



ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

A framework for leading through change

A common leadership mistake is to treat leadership challenges as managerial challenges - to try to apply technical solutions in situations where people themselves need to change. These 'adaptive challenges' require a different approach, with different mindsets and strategies, supported by collective and continuous learning and experimentation.



Key Idea

Adaptive leadership is one of the most commonly taught models of public leadership. Popularised by Ron Heifetz and colleagues at Harvard University, it responds to a common mistake: confusing adaptive challenges for technical management challenges. It provides a shared language and concepts to support leadership and systems change at the team, organisation or community level.

Adaptive Leadership requires a thorough diagnosis of the situation to determine the work involved and where that work resides. The effort can be intense and requires leaders to be fully invested. Adaptive leadership can be counter-intuitive for technically minded people. It requires framing and asking the right questions, holding uncertainty and discomfort, and eliciting and leveraging others' commitments and contributions.

Adaptive Leadership is the practice of mobilising people to tackle tough challenges and thrive.

Applying Adaptive Leadership

1	Invest time in understanding the situation – differentiating the technical from the adaptive elements of the problem.
2	Create and manage the holding environment – establish a team and coalition that keeps working through ambiguity and uncertainty.
3	Alternate between balcony and dance floor – zoom between the big picture and practical reality as problems and solutions evolve.
4	Regulate the temperature – raising and lowering the heat, orchestrating necessary conflict and keeping distress levels in a productive zone.
5	Engage above and below the neck – this is emotional work and you must connect with people's values, beliefs and anxieties.
6	Give the work back – play your part but enable others and protect voices that are not always heard.

1	Invest time in understanding the situation – differentiating the technical from the adaptive elements of the problem.
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A leader's first task is to diagnose if the challenge is technical or adaptive. Technical problems can be diagnosed and solved, by applying established knowhow and procedures. If you are confident that the solution can be found through existing expertise and structures of authority, you are facing a technical challenge.

Adaptive challenges are different. They are characterised by complexity, uncertainty, and competing values and priorities. They demand collective and continuous learning to bring about shifts in attitudes, behaviours and ways of working among multiple stakeholders.

Of course, not all problems are neatly presented as one type or the other, components are often intertwined. Diagnosis requires us to see 'where the problem lives' – its institutional, systemic and societal context - 'stepping onto the balcony' in Heifetz's terms. A correct diagnosis helps us to direct resources at the solution with the best prospect of success.

Kind of Work	Technical	Technical & Adaptive	Adaptive
Problem definition	Clear	Clear	Requires Learning
Solutions & implementation	Clear	Requires Learning	Requires Learning
Primary locus of responsibility for the work	Authority	Clear	Clear
Resources	Time & Money	Time & Money + Hearts, minds, loyalties & deeply held values	Hearts, minds, loyalties & deeply held values

2

Create and manage the holding environment – establish a team and coalition that keeps working through ambiguity and uncertainty.

Adaptive leadership requires that you and those in your environment can work through disequilibrium, conflict and learning. For you, this will require a learning mindset of the kind we promote in APL. However, you will also need to encourage this mindset in others.

A holding environment (originally a psychological term) refers to a context that provides structure, support, and stability for people to do emotional or cognitive work. A productive holding environment requires both psychological safety and group accountability. It enables ideas to be shared, experiments to be attempted, mistakes to be learned from, concerns to be raised, and assumptions to be challenged. This is the basis of high performing teams and organizations.

To create a productive holding environment:

- Dedicate time, space and governance to build shared understanding of the problem.
- Do your part, while also supporting others to drive change.
- Foster a culture of collective learning that makes performance visible.

Be aware that not every problem will be ready for resolution. In such cases, pushing too hard simply boils things over (this is known as 'premature loading'). You may need to step back, slow down, make the problem smaller and even wait for better timing.

3

Alternate between balcony and dance floor – zoom between the big picture and practical reality as problems and solutions evolve.

The process of Adaptive Leadership is to diagnose first, then take action. This is a 3 step process. These steps are iterative and they operate on two levels - system and self.

Step 1. Observe the events and patterns around you, seeing the system as a whole.

Step 2: Interpret what you are observing and consider multiple hypotheses of 'what is really going on here?'

Step 3. Design interventions based on observations and interpretations, intervening skillfully and intentionally.

To properly observe the situation you will need to 'step up onto the balcony'. From here, you may see patterns and connections that help you identify win-win solutions. You can ask how and where power is being exercised, giving you a richer view of what is happening, what may be driving it and what you may be able to do to influence it. The 'dancefloor' is where you are involved in working the issue, close to practice and attending to the detail. This is where the work gets done, but on a regular basis you need to step back to get the distance to observe what's really going on at a system level before you get back on the dancefloor to make further interventions. These are different modes of thinking, performed separately.

In alternating between the dance floor (in the problem) and the balcony (observing the problem), recall the late Canadian Minister Jim Flaherty's insight that on his desk at Budget time he needed both a microscope (to study the fine detail) and a telescope (to see the bigger picture). But trying to look through both at once produces only a blur. You need to alternate, in a cycle of zooming in and doing the work, and then zooming out again to see the context.

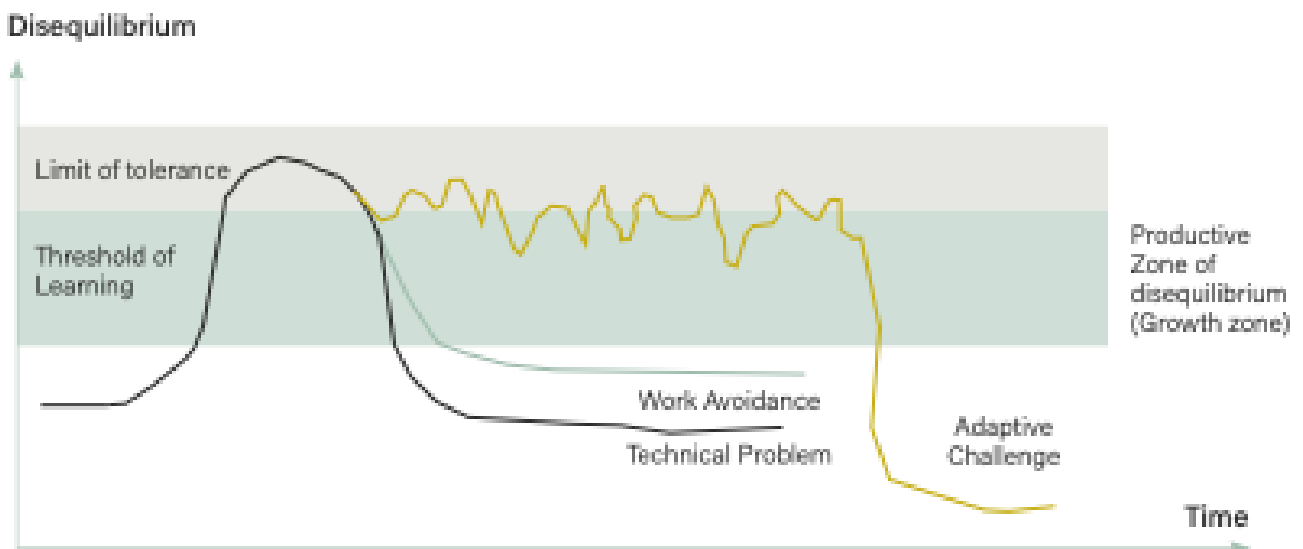
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Regulate the temperature – raising and lowering the heat, orchestrating necessary conflict and keeping distress levels in a productive zone.

Adaptive Leadership involves helping people to navigate through disturbance, taking them out of their comfort zone. This generates 'heat'. An adaptive leader needs to continually adjust the temperature to keep it within the 'productive zone of disequilibrium' so the temperature is not too cold (avoiding the work) and not too hot (where the process overboils) and you can get to your destination.

Dealing with adaptive challenges requires uncomfortable work that many people will avoid at all costs. They may push responsibility onto others, look for a 'big man' to step in and fix the problem, kill the messenger, externalise the enemy or create a scapegoat. They may divert attention from the real problem, deny or misrepresent it, redefine it to fit their competence, or reframe it to shift blame. They may send it off to a process going nowhere. Anything but doing the work.

Generating some heat is required to make progress. This can mean holding difficult conversations, challenging accepted norms, sharing frustrations and fears, or entertaining provocative hypotheticals; it may even require allowing conflict among the people involved – so long as it's productive.



5

Engage above and below the neck – this is emotional work and you must connect with people's values, beliefs and anxieties.

One distinctive aspect of leading adaptive change is that you must connect with the values, beliefs, and anxieties of the people you are trying to move. This is uncomfortable work and people will struggle with fear, uncertainty and loss. Navigating adaptive change involves both conservation and loss. Using an analogy from biology, a key question is what DNA do we conserve, and what DNA do we discard, in order to adapt and thrive in new conditions?

Adaptive leaders support people navigate from a history, through a present, and into a future. The change is anchored in the values, loyalties and competencies that should endure - that are essential. There's a need to honour the history first, building from this to make any loss worthwhile. Loss may be real or perceived. Loss can be direct (time, money, habits, routine), or take the form of loyalties (to people, values and culture), or competence (threats to self and loss of status).

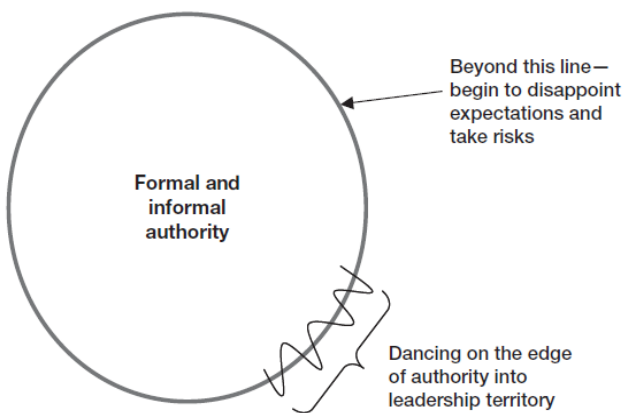
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Give the work back – play your part but enable others and protect voices that are not always heard.

Leaders often feel pressure to solve every problem. In adaptive contexts leaders must give the work back to the people impacted to find a solution that they can own and that will endure. An adaptive leader enables and empowers others, and seeks and amplifies voices that are not always heard.

Adaptive leadership (the activity) does not depend on formal authority (the position) to solve problems. Adaptive Leadership often requires people to take leadership that is beyond their authority and the expectations of their authorisers. Leadership involves dancing on the edge of authority and sometimes crossing the line. There's a need for will plus skill, but be careful not to go so far and lose authorisation.

Formal and informal authority



Additional Resources

Adaptive leadership has been built on a range of seminal publications by Ron Heifetz and colleagues, including Leadership without Easy Answers (1994) and key extensions in 2001 (with Donald Laurie), 2002 (with Marty Linsky) and 2009 (with Marty Linsky and Alex Grashow).

Two accessible resources are:

- Ron Heifetz. Adaptive leadership in 12 Minutes. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9kVxxfknu4>
- Heifetz, R, Grashow, A. & Linsky, M. 'The Theory Behind the Practice' in The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World, (Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation, 2009)

For an easy-to-read Public Admin Explainer from ANZSOG, [click here](#).

Acknowledgement

This explainer has been authored by MKI, drawing from the concepts of the Adaptive Leadership framework. We acknowledge the seminal work on Adaptive Leadership by Ron Heifetz and colleagues at Harvard University.