

ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

Adaptive leadership asks you to see the bigger picture and partner with others in a way that builds shared understanding, surfaces collaborative possibilities and creates proof points for achieving things together that you could never achieve alone. Your leadership sits within a context, but adaptive leadership strategies enable you reshape that context as you are tackling the problems before you.

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 leadership for technical management challenges.

Adaptive leadership challenges require collective and continuous learning, and quite different mindsets and strategies to the formal authority, expertise and routine processes that underpin technical management challenges. 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.

Leadership is about closing the gap between the current reality and aspired reality.

Strategies for Adaptive Leadership

1	Invest time in understanding the problem and its context – 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	Recognise that this is emotional work – know that it will be uncomfortable and that people will struggle with fear, uncertainty and loss.
6	Play your part, but enable others and protect voices that are not always heard, and give the work back to those who need to own it.



Invest time in understanding the problem: Adaptive and Technical Challenges

Technical problems can be diagnosed and solved, generally within a short time frame, by applying established know-how and procedures. Technical problems are amenable to authoritative expertise and the management of routine processes.

Adaptive problems are different. They do not have straightforward solutions but rather 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.

A leader's first task is to take the time needed to discern which parts of the problem are technical and which parts are adaptive. For hard policy problems, you will encounter both. Understanding an adaptive problem requires us to also see 'where the problem lives' - its institutional, systemic and societal context - 'stepping onto the balcony' in Heifetz's terms.

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

Three key strategies of Adaptive Leadership

01

Create a productive holding environment

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 productive holding environment requires both psychological safety and group accountability – to enable ideas to be shared, 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.

Three key strategies of Adaptive Leadership

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Alternative between the Dance Floor and the Balcony

When you are in amongst the action, on the frontline, close to practice and attending to the detail in front of you, you get a very practical perspective of a problem. However, for adaptive problems, the context also matters. When in amongst the action, it can be almost impossible to form a balanced view of how the system is working.

To see the bigger picture, you will also 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 not only what is happening, but what may be driving it and what you may be able to do to influence it.

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.

03

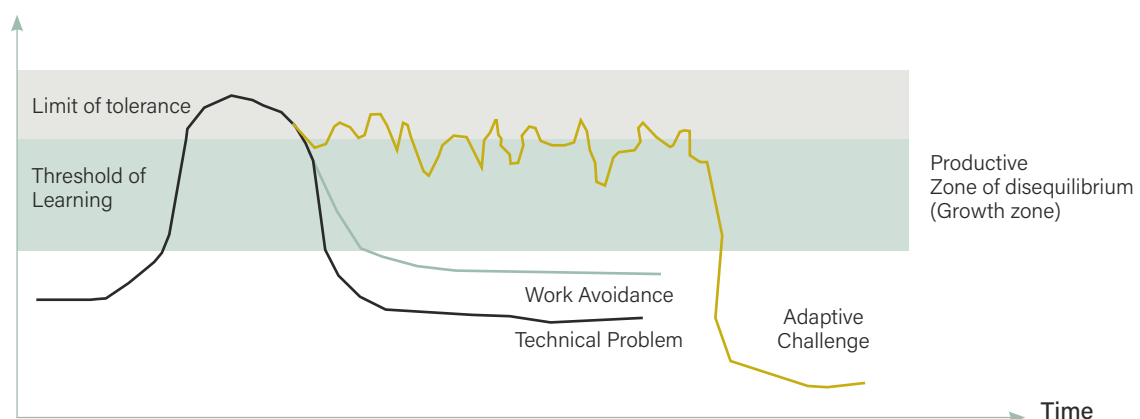
Regulate the temperature

Change often requires you to generate heat. You may have to hold difficult conversations, challenge norms, beliefs and values, share your frustrations and fears, and entertain trade-offs.

This is 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 heat involves creating a sense of urgency and discomfort, even orchestrating conflict among people involved. However, there is a productive zone here – where the temperature is not too cold (avoiding the work) and not too hot (where the process overboils).

Disequilibrium



Some further resources on adaptive leadership

For Farayi Chipungu's APL 2024 workbook. Farayi's workbook, [click here](#).

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 \(with Marty Linsky and Alex Grashow\)](#).

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