

Adaptive Leadership for Results

Based on the work of Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky

From the book Leadership on the Line

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Leadership is about achieving results. Leaders seek to create alignment around a common result and then work with others to make aligned contributions to achieve the result. In this process, both technical and adaptive challenges will emerge. To achieve results, a leader must know the difference between technical and adaptive challenges and be able to implement strategies addressing both.

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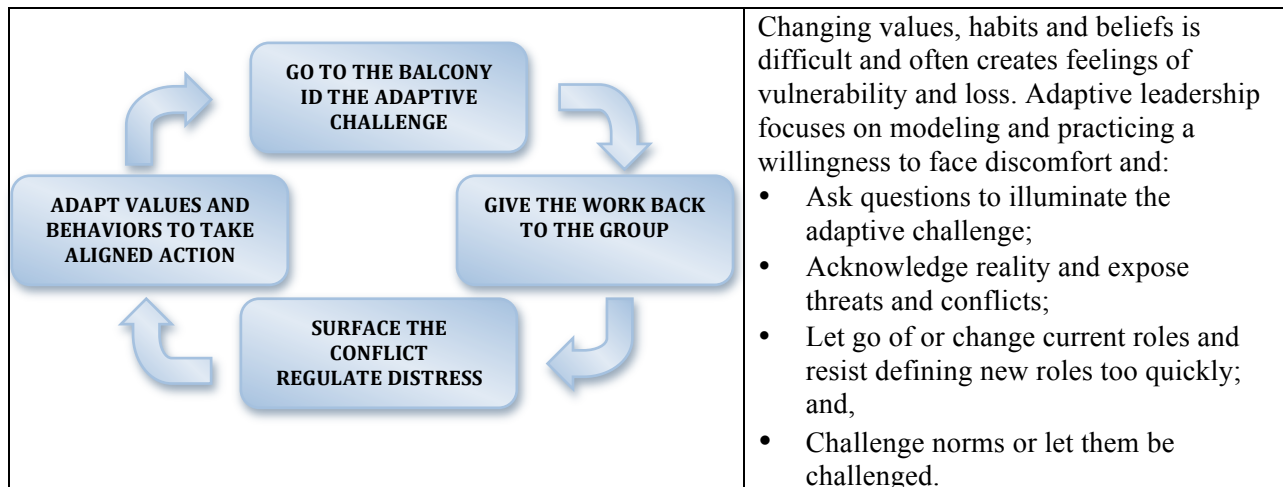
Technical challenges can be solved with existing knowledge, skills and/or technologies. Adaptive challenges are those where there is no readily available technical solution and the exact nature of the challenge may be unknown. Adaptive challenges are always present when striving for high alignment and high action because facing them involves challenging existing modes of operating, examining deeply held, often unconscious, values and beliefs, and exploring new ways of thinking or acting.

1. Telling the Difference Between Technical and Adaptive Challenges¹

Does making progress on this problem require changes in people's values, beliefs, attitudes and behavior?

- *Whose values, beliefs, attitudes or behaviors must change in order to move forward?*
- *What shifts in priorities, resources and power are necessary?*
- *What sacrifices would have to be made and by whom?*

2. The Focus of Adaptive Leadership



¹ The Art and Practice of Leadership Development, Harvard Kennedy School, Executive Program

3. Strategies (Principles) for Adaptive Leadership for Results²

a) Get on the balcony and identify the adaptive challenge

The dance floor is where the action occurs, where the leader is part of the dance and can only see his/her immediate surroundings. The dance floor is where the action occurs, where the leader is part of the dance and can only see his/her immediate surroundings. A leader goes to the balcony – above the dance floor – to see patterns, and identify and generate hypotheses about:

- What is the technical work and what is the adaptive work?
- What role does he/she hold for the group and what roles are others holding?
- What is being said and what is not being said?
- How authority is used and to what purpose?

b) Name conflict and regulate distress

Holding hypotheses allows a leader to name conflicts and surface dysfunctional norms. Naming and surfacing conflicts generates tension and distress by turning up the heat on what is hard to face. Making progress requires turning off the heat and addressing conflict. When the heat is too high, it is helpful to regulate the distress by pausing to do technical work or stabilize roles needed to sustain progress.

c) Give the work back to the people

The people with the adaptive challenge are the only ones who can identify a solution. Giving the work back means not providing answers from a position of formal authority but placing the work where it belongs and being willing to be part of the challenge rather than directing its solution.

d) Maintain disciplined action – battle work avoidance

Remind people of the adaptive work at hand and why it is important in the face of the following forms of avoidance:

- Displaced Responsibility as evidenced by attacks on authority or blaming others
- Distracted Attention as evidenced by no focus or focus on tangential issues
- Fake Remedies as evidenced by defining the problem to fit your competence and misusing consultants, committees and task forces
- Denial as evidenced by ignoring underlying conflict and creating false harmony

e) Holding steady

Holding steady is one of the most important attributes a leader can have. As hidden conflicts emerge and dysfunctional norms are addressed, leaders can feel a lot of pressure to “fix” things. To be able to “take the heat” means:

- Knowing that what is happening is not about you. It is about what you represent and projections made by others.
- Building a support system to give you perspective and resilience to take the heat.
- Keeping focus on the result and your passion for achieving it.

² Adapted from Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, Harvard Business Review Press, First Edition (April 18, 2002)