



HITA Sovereignty

Holding Your Ground When Leaders Push Back

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The word “sovereignty” typically calls to mind nations and governments. But it applies equally to change practitioners. Professional sovereignty is the self-determination and steadfastness that enable practitioners to stand firm when circumstances push them toward actions that run counter to a leader’s best interests. It’s a central pillar of the ATA program and one of the defining characteristics that distinguishes High Impact Trusted Advisors (HITAs). The full ATA paper “HITA Sovereignty” explores what it takes to hold your ground when leaders push back and why doing so is essential to serving them well. Here are some highlights.

HITAs carry two core assets: the methodology they apply and the sovereignty they bring to applying it. Skill without sovereignty collapses under pressure. Sovereignty without skill has nothing to stand on. Both are required, and of the two, sovereignty is the harder one to develop.

When Practitioners Draw the Line

There is no shortage of methodologies. Practitioners across every specialty are inundated with processes and tools. What’s often lacking is the conviction to stand by them when a leader pushes back, insisting that a certain aspect of the approach is too complex or that key steps should be skipped. Of course practitioners need to be as accommodating as possible, but at a certain point, too much accommodation jeopardizes realization. When this happens, if practitioners yield rather than stand firm for what’s necessary to reach realization of intended outcomes, or if they back down without ensuring the leader understands the implications of bypassing what’s being recommended, they have fallen short of their obligation to prioritize what’s best for the leader over their own comfort.

Leaders resist recommendations for understandable reasons: unfamiliarity with a new advisor or approach, the tendency to revert to instinct when stress is high, or a personality that simply isn’t wired to receive advisory guidance. None of this makes leaders bad actors. It makes them human. Leader pushback only becomes a problem when it crosses into territory that violates the

core of the practitioner's methodology and would lead to outcomes that aren't in the leader's own best interests. That's when sovereignty comes into play.

Within every methodology, some components are essential for realization, and others are nice to have. The sovereignty line is precisely where the essentials are separated from the preferable. When a leader declines an optional recommendation, that's fine. When a leader rejects something foundational, HITA practitioners must speak up—not in an attempt to override the leader's authority, but to ensure the leader fully understands what's at stake before making a decision.

Defending the line means having that explicit conversation. The practitioner isn't being combative or blocking what leaders want to do; the goal is making sure the leader understands what's at stake before bypassing something foundational. The decision belongs to the leader, which means the practitioner may ultimately have to cross the line despite offering counsel to the contrary. However, they still have an obligation to surface the implications of the boundary to be overridden.

The Deeper Reason It's Hard

If sovereignty were simply a matter of confidence or technique, it would be easier to teach. The struggle runs deeper than that, and for most practitioners it traces back to childhood.

Human beings are wired from birth to seek affirmation: love and acceptance from the people who matter to them. When those people dispensed affirmation freely, it nurtured. When they dispensed it conditionally in exchange for compliance, it trained. Children raised by conditional gatekeepers learned early that authenticity was risky and conformity was rewarded.

That imprint doesn't disappear in adulthood. Senior leaders trigger the same conditioned response that gatekeeping parents once did. The currency shifts from childhood rewards to professional ones (praise, security, access, advancement), but the dynamic is the same: mold yourself to earn approval. Practitioners trade integrity for likeability and authenticity for acceptance, often without realizing they've done it.

Sovereignty is the antidote. It is the self-determination and tenacity to stay anchored in what you know to be true, even when the pressure to conform is coming from someone with real power over your professional life.

Reclaiming Sovereignty: Four Assertions

Sovereignty isn't bestowed by rank, tenure, or credential. It's claimed. The full paper identifies four commitments that practitioners can make to reclaim and sustain it:

- **Claim Your Priorities.** A HITA's first priority is the leader's success, not the leader's comfort. That means bringing full conviction and independence of judgment to the work, not as a challenge to the leader's authority, but as the clearest expression of commitment to what the leader is actually trying to achieve.

Claim Your Brand. Your reputation isn't built on deliverables and deadlines. Those are table stakes. What defines a HITA is the unique value born of insight, judgment, and courage.

- **Claim Your Constituency.** Be discerning about who you serve. Contract explicitly about what your methodology entails, the requirements that impact the leader, and what it's actually like to work with you. Avoid situations where you'll be undervalued, underutilized, or expected to unthinkingly conform to the leader's whims.
- **Claim Your Integrity.** Sovereign HITAs are highly flexible in accommodating requests to adapt how they work, but they make sure leaders understand the consequences before bypassing what the work requires.

Compassion Without Abdication

Hesitation to take a sovereign stand is a natural human response to facing risk, shaped by years of conditioning. Compassion for that struggle is warranted, for others and for yourself. But compassion can't become a place to hide. It's important to acknowledge how hard it can be without excusing the failure to act on it.

Solid Performers may or may not speak truth to power. For those serving as a HITA, doing so isn't optional. The stakes are too high and the role too vital for insecurity and anxiety to govern the response. Taking on HITA responsibilities requires that the leader's success comes before your own comfort and security.

HITA work is ultimately about integrating methodological expertise with professional sovereignty, pairing skill with the resolve to stand behind it, and offering guidance that's not only sound but grounded in the strength of what you know works. That's what senior leaders respect, and that's what it means to serve as a HITA. The paper closes with a direct challenge to practitioners who recognize themselves in what they've read: the decision to claim sovereignty, or not, is ultimately yours to make.

This paper is drawn from the Conner Academy Advisor Training Academy (ATA) curriculum. To explore the full program, visit conneracademy.com.