

Adaptive Leadership -Heifetz (1997)

Adapted from Ronald A. Heifetz and Donald I. Laurie, "The Work of Leadership", Harvard Business Review, January – February 1997; and Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, "Leadership on the Line", Harvard Business School Press, 2002

Working across boundaries very often exposes systemic problems with no easy answers. Ronald Heifetz and Donald Laurie, thought leaders in the field of adaptive challenges and leadership and the authors of "The Work Of Leadership" call these challenges murky and say that when they intensify organisations may need to reclarify strategies, merge or dissolve businesses, or manage cross functional strife.

They confront the belief that the solutions to adaptive challenges come from senior managers and advocate the pooling of the intelligence of people throughout the organisation when searching for them.

They believe that this is a tough call for most leaders because it turns on its head the traditional view of what leadership is and how it should be done. Leaders need to stop saying what the answers are and replace this with the courage and capability to ask tough questions of colleagues that may challenge long held norms of what their organisation stands for and the way it does business.

And rather than running away from the conflict such questions may unearth leaders need to be prepared to draw such conflict out and let people feel what Heifetz and Laurie call "the sting of reality".

They have a set of six adaptive leadership principles that they maintain help to prevent followers ducking out of difficult adaptive work and throwing it back to the leaders:

1. Get on the balcony

Leaders should resist getting caught up in the "field of play" even if they enjoy being there. Instead they need to balance taking action on the "dance floor" with being on the "balcony" where they can spot emerging systemic patterns which could include people avoiding work and power struggling.

Only with this balcony perspective can they mobilise others to do adaptive work.

2. Identify Your Adaptive challenge

TECHNICAL PROBLEMS	ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES
Easy	Difficult to identify (easy to deny)
Often lend themselves to quick and easy solutions	Require changes in values, beliefs, roles, relationships and approaches to work
Often can be solved by an authority or expert	People with the problem do the work solving it
Require change in just one or a few places; often contained within organisational boundaries	Requires change in numerous places, usually across organisational boundaries
People are generally receptive to technical solutions	People often resist even acknowledging adaptive Challenges
Solutions can often be implemented quickly – sometimes by edict	Solutions require experiments and new discoveries; they can take a long time to implement and cannot be implemented by edict

3. Regulate distress

Adaptive work needs pacing otherwise it can disable people. For it to feel inspirational leaders need to allow people to discuss and debate issues thoroughly, surface competing views and clarify any assumptions. Following this leaders must be ready to give direction by defining key issues and moderating the speed of change. They should watch that they don't start too many initiatives without stopping others. In other words the system needs just enough tension to resist the pressure of the status quo. Leaders should be secure enough to raise tough issues without falling prey to anxiety themselves. Their poise and presence is paramount here.

4. Maintain disciplined attention

Managers should be encouraged not to deny or scapegoat divisive issues. If anything their leaders need to deepen the debate so that polarised, superficial conflict is unearthed. The leaders should also demonstrate collaboration to solve problems.

5. Give the work back to employees

Supportive rather than controlling. The last thing an adaptive leader wants is for others to be dependent on them otherwise collective self

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confidence will not develop. Risk taking should be promoted and encouraged and back up provided if mistakes are made. The aim is to help the collective recognise that it contains the solutions.

6. Protect leadership voices from below

See the exposure of organisational contradictions as a good thing. Don't silence whistleblowers, and radical "creatives" whose perspectives encourage fresh thinking. Otherwise something really important may be missed.

Leaders Responsibilities	Traditional Response	Adaptive Response
<i>Direction</i>	Define problems and solutions	<i>Identify the adaptive challenge and pose key questions and issues</i>
<i>Protection</i>	Protect the organisation from outside threats	<i>Let the organisation feel as much pressure that it can stand</i>
<i>Orientation</i>	Make clear roles and responsibilities	<i>Challenge current roles and resist defining new roles too quickly</i>
<i>Managing Conflict</i>	Restore order	<i>Highlight it or let it emerge</i>
<i>Shaping Norms</i>	Keep existing norms	<i>Challenge wasteful norms</i>