



Adaptive Leadership

Leading an Organization to Face Its
Difficult Challenges

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Sources and Resources

- Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994)
- Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002)

Agenda



- I. Concept of adaptive leadership
- II. How do you practice adaptive leadership?
- III. How do you survive?



I. The Concept of Adaptive Leadership

- Leadership
 - An activity
 - Not a position
 - Not a set of personal characteristics
 - Viewed in terms of adaptive work
 - Adaptive work: addressing conflicts in the values people hold, or to reduce the gap between the values and the reality



Two sets of distinctions

- **Authority vs. leadership**
- **Technical problems vs. adaptive problems**



Authority vs. Leadership

Authority

- Conferred power to perform a service
- Implies a relationship of dominance/deference
 - May come from an official position
 - Or may come from trust
- Expectation: will keep the organization or community happy, on an even keel

Leadership

- May be exercised by anyone
- Is focused on challenging the organization or community to face its problems
- It's not about setting a vision and mobilizing the people to accomplish your vision...
- But about **helping** them address problems that require change

Technical vs. adaptive challenges



Technical problems



You know how to solve the problem



Expertise can be applied

Adaptive challenges

- You don't know how to solve the problem
- You may not even fully understand the problem
- There may be many different people affected
- Solving it involves dealing with conflict, values, behaviors





- Why does this matter?
 - Adaptive challenges require different responses than technical challenges.
 - The authority and expertise-based solutions won't solve adaptive problems.
 - Many challenges that confront organizations are adaptive.
 - Authority can be a resource for leadership; it can also be a constraint.



- Adaptive challenge--

“a gap between the shared values people hold and the realities of their lives”

or “a conflict among people in a community over values or strategies”



- So, leadership is helping a community, an organization, take on adaptive problems-
 - Confront conflicts within the community that are holding it back
 - Face changes in reality that mean that the old ways of doing things aren't working any more
 - Address situations where there's a gap between what you value and want to accomplish and what you are actually doing
 - Requires change in mindsets and behaviors



Questions to think about...



Do you find the distinction between technical and adaptive challenges helpful?



Does your organization face adaptive challenges? What makes them adaptive challenges? Examples?



II. How do you exercise adaptive leadership?

- Not a recipe book or a rule book. But some key practices that can help.
 1. Getting on the balcony
 2. Identifying the adaptive challenges
 3. Managing distress
 4. Focusing attention on the problem
 5. Giving the work back to the members of the community/organization



1. “Getting on the balcony”

- Trying to understand patterns, relationships
- Diagnose the adaptive challenge
- Analyze how to get people to face it



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2. Identifying the adaptive challenge

- What needs to change?
- Why and how?

-- Questions to ask:

1. What's causing the distress in the organization?
2. What internal contradictions does the distress represent?
3. What are the histories of these contradictions?
4. How am I and others perceived by the various sides?
What interests am I perceived to represent?



3. Managing distress

- Facing conflicts and value issues creates stress—distress.
- but it has to be managed and contained
- Need to understand symptoms of distress, responses, and history of problem solving

– Questions to ask:

1. What are the characteristic responses of the organization to stress, conflict, etc.?
2. In the past, at what point has the distress become self-destructive?
3. What actions by authorities have restored equilibrium? What mechanisms are available to me, in my position?



4. Focusing attention on the problem

- We often try to avoid working on hard problems and find ways to avoid them.
 - Find excuses, someone else to blame
 - Perpetually reorganize, thinking that will solve the problem
 - Turn aside to other problems

– Questions to ask:

1. How do people in the organization tend to work on problems and how do they avoid that work?
2. What does the current pattern of work avoidance indicate about the nature and difficulty of the present adaptive challenge?
3. Which of multiple issues is ripe for addressing?



5. Giving the work back to your people

- Don't be tempted to let them depend on you to face the challenges.
- Figure out what kinds of changes different people have to make for the organization to move forward.
- May mean orchestrating conflict.

– Questions to ask

1. Changes in whose values, beliefs, or behaviors would allow progress on these issues?
2. What are the losses involved?
3. Given my role, how am I likely to be drawn into work avoidance?



Recap—Key guidelines

1. Getting on the balcony
2. Identifying the adaptive challenges
3. Managing distress
4. Focusing attention on the problem
5. Giving the work back to members of the organization or community

- Questions?

III. Leadership is hard--how do you survive?



1. Separating your self from your role
2. Finding partners
3. Listening to yourself
4. Finding a sanctuary
5. Preserving a sense of purpose



1. Separating your self from your role

- Understand that people's responses to your actions are not about you personally but are a response to the role you are playing.
- Allows you to avoid internalizing conflicts and instead to externalize them



2. Finding partners

- The confidant
- The ally
 - Across levels
 - Across different organizations



3. Listening to yourself

- Understanding your own biases and ways of processing information
- Reflect daily on your own successes and failures, and what habits or behaviors get us into trouble
- Reflect on people/situations that you find annoying—they may be clues that you need to listen better



4. Finding a “sanctuary”

- Take care not to lose yourself
- Plan opportunities to regain perspective
- Different for different people



5. Preserving a larger sense of purpose

- Not about the immediate goals or activities
- “The capacity to find the values that make risk-taking meaningful”
- Helps keep frustrations and failures in perspective, so helps sustain commitment and willingness to exercise leadership.



Key takeaways



Adaptive challenges



Technical vs. adaptive problems



Getting on the balcony



Asking why and how



Looking into yourself



Taking care of yourself





The challenge



Does your organization face adaptive challenges? What makes them adaptive challenges? Examples?



Do you see some of these ideas as helpful to you in your organization or community?



How can you put into practice what you have learned today?





- Thank you!