

ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

John Roberto
LifelongFaith Associates
(jroberto@lifelongfaith.com)

Leadership is the activity of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges (problems) and do the adaptive work necessary to achieve progress and thrive.

(Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky)

Adaptive Leadership Principles

- ***Adaptive leadership is specifically about change than enables the capacity to thrive.*** New environments and new dreams demand new strategies and abilities, as well as the leadership to mobilize them.

Adaptive Leadership Principles

- ***Successful adaptive changes build on the past rather than jettison it.*** A challenge for adaptive leadership, then, is to engage people in distinguishing what is essential to preserve in their organization's heritage from what is expendable. Successful adaptations are thus both conservative *and* progressive. They make the best possible use of previous wisdom and know-how. The most effective leadership anchors change in the values, competencies, and strategic orientations that should endure in the organization.

Adaptive Leadership Principles

- ***Organizational adaptation occurs through experimentation.*** Those seeking to lead adaptive change need an experimental mind-set. They must learn to improvise as they go, buying time and resources along the way for the next set of experiments.

Adaptive Leadership Principles

- ***New adaptations significantly displace, reregulate, and rearrange some old DNA.*** Leadership on adaptive challenges generates loss. Learning is often painful. Leadership requires the diagnostic ability to recognize these losses and the predictable defensive patterns of response that operate at the individual and systemic levels. It requires know-how to counteract these patterns.

Adaptive Leadership Principles

- ***Adaptation takes time.*** It takes time to consolidate adaptations into new sets of norms and processes. Adaptive leadership thus requires persistence. Significant change is the product of incremental experiments that build up over time. And cultures change slowly. Those who practice this form of leadership need to stay in the game, even while taking the heat along the way.

Adaptive Work as Spiritual Work

What Heifetz describes as adaptive work is, at its heart, spiritual work. It involves the central dynamics of the spiritual life and of transformation, which includes loss, risk and trust, even death and resurrection. Our sacred Scriptures, sacraments and our symbols are all powerful resources for adaptive challenges and adaptive work that we face at this time. No program, effort at restructuring, or 'right' leader alone will meet this challenge. It involves our own changes of minds and hearts."

(Anthony Robinson, *Leadership for Vital Congregations*)

Distinguishing Technical Problems from Adaptive Challenges

- **Technical problems** (even though they may be complex) can be solved with knowledge and procedures already in hand.
- Easy to identify.
- Require change in just one or a few places; often contained within organizational boundaries
- Everyday, people have problems for which they do, in fact, have the necessary know-how and procedures—*technical problems*.

Distinguishing Technical Problems from Adaptive Challenges

- **Adaptive challenges** are situations for which solutions lie outside the current way of operation.
- Difficult to identify (easy to deny). People often resist even acknowledging adaptive challenges
- Require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization.
- Without learning new ways—changing attitudes, values, and deep-seated behaviors—people cannot make the adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the new environment.
- Calls for changes of heart and mind—the transformation of long-standing habits and deeply held assumptions and values.

Adaptive Change

- ❑ People don't resist change per se.
- ❑ People love change when they know it's a good thing. (No one gives back a winning lottery ticket.)
- ❑ People resist loss. When change involves real or potential loss, people hold on to what they have and resist the change.
- ❑ The common factor generating adaptive failure is resistance to loss. A key to leadership, then, is the diagnostic capacity to find out the kinds of losses at stake in a situation.
- ❑ Adaptive leadership almost always put you in the business of assessing, managing, distributing, and providing contexts for losses that move people through these losses to a new place.

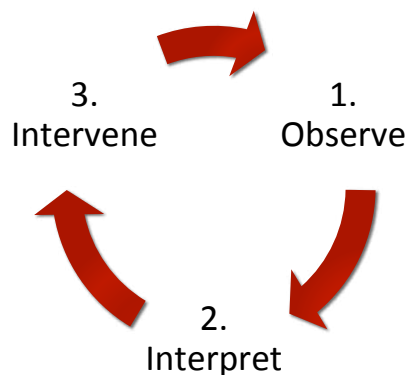
Adaptive Change

- ❑ Adaptive leadership is a process of conservation and loss.
- ❑ "Of all that we care about, what must be given up to survive and thrive going forward?"
- ❑ "Of all that we care about, what elements are essential and must be preserved into the future, or we will lose precious values, core competencies, and lose who we are?"
- ❑ As in nature, a successful adaptation enables an organization or community to take the best from its traditions, identify, and history into the future.

You May Be Facing an Adaptive Challenge If. . .

- the solution requires operating in a different way than you do now. . .
- the problem AND the solution require learning. . .
- the solution requires shifting the authority and responsibility to the people who are actually affected. . .
- the solution requires some sacrifice of your past ways of working or living. . .
- the solution requires experimenting before you're sure of the answer. . .
- the solution will take a long time. . .
- the challenge connects to people's deeply held values. . .

The Adaptive Intervention Process



1. **Observing** events and patterns around you;
2. **Interpreting** what you are observing (developing multiple hypotheses about what is really going on; and
3. **Designing** interventions based on the observations & interpretations to address the adaptive challenge you have identified.

Adaptive Leadership Process

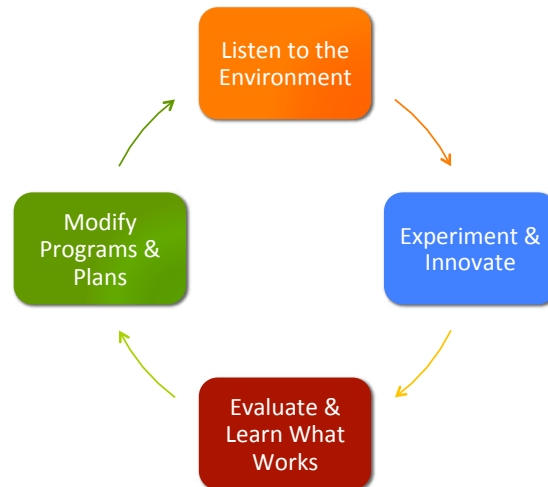
1. **DISCERN:** Are you facing technical problems for which technical fixes will be appropriate or are you facing adaptive challenges or are you facing both?
2. **IDENTIFY:** What are the significant adaptive challenges?

Adaptive Leadership Process

3. **INTERPRET:** What you are observing about this adaptive challenge.
 - ✓ Is there any part of this challenge that is new and that might need a different strategy than what is usually done?
 - ✓ Who are the key stakeholders, and how might they be positively affected or negatively affected? How would they describe the situation and the stakes for them?
 - ✓ How generalized is the urgency to do something or do you have to figure out how to ripen the issue?
 - ✓ What are the adaptive elements of this challenge/situation, and what are the technical aspects?
 - ✓ Is this the only organization facing this challenge/situation? What responses are others making?

Adaptive Leadership Process

- 4. IDENTIFY INTERVENTIONS** that could address the adaptive challenge.
- 5. DESIGN INTERVENTIONS** based on the observations & interpretations to address the adaptive challenge.



Adaptive Leadership Process

- 6. THINK HARD ABOUT YOUR FRAMING.** Thoughtful framing means communicating your intervention in a way that enables group members to understand what you have in mind, why the intervention is important, and how they can help carry it out. A well-framed intervention strikes a chord in people, speaking to their hopes and fears. It starts where they are, not where you are. And it inspires them to move forward. Think about the balance between reaching people above and below the neck. Some groups and some people need data first, before the emotion. For others, it is the reverse. Connect your language to the group's espoused values and purpose.

Adaptive Leadership Process

- 7. HOLD STEADY.** When you have made an intervention, think of it as having a life of its own. Do not chase after it. The idea will make its way through the system, and people will need time to digest it, think about it, discuss it, and modify it. If you think of it as “yours,” you are likely to get overly invested in your own image of it. Once you have made an intervention, your idea is theirs. The key is to stay present and keep listening.

Adaptive Leadership Process

- 8. ANALYZE THE FACTIONS** that begin to emerge. As people begin to discuss the intervention, pay attention to who seems engaged, who starts using the new language or pieces of your idea as if it were their own. Listen for who resists the idea. Use these observations to help you see the contours of the factions that various people represent on the issue.

Adaptive Leadership Process

9. **KEEP THE WORK AT THE CENTER OF PEOPLE'S ATTENTION.** Avoiding adaptive work is a common human response to the prospect of loss. Avoidance is not shameful; it is just human. Expect that your team will find ways to avoid focusing on the adaptive challenge in doing their diagnosis as well as in taking action. Resistance to your intervention will have less to do with the merits of your idea and mostly to do with the fears of loss your idea generates.

Adaptive Leadership Process

- **Get allies.** You need to share the burden of keeping the work at the center of people's attention.
- **Understand.** Try to understand the impact of new directions on the constituents behind the people in your working group, and how the pleasure or displeasure of those constituents is going to play out in the behavior of the person. Then think about how you can help that person with their problem, e.g., presenting the idea to their group or making sure the person receives credit for making the new idea happen.
- **Threat & Loss.** To help the members of your team who are worried about their own people, interpret their group's resistance in terms of threat and loss. Dealing with the fears of loss requires a strategy that takes these losses seriously and treats them with respect.

Build an Adaptive Culture

1. Elephants on the table are named.
2. Responsibility for the organization is shared.
3. Independent judgment is expected.
4. Leadership capacity is developed.
5. Reflection and continuous learning are institutionalized.