

ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP - HANDOUT 1

LIVING IN DISEQUILIBRIUM

OBJECTIVES

1. Reflecting on the risks and challenges associated with adaptive work
2. Understanding work avoidance and learning to maintain disciplined attention
3. Learning how to work in disequilibrium and manage tension and polarities

MAIN IDEAS

Managing the risks of adaptive work

- From your own experience, what are distinct challenges and dangers involved in leading adaptive change in your organization or community?
- What threats or pressures have others subjected you to in an attempt to lower the heat or force you out of the game?

Leading people through painful adaptation carries pressures and threatens the system's stability. The process involves loss and pain and thus produces resistance. In response to being challenged in their deepest loyalties and ways of thinking, people become defensive and set out to restore previous equilibrium. Their tactics could take many forms:

- blaming or marginalizing those putting the adaptive issue on the table,
- attacking, complaining to authority figures or questioning their judgment,
- attempting to divert attention to lower the heat (promoting or overwhelming the agenda of those initiating adaptive work,...)
- trying to compromise the purpose of adaptive work by seducing or playing on weaknesses or hungers

Regardless of the manner in which individuals try to avoid the pain of adaptive work, the hope is found in leadership's capacity to accompany and mobilize the group through this disequilibrium while managing their fears and disappointments.

Managing Work Avoidance and Keeping Disciplined Attention

People often avoid adaptive work by diverting attention away from the issues that generate frustration and conflict or by displacing responsibility.

- What are ways you personally resort to when under pressure to avoid difficult work and divert attention? (humor, defensiveness, justification, blame...)
- What are common avoidance mechanisms that your team or organization commonly use?
- Identify 1-3 things you can do to help people maintain disciplined attention.
- Identify 1-3 things you can do to give the work back to the people.

Common Avoidance Mechanisms

Focusing only on the technical part of the challenge and applying quick fixes	Delegating the adaptive work to those who can't do anything about it	Create a proxy fight (personality conflict) instead of grappling with the real problem	Defining the problem to fit one's expertise without attention to the need of personal adaptation
Attacking or blaming authority	Marginalizing those who try to raise the issue	Denying that the problem exists	Keeping some options off the table to honor legacy or values
Externalize the enemy	Displacing Responsibility	Shifting attention to other topics (other successes or other problems)	Taking a break or leaving the meeting
Blaming competition or external circumstances	Scapegoating someone (It's their fault!)	Turning down the heat in a meeting by using humor	Banalizing the issue

Leadership requires getting people and groups to assume greater responsibility. Key leadership tasks include:

- **Holding steady** when people are reacting - receiving their anger without becoming reactive or personally justifying yourself, maintaining composure and respect while defending your viewpoint, staying present and opening a space for others to fill.
- **Maintaining disciplined attention:** recognizing common avoidance mechanisms that people use, reporting observed behavior (instead of judging or making attacks) and counteracting these tactics by bringing focus back to the real challenge.
- **Giving the work back** when signs of dependence start showing. Leaders are called to spot when they give in to the pressures of solving the adaptive challenge on their own and give the work back to allow the entire system to contribute to its resolution. Lasting progress happens when the entire system internalize the challenge, owns it, learns from it and adapts.

Role play in small groups

- Take the following scenario: A team leader having a conversation with two team members who have been regularly fighting.
- During the role play, the two team members will practice work avoidance mechanisms and the team leader will practice giving them the work back.

Regulating pace and disequilibrium

Among the challenges of adaptive leadership is pacing the work and regulating the disequilibrium that leaders introduce to the organization. Too much disequilibrium overwhelms, not enough stagnates.

- Identify 1-3 things you can do to raise or lower the amount of disequilibrium in order to keep it within a productive range?
- What are signs in your own group/organization that point to the need of lowering the temperature? When, on the other hand, do you feel that more heat might be needed?
- How are you usually able to recognize these subtle signs in the midst of the action? What can you do to better attune yourself to the signs that your group sends you?

Leaders are called to pay particular attention not to rush the process, overwork the system, or intervene when the system is still not ready or the issue is not ripe. Interventions of this sort are counterproductive.

By keeping their hand on the organization's thermostat, leaders will be able to:

- lower the heat when needed (by delaying some particularly sensitive matters to more suitable times for example, or giving the system some breathing space and allowing some avoidance...)
- and raise the temperature back to gain the group's attention (by challenging the default interpretation, listening to dissenting voices, giving room for disagreement to surface,...)

Additional Reflection

- How can listening to dissenting voices or allowing disagreement benefit adaptive work?
- How can you balance between lowering the heat and not completely falling into work avoidance?

Connecting people to purpose

In the heat of adaptive work, people need to be reminded of the vision behind the disequilibrium they are enduring. It is very important to set context, ground people to the ultimate purpose and help them sustain momentum. This involves:

- making the promised future more tangible
- communicating the purpose and vision in every occasion
- keeping people's focus on the values they committed to honor

These conversations about the future not only help the group tolerate hardship but also shield those initiating adaptive work from becoming personal targets and develop trust in their interventions.

- What could be fulfilling reasons for your people to do the work that you are asking them to do?
- What is the possible vision for the future once the group has learned and faced its adaptive issues?
- How can you keep reminding them of this ultimate purpose and vision?

Managing the Politics of Change

Adaptive work is not only lonely but also dangerous and political. Leading adaptive change in uncertain times needs an active involvement from key stakeholders especially formal authority. One of the most important tasks of leaders is therefore to expand their influence by finding allies and partners who will share the dangers and exposure. Another equally crucial part is to diagnose the political landscape, form a map of key stakeholders (including opposition) and develop effective strategies to mobilize them or manage/neutralize their resistance.

- Identify the relevant parties in a recent strategic initiative. What are you asking each of them to experience? (a measure of loss, disloyalty, incompetence...) How so?
- Refer to the Worksheet on **Managing Stakeholders** for a deeper reflection and exploration of the topic.

Orchestrating Conflict

Adaptive work inherently involves working with intense emotions and balancing acute differences. However, with the right approach, competing perspectives can become a source of creativity rather than a source of conflict. A vital leadership role in this regard is to prepare the ground for such heated discussions and consequently control temperature, limit harm and canalise energy into finding creative solutions (a process often referred to as orchestrating conflict).

- Building on your own experience, what conditions and practices are needed to accompany people through their controversial issues and orchestrate the ensuing conflict?

Cultivating the right climate and conditions for conflict transformation is key as it will generate a safe space for people to hear each other out, sort their competing loyalties, recognize each other's losses and accept sharing the costs of adaptive work. Fostering a safe holding environment could include among others: inviting an external facilitator, developing a team charter, committing to group processes that ensure everybody gets to express himself equally...

Simulation/Role Play

Part 1: Bring to mind a controversial issue in your own organization.

- What are the different viewpoints?
- How would you prepare for a meeting between the parties involved?
- What is a relevant holding environment that would allow to orchestrate this conflict?
- What should you keep in mind?

Share with your small group and gather their insights.

Part 2: You are attending a board meeting at your university and the group is having a heated argument over hosting a highly qualified speaker who denies the existence of God.

- In your small group, take some time to identify competing perspectives.
- Consider how they might be orchestrated.