



The Practice of Adaptive Leadership

by Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, & Marty Linsky

Think you might want to read this book?

Ask yourself these questions: Is your leadership team adaptive? Are you thinking that being more nimble might make you a better team? Have you seen examples where ideas should have been generated, but were not? If you answered yes to any of these questions, then pick up *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* and explore. You will analyze your

meeting norms, identify losses as part of the process, and learn the key variables to look for when assessing your team's capacity to adapt. A great read for anyone who believes in the power of teams yet struggles to lead one that reaches its potential.

What would Socrates ask?

- Who tends to have longevity in your school— the risk averse or those who are eager to adapt?
- How has change been a positive for your school?
- Are you willing to risk looking incompetent to try something new?
- Is there a formal system to acknowledge and process new ideas at your school?
- Does your organizational chart and meeting structures allow for an organic flow of new ideas?
- What if one area of a school were analyzed each year for potential change?
- In what ways has adaptation happened recently, and why was it successful?
- Are there examples where your past experiences are preventing you from adapting?
- Can you identify a yet-to-be learned skill that would make you a more adaptive leader?

Concepts

- Adaptive Leadership is an interactive process involving three key activities: (1) observing events and patterns around you; (2) interpreting what you are observing (developing multiple hypotheses about what is really going on); (3) designing interventions based on the observations and interpretations to address the adaptive challenge you have identified.
- What makes some organizations more adaptive than others? (1) elephants in the room are named; (2) responsibility for the organization's future is shared; (3) independent judgment is expected; (4) leadership capacity is developed; (5) reflection and continuous learning are institutionalized.
- In any meeting, in any organization, there are really four meetings taking place at once: (1) there is the public, explicit conversation, the ostensible reason for coming together; (2) there is the informal chat, hallway conversation, or pre-meeting meeting that took place before the meeting, but did not include everyone who was at the meeting itself; (3) there is the set of internal conversations unfolding within participants' heads related to the meeting agenda; (4) there are the meetings after the meeting, those conversations that occur at the coffee machine or by e-mail.

Quotes from the author

- You can learn a lot about your organization's adaptability by looking at its meeting protocols. Protocols include what kinds of meetings are held regularly, who gets invited to them, and how the agenda is established.
- In most organizations, people feel pressure to solve problems quickly, to move to action. So they minimize the time spent in diagnosis, collecting data, exploring multiple possible interpretations of the situation and alternative potential interventions.
- Adaptive leadership is not about meeting or exceeding your authorizers' expectations—it is about *challenging* some of those expectations.
- You also have to anticipate and counteract tactics that people will use to lower the heat to more comfortable levels. This work avoidance can take numerous forms, such as creating a new committee with no authority or finding a scapegoat.
- In the realm of adaptive leadership, you have to believe that your intervention is absolutely the right thing to do at the moment you commit to it. But at the same time, you need to remain open to the possibility that you are dead wrong.
- An intervention that has only, say, a 50-50 chance of success might have a 60-40 chance if you design it skillfully.
- In organizational and political life, people often jump to treatment without stepping back to clarify the nature of the problem itself, making enormous investments in solutions, rolling out large-scale new strategies and programs, without knowing as much as they should about the situation.
- Adaptive work demands three very tough human tasks: figuring out what to conserve from past practices, figuring out what to discard from past practices, and inventing new ways to build from the best of the past.
- Some people are comfortable working through conflict, while most avoid it entirely or try to get through it as quickly as possible. But surfacing the relevant conflicts is essential when an organization is falling short of its aspirations.
- People who lead adaptive change most successfully have a diagnostic mind-set about themselves, as well as about the situation. That is they are continually striving to understand what is going on inside, how they are changing over time, and how they as a system interact with their organization as a system.
- We find it useful to take the perspective that people don't live in reality—we live in the story we tell ourselves about reality.
- Our purposes often become eclipsed by everyday tasks, crises, and requests from colleagues. When you lose touch with your purposes, you lose your capacity for finding meaning in your life.
- You need to strengthen two skills to master the ability to inspire: listening from the heart and speaking from the heart.
- Leadership is an improvisational art— there is no recipe.
- If your *group or organization is not in a state of emergency or overwhelming disequilibrium*, frame the effort as an *experiment* (for example, a pilot project) from the outset.

Quotes from others

- “There is no such thing as a dysfunctional organization because every organization is perfectly aligned to achieve the results it currently gets.” - Jeff Lawrence
- “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.” - F. Scott Fitzgerald

Implement tomorrow?

- We know of more than one organization that formally builds into its regular meetings a time for reflection near the end of meetings to ask whether they have advanced their larger purposes.

Organizations/schools working on answers

- Outward Bound

Referenced books with the potential to impact leading and learning in education

Author(s) Last Name	Title
Heifetz	<i>Leadership without Easy Answers</i>
Parks	<i>Leadership Can be Taught</i>
Williams	<i>Real Leadership</i>
Foster & Kaplan	<i>Creative Destruction</i>
Laurie	<i>The Real Work of Leaders</i>
Brudnoy	<i>Life Is Not a Rehearsal</i>
Carlzon	<i>Moments of Truth</i>
Kegan & Lahey	<i>How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work</i>
Heifetz & Linsky	<i>Leadership on the Line</i>

The applicability of this book to education is



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