

Adaptive Leadership

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Core beliefs of adaptive leadership:

- Leadership can be learned. It is about understanding and about behaviors and actions. It is not an inherent set of traits such as charisma.
- The adaptability of organizations depends on having widespread leadership that can come from anywhere within an organization, not just from those in top positions of authority.
- Because adaptive change generates resistance, exercising leadership can be both difficult and dangerous.

Adaptive leadership distinguishes between adaptive challenges and technical problems.

Technical problems are ones that can be defined clearly and for which solutions exist; it may be difficult to fix, but we know what to do or can find an expert who does. Technical problems can be managed and usually fall to some one with the authority to address them.

Adaptive challenges imply having to learn new ways of working and having to choose between what appear to be contradictory values. They cannot be “managed”, but must be confronted and dealt with honestly.

Adaptive challenges, although unique for each organization, share several properties in common:

1. There is a gap between aspirations and reality.
2. Progress requires responses outside the organization’s standard repertoire.
3. Narrowing the gap will require difficult learning.
4. Part of the learning will require distinguishing, among all that is valued, what is essential to be carried forward and what is expendable, which will involve loss.
5. The losses often involve learning to refashion loyalties and develop new competencies.
6. Painful choices must be made between competing loyalties and values.
7. The people with the problem are the problem, and they are the solution. Problem-solving responsibility must shift from authoritative experts to stakeholders.
8. Adaptive work requires a longer timeframe than technical work.
9. Adaptive work involves experimentation.
10. Adaptive challenges generate disequilibrium, resistance and work avoidance.

Significant organizational change inevitably involves adaptive challenges.

Working on an edge

Within any profession or sector, one of the primary characteristics of the artistry of leadership is the willingness to work on an edge—the edge between the familiar and the emergent. Harvard University professor Ronald A. Heifetz honours this edge when he speaks of the capacity to lead with only good questions in hand—and that acts of leadership require the ability to walk the razor's edge without getting your feet too cut up—working that edge place between known problems and unknown solutions, between popularity and anxious hostility. Artistic leadership is able to remain curious and creative in the complexity and chaos of swamp issues, often against the odds. As we have seen, **those who practice adaptive leadership must confront, disappoint, and dismantle and at the same time energize, inspire, and empower.** The creativity that emerges from working on this paradoxical edge is integral to adaptive work, building out of what has come before, yet stirring into being something new and unprecedented—the character of leadership that is needed at this threshold time in human history.