thinking and experiment if Europe was to have the future they desired. In both examples, there was agreement that the status quo was unacceptable, that the parties shared a common purpose, and that progress would be made one step at a time.

We are at a similar point in utility regulation. So many factors and priorities are in flux – technology, the environment, policy, finances and the economy, etc. – that not only are there no easy answers, there may be no answers, at least of the form that people are looking for. As the chairman of IHS CERA, a leading energy consulting firm, stated recently about technological alternatives to oil, "In truth, we don't

[1] "GE's Immelt Accepts Responsibility as Shares Fall (Update 1)." Bloomberg.com, March 3, 2009, http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601109&refer=home&sid=ajYCLEW617S4, accessed August 26, 2009. For a thoughtful analysis of the GE situation, see Marty Linsky's blog for April 29, 2009. See Linsky on Leadership, http://www.cambridgeleadership.blogspot.com/, accessed August 26, 2009.

know, and we won't know for some time."[2] When we face this degree of uncertainty, our natural tendency is to look for fixes or for someone who has the answer. That is why there are regulatory events where the brightest minds present their ideas to decision makers.[3] That is also why people focus on statements from political leaders, business leaders, and expert consultants for guidance during times of uncertainty. We look to the best among us to have the answers we seek.

At times like this it is more important to ask the right questions (and risk getting wrong answers) than to get the right answers to the wrong questions. Rather than asking, "What is the right policy or regulation?" we should instead ask, "How do we constantly change and adapt without losing the things that are most important?" Instead of asking, "What should the utility of the future look like?" (economic, technology, and regulatory forces will drive that) we should instead ask, "What would regulatory organizations look like if they were to truly open doors for the future?"

This is a reset of regulation and of utilities. "Reset" means that we develop fresh perspectives and knowledge about the future, all the while holding in trust the wisdom of the past.[4] It does not mean that we engage in a grandiose redesign of utilities or regulation. To legitimately do this would require a belief that we know the future. Nor does reset suggest that everyone should reboot and erase institutional memory. Rather it means that some jurisdictions, but not all, should try different utility models. Some but not all should try different approaches to setting prices. And others should try different regulatory processes. Reset also does not mean that all jurisdictions should engage in aggressive experimentation. Rather, policy makers and stakeholders should emphasize cross-learning, allowing some countries to emphasize institution building, such as strengthening independence and building expertise, while others test other models of regulation.

This paper addresses how to engage in a reset for regulation and utilities. Implicit in the paper are the assumptions that significant change is a continuing condition for the foreseeable future, that the future holds more unknowns than it does certainties, and that addressing the reset issue is worthy of our

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[2] Yergin, Daniel. August 30, 2009. "Why Oil Still has a Future," The Wall Street Journal, August 30, 2009. http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203706604574370511700484236.html, accessed August 31, 2009.

[3] See for example the NARUC conference "Utilities of the Future: Implications of a Carbon Constrained World" and the FCC's workshops on growing broadband. Sources: http://www.naruc.org/climateconference/ accessed August 31, 2009, and http://hraunfoss.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/DOC-293109A1.pdf accessed August 31, 2009.

[4] In some instances people are tempted to exclude industry or regulatory experts from the experimentation in the belief that they will hold to traditions and not think outside the box. This paper does not advocate such an approach. Energy, telecommunications, and water are complex businesses and there are many misunderstandings about how things work. Furthermore the sectors are critical to a well functioning economy. To avoid serious disconnects between ideas and reality, and to ensure continuity of these critical industries, it is better to engage experts in adaptive learning than try to begin with a vacuum.

effort. The paper is organized around three juxtapositions. The first is that we should focus on next practices, not best practices. (Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky 2009b) Best practice is about imitation and is important for following in someone else's footsteps. A focus on next practice is needed when we are going into areas where no one has gone before.

The second pair of ideas the paper contrasts is a focus on why rather than on what. (Collins 2009, pp. 36-42) When we ask ourselves "What should we do next?" we emphasize practice. But the practice needs a foundation of basic principles and values. So we should ask ourselves "Why have certain practices or experiments been successful or unsuccessful?" so that we engage in an analysis of our underlying priorities and of our context. This allows us to learn, keep what is important, and discard what holds us back. The third juxtaposition is between leading and leadership. A leader provides direction, which is proper when the right direction is known with a high probability. In contrast leadership mobilizes people to tackle difficult and often ambiguous problems and circumstances. (Heifetz, 1994, p. 15)

Next Practice, Not Best Practice

Utility regulation is probably the most technically complex function of government. Properly done, regulation involves the interdisciplinary efforts of financial analysts, accountants, lawyers, engineers, economists, public relations experts, and administrators. For example the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad & Tobago has identified six specific roles, from opening markets to competition to promoting access, that it is to fulfill and 17 necessary activities, including licensing, standards setting, and testing equipment.[5] Each of the agency's tasks involves nearly all of the disciplines listed above. The California Public Utilities Commission's (CPUC) work plan focuses on its proceedings for setting prices and for other decisions it expects to consider, and its calendar highlights its processes, meetings, decisions, programs, and public participation hearings.[6] The CPUC's 2008 annual report describes its energy responsibilities as developing and administering energy policy and programs and ensuring compliance with decisions and statutory mandates, based on objective and expert analyses.[7]

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[5] The roles include establishing conditions for an open market for telecommunications, facilitating the orderly development of a national telecommunications system, promoting universal access, regulating broadcasting services, encouraging investment in telecommunications, and protecting the interests of the public. Source: Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago, http://www.tatt.org.tt/role.htm, accessed August 3, 2009.

[6] California Public Utilities Commission, "Work Plan 2006," http://docs.cpuc.ca.gov/published/report/53008.htm, accessed August 3, 2009.

[7] California Public Utilities Commission, "Annual Report 2008." http://www.cpuc.ca.gov/NR/rdonlyres/F7CE31C1-64AF-4656-8646-57E2D52264E2/0/CPUC2008AnnualReport.pdf, accessed August 3, 2009.

In performing their work, regulatory agencies often imitate the practices of other agencies in addition to following expert analysis. A former PURC student, Troy Quast, researched this issue in his dissertation and found that regulatory decisions of small U.S. states are heavily influenced by the decisions of the largest states in their respective regions even with the small states' circumstances are dissimilar to the large state's circumstances. (Quast 2005) Similarly, a spot check of regulatory training programs shows that many emphasize best practices and experiences of practicing or former regulators.

Imitation is legitimate when we find ourselves in circumstances familiar to others, but can hurt us when we find ourselves in novel situations. Situations that are familiar present what are called technical challenges, which are problems where there is general agreement on the existence and nature of the problem, the alternative solutions are clear, and work can be dealt with by subject matter experts, such as regulatory economists, lawyers, accountants, and the like. In contrast, novel experiences present adaptive challenges, which are those that arise when fundamental changes in a group's (or an individual's) environment call for the group to rethink basic goals and strategies to thrive or even just survive. (Heifetz 1994, pp. 3-9, 35)

How can we tell when circumstances are familiar or when they are novel? This is difficult and the tendency is to misidentify novel experiences as familiar ones (Heifetz and Linsky 2002, p. 14). But there are signals that alert us. One signal is stakeholders disagreeing on whether there is a problem or on the nature of the problem. Consider what happened in New Orleans when it was struck by Hurricane Katrina. The possible consequences of such as storm had been known for some time, but political priorities favored putting taxpayer money into projects other than building up the city's dikes. When the storm struck many people remained in denial about the consequences: Some residents refused to seek safety and some politicians let jurisdictional boundaries and face-saving be higher priorities than quick and efficient response to the crisis. Many players in the crisis failed to acknowledge the high costs of prevention or accept the responsibility for recovery.

Other signals indicating adaptive challenges include stakeholders' embracing policy options that align with long held beliefs and biases rather than with the problem at hand, and refusing to change behavior and implement policies that have been agreed upon. (Jamison 2006) Consider for example recent budget cuts at the University of Florida. The president of the university asked the various academic heads to identify ways that their units could adjust to a decrease in funding. Some units, such as the College of Education, made hard choices that included eliminating programs that were valued, but where the college was not a leader. Other units refused to accept that hard choices needed to be made and put forward plans that weakened all programs.

Also consider the experience of one African country that created a regulatory agency to regulate energy, telecommunications, and water. The country formulated the agency with prompting from the World Bank, but took over a year to begin populating it with employees. Even once a small number of employees were hired, the country failed to adopt sector laws that would give the agency clear policy direction and authority. Indeed at a recent press conference to announce a decision that the agency supposedly made on a telecommunications pricing issue, the communications ministry announced the decision and the regulator simply commented that it was in agreement with the ministry. The situation demonstrates the presence of adaptive challenges that were left unaddressed. The government was unwilling to form a truly independent regulator, The Word Bank failed to provide the funding it had promised to staff the agency, and the government was unwilling to formulate new sector policies.

Addressing adaptive challenges requires experimentation and an active engagement in surfacing conflicts and gaps between the beliefs and priorities people hold on the one hand, and the realities they face on the other. (Heifetz 1994, p. 22) Consider, for example, the history of electricity reforms. Chile and Argentina accepted the reality that state-owned monopolies were not going to provide the power the countries needed and led the world in electricity reforms. The countries made mistakes that they and several European countries learned from. The European countries engaged in their own reforms and, for the most part, avoided repeating the Latin American mistakes as they experimented with different reform models. The United States learned as well, but as evidenced by the California electricity crisis, did not learn well enough and created a new set of mistakes that others observed and learned from. (Jamison Forthcoming)

These experiences illustrate the importance of adaptive learning, which is the learning that takes place when new experiences help us close the gap between what we believe is true and what is actually true (Heifetz 1994, pp. 244-245; North 2005, pp. 66-67). In the immediate case where regulators, utilities, other businesses, consumers, and the like all face adaptive challenges, the adaptive work must occur throughout the system for legitimate change to occur: A top down edict will only be met with resistance and refusal regardless of the merits of the substance of the directive. For effective co-evolution of regulators, utilities, etc. to occur, the system must have decentralized control and multiple decision makers, experiments, and deliberate sharing of ideas and debriefing on trials (Jamison Forthcoming).

Without deliberate effort to suspend traditional practices and controls, we can find ourselves stuck. When consultant Adam Kahane went to the Basque Country in 2002 to help find a peaceful solution to the conflict between the Basque separatist group, ETA, and the government of Spain, he found an unwillingness to break from the status quo and engage in talks or even to agree that peace was the proper objective. The Spanish Prime Minister preferred to continue to characterize the Basque separatists as fanatics and the ETA preferred to maintain a revolutionary self image of after the model of Fidel Castro. (Kahane 2004, pp. 39-43) In Australia, the incumbent telecommunications company, Telstra, took an unyielding, oppositional stance towards the sector regulator with respect to measuring service costs and towards the government with respect to the government's desire for a national broadband network. The result was regulatory paralysis and Telstra being excluded from bidding on the broadband network.

Not what, but why

Emphasizing next practice over best practice is important in times of change because the practices that made regulatory agencies successful in the past may work against them for the future. Consider a recent experience at PURC when a politician met with our faculty to discuss utility policy. The politician expressed concern over the role of regulatory agencies because regulators, in the politician's view and in contrast to other government agencies, report to no one. The politician missed part of the essential DNA of utility regulation, namely the productive tension between short term political will and long term political aspirations.[8]

To make sure that we understand the essential characteristics and features of our institutions and practices, we must be students of our work (Collins 2009, p. 39). Consider how Jim Collins, author of *From Good to Great*, which is Amazon's number 1 seller on strategy and competition, describes the importance of a leader being a continual learner. He tells the story of a small, unknown American company in the 1950s that decided to emphasize discount retailing in small, rural towns. The company's visionary leader emphasized partnership with his people, everyday low prices, and accountability. The company decimated its Main Street rivals and competed effectively against its primary competitor, K-Mart, a large discount retailer that was at this time an industry leader. The company's stock value increased 6000 percent from 1970 through 1985 and it became one of the country's largest discount retailers. Now if you are thinking that Collins is describing Wal-Mart, you are wrong. He is talking about Ames Department Stores, a company that no longer exists. Why did Ames go out of business while Wal-Mart, following almost an identical business plan, rose to number one in the Fortune 500? Collins says a big part of the answer lies in Wal-Mart's founder's self-deprecating and inquisitive nature. Sam Walton famously interviewed its rivals' employees, taking copious notes on a yellow pad, and was well known for asking more questions than he answered when visited by foreign business leaders. This passion for knowing why things work, not just what works, was instrumental in propelling Wal-Mart to the top. (Collins 2009, pp. 39-41)

Small differences can make all the difference because the "process of adaptation is at least as much a process of conservation as it is of reinvention." (Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, 2009b) What do we need to conserve? Modern utility regulation is about controlling market power, providing stability and continuity, and protecting investment from opportunism (Jamison Forthcoming), but these might not be the essential DNA. Controlling market power is really about ensuring wide spread service availability and affordability because utility services are considered to be imbued with the public interest. Stability and continuity are about controlling risk, as is containing opportunism. Are utility services always affected with the public interest? Because the expectation of profit is a key driver of innovation, and innovation is an essential element of adaptation, is controlling market power still the appropriate regulatory mechanism, or can we obtain service availability and affordability in another way?

The importance of knowing an organization's core DNA is illustrated by the experience of one of the authors of this paper, Araceli, with a company several years ago. The company hired a new regional marketing manager whose work would complement that of another regional manager in another part of

[8] The DNA metaphor in a reset situation is developed and explained in Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009b).

the country. This plan was clearly spelled out to both managers, but once the new manager was hired, the company marginalized the incumbent manager, who happened to be a single mother with two children, by shifting responsibilities to the new manager. The changes appeared unjustified by any changes in the market or by the performance of the incumbent manager. Interpreting this as a signal that the company's underlying values were in conflict with her own, Araceli ended her association with the company. Her reading of the company's core values was later confirmed when the executives were arrested and charged with corruption, although on issues unrelated to the manager positions.

Not leading, but leadership: The sweet spot

Ensuring that we intelligently move from best practices to next practices, in part by continually investigating the why question and not just the what question, takes us to the third juxtaposition, namely that we should focus not on leading but on leadership. But before exploring that further, it is useful to lay a foundation by explaining a model used at PURC to think about analysis, politics, leading, and leadership, illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Framework for basic questions

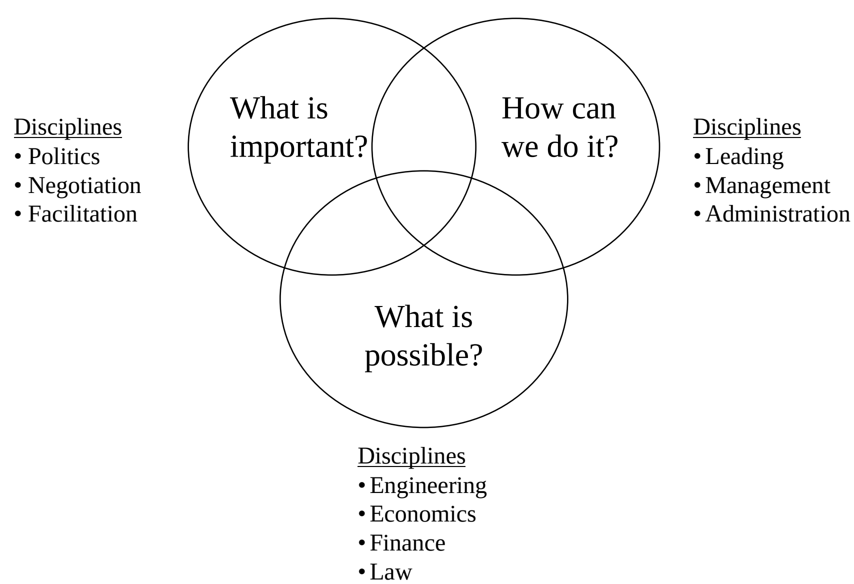

Figure 1 shows three basic questions involved in utilities policy. The foundational question is: What is possible? This is the realm of economics, engineering, law, and the like. Within these disciplines, experts tell us about cash flow requirements, costs of financing, legal rights and responsibilities, and what can and cannot be done with current technologies. The positive research[9] in the physical and social sciences are the major contributors to this foundation, but in many ways it is also the bread and butter of regulatory work. This is why many political scientists refer to expert regulatory agencies as a fourth branch of government, namely that the agencies are so highly expert that they often receive a higher level of respect from the population, from academicians, and from top level consultants than do the political branches of government.[10]

A second basic question is: What is important? This is typically the realm of politics where through our elections and other political activities we establish visions and priorities for our nations and other levels of government. Research in this field is normative because it advocates goals, objectives, and instruments. The last basic question is: How can we do it? This question addresses many of the human processes that it takes to move from "What is possible?" and "What is important?" into accomplishment. This work is the domain of disciplines such as management and administration, including the act of leading people to perform the work of an organization.

Figure 1 shows an overlap of the three questions, implying that there is a core, or a sweet spot, where what we would like to achieve is technically feasible and can be worked through the human processes. But what if this overlap does not exist or what if it is difficult to find? Consider PURC's recent experience assisting in the development of an event where scientists and policy makers discussed how to improve the scientific basis for energy policy. One politician gave the disturbing answer that basing policy positions on scientific evidence is generally ineffective because scientific input is too complex to be communicated and made relevant in the few moments that policy makers have with their constituents. From one perspective this is a communications issue, but it may also be based on issues of prior beliefs, embedded values, and lack of trust. Whatever the reasons, if facts are left out of the policy process the resulting policies are little more than fantasies and lead to greater dysfunction, frustration, and conflict. Furthermore the scientific work that is intended to influence policy occurs in a vacuum, resulting in research that is increasingly irrelevant to people's priorities and everyday lives. So instead of finding the sweet spot where the three circles intersect, we find ourselves with disconnect.

Leadership is needed to overcome the disconnect that occurs when the core does not exist or is difficult to locate. In contrast to leading, which is the process of providing direction for a group,[11] leadership is about mobilizing people to identify disconnects, adapt the group to new situations, and determine direction. Oftentimes the persons providing leadership are not those with formal authority to lead. In

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[9] Positive research describes how things work or what things are. The research by Troy Quast (2005) described earlier is an example of positive research. In contrast, normative research describes what the author believes should be. It is prescriptive. The immediate paper is normative because it describes what the authors believe regulators and others should do to achieve particular objectives.

[10] See for example Vilbert (2007).

[11] See for example Kotter (1996).

fact, lacking formal authority can be an advantage for a person providing leadership because she does not have the conflicting burden of trying to keep the organization calm and functioning while promoting the disruptive work of exploring disconnects. (Heifetz 1994, pp. 184-188)

Consider the experience of one of the authors, Mark, when he worked for the telecommunications company, Sprint, from 1993 to 1996.[12] The passage of the U.S. Telecommunications Act of 1996[13] (Act) presented a dilemma for Sprint. The Act pitted long distance providers against traditional local telephone companies, and Sprint was in both lines of business. Up until that time, Sprint had played both sides in regulatory debates and sometimes held contradictory policy positions because it was effectively two companies – a long distance company and a local telephone company – and the corporate executives had no policy as to which line of business mattered most to the company. Mark worked as a policy manager for the long distance side of the company. The Act directed the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to establish policies for competition and, depending on how the FCC decided these policies, either local telephone companies or long distance companies, but not both, would succeed in dominating the industry. Mark and his colleagues in the company thought the Act would force the corporate executives to announce Sprint's business direction. The executives did not. This was a problem because the FCC and the state regulators were asking Mark and his colleagues for Sprint's positions on implementing the Act, but there was no corporate direction.

Mark asked a colleague what he should do and she advised: "Mark, just act like you are in charge and see what happens." To make a long story short, that is what he did and it worked. He recruited a team that identified policy questions that Sprint needed to answer, asked for additional volunteers to write draft corporate positions, and announced deadlines. Eventually the executives noticed the work and assigned the chief operating officer and the corporate general counsel to review the policy drafts and decide any unresolved policy conflicts. It all worked. Mark had no authority to do this work, but by defining the work and asking people to get involved, he helped bring about a positive change in how Sprint defined its corporate identity.

This issue of providing leadership without formal authority to lead has implications for the opportunities for regulatory agencies to provide leadership. Other stakeholders in the policy making process – politicians, businesses, consumer groups, and the like – have constituencies that they serve and, to stay in the game, must maintain a certain loyalty with those supporters. (Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky 2009a, pp. 91-96) This is less true of independent regulatory agencies because their independence means that their loyalties are to the regulatory process. The independence gives the regulator greater latitude to raise issues that cause conflict between the various constituencies. However, the lack of a constituency

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[12] This narrative draws upon Jamison (2007).

[13] PUB. L. NO. 104-104, 110 Stat.56.

leaves the regulator more open to political attacks that are difficult to defend against (Jamison 2007).[14] The solution to this friction is often to orchestrate experiments and dialogues that help groups find or create the sweet spot shown in Figure 1. This conflicts with regulatory agencies' traditional roles of providing expert answers, obtaining policy direction from the political process, and staying out of the management of utilities, but is an important role during times of change.

Conclusion

This paper develops a model for resetting regulation and utilities in today's uncertain environment. Given that the future is unknown and probably unknowable, and that at least some countries face situations where particular policies that gave success in the past now hold the countries back, it is important to engage in adaptive learning. The model for adaptive learning includes focusing on next practices rather than best practices when faced with novel situations, studying why some practices have been successful and continuing to learn from attempts at next practices, and focusing on leadership rather than leading to ensure that all elements of the system – regulatory agencies, service providers, customers, and the like – engage in adaptive learning.

Marty Linsky of Harvard University summarized the paradox of leadership for a reset this way:

> "…you have to be completely committed to what you are doing in order to step out there and take the risks, but at the same time, with equal persistence, you have to hang on to self-doubt, always keeping open the possibility that there is a better idea out there. Otherwise, how can you ever learn and grow? But, then again, I might be wrong about that."[15]

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[14] In jurisdictions where regulatory agencies are creations of the legislature, one view could be that politicians are the constituents of the regulatory agency. However, if the agency has independence in its budgeting, appointment and removal, decision making, and appeals processes, the agency answers primarily to the law, which makes the agency responsible for the system. There may be situations where an individual regulator is personally loyal to a political party or to politicians that helped him or her obtain a position in the regulatory agency.

[15] Linsky on Leadership, http://www.cambridgeleadership.blogspot.com/, accessed August 26, 2009.

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