

ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP - INPUT

INTRODUCTION

Adaptive leadership is a model developed by Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky that emphasizes the need to adapt our ways to match the complexity of our challenges. This theory is designed to help individuals and organizations deal with the implications of a highly volatile and uncertain environment where old ways of leading no longer work. It advances a new way of understanding leadership away from the traditional models of command and control or the dependencies on heroic individuals. The model's DNA has strong relations with Ignatian charism. It offers practices and techniques to diagnose the current reality, it helps design solutions that adapt to this reality, and provides tools for the collective to thrive and remain sustainable.

MAIN IDEAS

Between technical and adaptive challenges

Leadership is in the business of solving problems and reaching results. Hence, **understanding challenges and properly diagnosing them** is a first step in helping the group of individuals survive and thrive in a highly complex environment. One part of the problems that individuals and organizations encounter is relatively simple to identify and has somehow clear solutions. They often require the application of simple expertise and good management and do not require internal change or adaptation. This type of problems may involve for example fixing a broken equipment, buying new material, hiring or firing people, giving a salary raise... Because the implementation of such solutions necessitates access to power and resources (expertise, money, ability to make decisions...) the entity usually in charge of addressing these issues has authority or is an expert. Heifetz refers to this category as “**technical problems**”. Although the implementation of technical solutions is not necessarily easy, but with the right authority or resources, success is somewhat guaranteed.

Conversely, there are other more complex type of problems where the usual technical fixes and authority's interventions fail to provide appropriate resolution (and sometimes can even exacerbate the situation). These challenges are more difficult to define, involve a gap between current beliefs/values and the circumstances at hand, and therefore require difficult learning and adaptation at the entire system's level. Heifetz refers to them as “**adaptive challenges**”. Leadership theory has only recently started to address the complexity of adaptive work, before it focused more on the aforementioned technical problems. On the next page you will find a table that will help you distinguish a technical problem from an adaptive challenge.

Unlike technical issues, adaptive problems require collective learning and cannot be solved by one individual or team. Successfully initiating adaptive change therefore requires a shift from classic authority thinking towards a more plural and interdependent approach to leadership.

Technical Problems	Signs that the challenge is not only technical but has an underlying adaptive component:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Easy to identify and often well defined <input type="checkbox"/> Response to these challenges are clear <input type="checkbox"/> Can be solved with current know-how <input type="checkbox"/> Can be solved by calling the right expert <input type="checkbox"/> Can be solved by applying the right tool or knowledge to create the right solution <input type="checkbox"/> Solved through current structures, procedures, and ways of doing things <input type="checkbox"/> Primary responsible for doing the work is “authority” (with access to resources and power to solve the problem). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Change needs to affect people’s hearts and minds not just their preferences or behaviors <input type="checkbox"/> Traditional problem-solving tactics have been used repeatedly, without success <input type="checkbox"/> The challenge has been part of the organization for some time (not a new issue) <input type="checkbox"/> Problem reappearing after short term fixes <input type="checkbox"/> A cycle of failure, growing cynicism and resignation <input type="checkbox"/> Persistence of conflict is a sign that people have not yet adjusted or accepted losses <input type="checkbox"/> The outburst of sudden repetitive crisis <input type="checkbox"/> Dependence on authority, expecting them to apply fixes to technically solve the issue <input type="checkbox"/> “Blame-it-on-the-management” mentality <input type="checkbox"/> Persistent complaint about a widening gap between aspirations and current reality <input type="checkbox"/> Previously successful experts and authorities are unable to solve the problem <input type="checkbox"/> Manifestation of stress and frustration from the status quo <input type="checkbox"/> Urgency and crisis are often felt within the system <input type="checkbox"/> Willingness to try new approaches building up
Adaptive Challenges	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> More difficult to define, no known or clear-cut solutions <input type="checkbox"/> Solutions not found in manuals or authoritative expertise <input type="checkbox"/> Making progress on these challenges requires experimentation and new perspectives <input type="checkbox"/> Systemic, spread across organizational boundaries, affecting interrelated groups <input type="checkbox"/> Those working on the problem are themselves part of the problem <input type="checkbox"/> Primary responsible for doing the work are stakeholders themselves <input type="checkbox"/> Are addressed through difficult learning and uncomfortable adaptation of values, priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties <input type="checkbox"/> Question fundamental assumptions <input type="checkbox"/> Involves divergent and opposing points of views <input type="checkbox"/> Involve loss to those involved and hence bring inevitable resistance <input type="checkbox"/> Involve a different timeframe than that of technical work 	

Beside properly diagnosing challenges, effectively leading adaptive change involves as well mastering the following iterative process:

1. Observe (events and patterns)
2. Interpret/Reflect (develop multiple hypotheses and remain open to other options)
3. Intervene (based on the observations and interpretations, design interventions to address the adaptive challenge and take action)

It also requires continuous movement between what Heifetz refers as hitting the dancefloor (taking action) and stepping on the balcony (reflecting how the intervention was received).

Between Leadership and Authority

In his books, Heifetz draws attention to the limits of our language when discussing and practicing leadership and distinguishes the authority function from leadership work. He suggests that the word leader is often used to refer to people in formal positions of power. However, dependence on “leaders” can become problematic in the setting of adaptive work:

- On one hand, it could potentially lead to inaction of those who do not consider themselves as “leaders”.
- On the other hand, it could foster inappropriate levels of expectations on those in power which could easily translate into frustration and disappointment given their inability to solve adaptive issues alone.

In this context, Heifetz redefines leadership as an intervention oriented towards a higher purpose, tackling complex problems that no one can handle alone, for a better collective future. This mobilizing activity is not necessarily linked to positions of power and can be exercised with and possibly without formal authority. Adaptive leadership work is about engaging and mobilizing people to work together and access their collective intelligence and resources to address their issues. This suggestion implies a mindset shift:

- from command and control towards involving and experimenting with others,
- from the power of a heroic leader to the responsibility of working together for a common purpose,
- from having all the answers and doing the work on behalf of others to asking the right questions and helping people manage losses as they do the work themselves (disappointing their expectations at a rate they can tolerate)

Staying Alive Through the Challenges of Leading Change

Leaders engaged in adaptive work put themselves on the line when they challenge people’s default interpretations or values and mobilize them to give up deep-rooted habits. Beside the risk of losing others’ trust, leaders face ongoing attempts that aim to discourage their efforts and preserve the *status quo* (marginalization, diversion, attacks, seduction...). Managing these risks calls for prudence and courage. It also involves:

- Accepting to live in disequilibrium
- Regulating pace/intensity of work depending on the situation
- Managing people’s avoidance / distractions by keeping a disciplined attention to the challenge at hand
- Connecting people to purpose by reminding them of the promised future
- Managing the politics associated to adaptive change, like building alliances and managing stakeholders
- Orchestrating conflict and competing perspectives.

Handout 1 “Living in disequilibrium” provides more details on the above and suggests exercises and practices. In addition to these external pressures, those exercising leadership need to manage internal threats as well (burnout, callosity of heart, cynicism, arrogance...). Refer to the worksheet on “Managing the Dangers of Leadership” in the practices section.

IGNATIAN NOTE

There is a strong relation between the ideas posited in the adaptive leadership theory and the underlying ideas of the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm. Here are some reflections on this point from Susan Mountin and Rebecca Nowacek from Marquette University:

To the extent that a signature pedagogy of Jesuit education has been identified, it has been located in this **process of experience, reflection, action, and evaluation**. In 1986 the International Commission on the Apostolate of Jesuit Education (ICAJE) published The Characteristics of Jesuit Education. This document took a broad scope, identifying 10 characteristics, [...] in an effort to make those characteristics more accessible and practicable [...] the ICAJE later published Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach. This document introduces and discusses the "**Ignatian pedagogical paradigm**"- a paradigm quite explicitly linked to the Spiritual Exercises:

*A distinctive feature of the Ignatian pedagogical paradigm is that, understood in the light of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, it becomes not only a fitting description of the **continual interplay of experience, reflection and action** in the teaching learning process, but also an ideal portrayal of the dynamic interrelationship of teacher and learner in the latter's **journey of growth in knowledge and freedom**.*

In addition to this, on the point 143 in the article of the "Characteristics of Jesuit Education" we find:

*For Ignatius and for his companions, decisions were made on the basis of an ongoing process of individual and communal "discernment" done always in a context of prayer. Through prayerful reflection on the results of their activities, the **companions reviewed past decisions and made adaptations in their methods, in a constant search for greater service to God ("magis")***

EXPECTED LEARNINGS AND OUTCOMES

1. Introducing the practice of adaptive leadership (Ronald Heifetz)
2. Exploring key considerations for leading adaptively
3. Reflecting on the adaptive challenges in my organization and gaining tools to lead adaptive work

"Exercising leadership is the art of mobilising a group of people to do adaptive work for the greater good."

Ronald A. Heifetz