

Adaptive Leadership
Cross Campus Leadership Initiative
Theory Workshop

I. Common title given to the model:

Adaptive Leadership

II. Most often cited author or translator of the model:

Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky

III. Other research/theory from which the model is derived:

Post-Industrial Leadership (Rost, 1991) – *Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and collaborators who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes.*

IV. Definition of the model or concept:

Adaptive leadership - the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive.

Key Ideas

Adaptive leadership, like medicine, has two parts:

1. Diagnosis – reflecting on the problem and understanding it fully; we feel pressure to jump to action; diagnosis is the “single most important leadership skill and undervalued capacity”
 - a. “Out on the balcony” or “above the dance floor” – the process of regularly taking a larger view of situations
 - b. When we rush to action, we tend to personalize problems (e.g., Joe is a bad person, Mary is selfish)
2. Action – toward society/organization as well as yourself

Adaptive Problems versus Technical Problems

- *Technical problems* are those problems that already have answers, even if the answers require a lot of expertise or are not found within the organization
- *Adaptive problems* require new learning, new capacities. The solution isn’t “out there”
- The most common cause of failure in leadership is produced by treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems
- Most problems are both technical and adaptive
- People avoid dealing with adaptive problems because it requires dealing with loss
- If life presented exclusively technical problems, people would get what they need looking routinely to authorities for solutions to problems

Four Adaptive Challenge Archetypes

1. Gap Between Espoused Values and Behavior
2. Competing Commitments
3. Speaking the Unspeakable
4. Work Avoidance (diversion of attention and displacement of responsibility)
 - a. Diverting attention – focus only on technical parts define the problem to fit one’s current expertise, turn down the heat by telling a joke or taking a break, deny that problems exist, create a proxy fight (personality conflicts), take options off the table
 - b. Displacing responsibility – shoot the messenger, scapegoat, externalize the enemy, attack authority, delegate the adaptive work to consultants, task forces, committees

Adaptive leadership requires three key activities:

1. Observing events and patterns around you (i.e., going to the balcony)
2. Interpreting what you are observing (multiple hypotheses)

3. Designing interventions based on the observations and interpretations designed to address the adaptive challenge you've named

Five characteristics of an adaptive organization:

1. Elephants in the room are named
2. Responsibility for the organization's future is shared
3. Independent judgment is expected
4. Leadership capacity is developed
5. Reflection and continuous learning are institutionalized – mistakes aren't marginalized, the perspectives of frontline people are considered, retreats and off-sites include people from all levels, when something bad happens it's acknowledged, sabbaticals and leaves of absence, communication and interaction are nurtured, execs encourage pure reflection, coaching for mid-level and top people, strategic plans are living, breathing documents

V. How could this model be used to look at the ongoing process of leadership learning for students?

1. Building students capacities to engage in adaptive leadership – introduce theory
2. Educators ought to engage in adaptive work to name and address adaptive problems

VI. Is student understanding of this theory likely to be immediately evident or unfold over a period of time?

The basics of the theory are intuitive and easy to understand. Developing the capacities to do adaptive work are ongoing and take time because it's a culture shift.

VII. What measures are used (could be used) to assess students' progress in learning this theory?

There don't appear to be any valid and reliable instruments to assess adaptive leadership despite myriad business "self-assessments" readily available on the Internet.

VIII. What is different about students who deeply understand and use this model in their leadership?

They are better equipped to confront difficult challenges in their organizations and communities. They understand the importance of involving stakeholders and the sustained leadership work necessary to make cultural shifts.

Recommended Resource

Heifetz, R., Grashow, A., & Linsky, M. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.