

Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive leadership considers leadership as a process or practice rather than being about individual personal effectiveness: it is seen as the “*practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive*”¹. It is a form of leadership that is not constrained by hierarchy in that it can be displayed by people working across an organisation.

The theory considers there to be two types of leadership challenge, each requiring a different leadership approach²:

Technical problems: these are problems for which there is a known answer, and so draws on an organisation’s accumulated knowledge, expertise and experience.

Adaptive challenges: these do not have a known answer typically because they have not been experienced before, and so cannot be solved through an organisation’s knowledge base – it requires something different.

Kind of challenge	Problem definition	Solution	Locus of work
Technical	Clear	Clear	Authority
Technical and adaptive	Clear	Requires learning	Authority and stakeholders
Adaptive	Requires learning	Requires learning	Stakeholders

Adaptive change is uncomfortable; it challenges our most deeply held beliefs and suggests that deeply held values are losing relevance, bringing to the surface legitimate but competing perspectives or commitments. This means that adaptive challenges require a different form of leadership behaviour: adaptive leaders do not provide the answers (and do not equate leadership with expertise) and accept that a degree of disequilibrium is needed to sustain adaptive change (rather than minimising conflict and discomfort). They need to acknowledge that they do not know the solution to a problem – they do not have all of the answers but need to learn their way through the problem.

Core to adaptive work are three activities³:

- ☐ Observing events and patterns, taking in this information as data without forming judgements or making assumptions about the data's meaning;
- ☐ Tentatively interpreting observations by developing multiple hypotheses about what is really going on, and at the same time, recognising that hypotheses are simply that - hypotheses; and

¹ Heifetz R, Grashow A, and Linsky M (2009) The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World

² Heifetz R, Grashow A, and Linsky M (2009) The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World

³ Heifetz R, Grashow A, and Linsky M (2009) The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World

- Designing interventions based on your observations and interpretations in the service of making progress on the adaptive challenge.

Heifetz argues that this leadership process requires people to focus on the specific problems at hand and to modify the way have worked in the past; it should compel all stakeholders involved to work towards a solution through debate and creative thinking, identifying the rewards, opportunities and challenges they will face. He sets out the different approaches in terms of three key elements of leadership - providing direction, protection and order:

Task	Technical	Adaptive
Direction	Provide problem definition and solution	Identify the adaptive challenge; frame the key questions and issues
Protection	Protect from external threats	Disclose external threats
Order:		
Orientation	Orient people to current roles	Disorient current roles: resist orienting people to new roles too quickly
Conflict	Restore order	Expose conflict or let it emerge
Norms	Maintain norms	Challenge norms or let them be challenged

An alternative description is considering six steps to adaptive leadership⁴:

1. Identify the type of problem
2. Focus attention and secure commitment; adopt the behaviour you expect from others and take responsibility for the problem.
3. Frame the issues – step back and see the big picture, the emerging patterns and connections.
4. Secure ownership – sustain the conditions through which stakeholders take responsibility for problem solving – place the work where it belongs.
5. Manage stakeholder conflict and maintain stress – adaptive leaders need to induce enough discomfort for change to take place, but not so much that it leads to organisational paralysis.
6. Create a safe haven – for example by creating a secure place to discuss disparate perspectives.

⁴ Sowing Seeds: Engaged Leadership. Public Services Management Wales