

Adaptive Leadership

Definition

Adaptive leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive (build continuous improvement into the system)

- challenges that arise when stakeholders view a situation very differently and all feel that they have much to lose if ANY change is implemented
 - challenges for which there are no simple, painless solutions; problems that require us to learn new ways
 - can't keep trying to put the square peg into the round hole to reach our goals
 - to meet the challenges such as these, we need a different idea of leadership (different approaches used w/different types of challenges)
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- ✓ Specifically about the change that builds continuous improvement into the system
 - ✓ Builds on the past rather than jettison it (What do we keep?)
 - ✓ Occurs through experimentation
 - ✓ Relies on diversity
 - ✓ Will significantly displace, reregulate, and rearrange current practices (What do we drop? What do we change?)

“The single most common cause of failure in leadership is produced by treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems.”

Technical vs. Adaptive

Technical problems have known solutions that can be implemented by current know-how. They can be resolved through the application of authoritative expertise and through the organization's current structures, procedures, and ways of doing things. (Doesn't mean easy; can be complex)

Adaptive challenges can only be addressed through changes in people's priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties. Making progress requires going beyond any authoritative expertise to mobilize discovery, shedding certain entrenched ways, tolerating losses, and generating the capacity to thrive anew.

Pain of Change

Adaptive change causes real pain to those involved. It involves a loss. They have to give up material things, power, their current understanding of the world, their values/habits/beliefs as they go through this process. Often they have to give up the security of “this is way I've always done it!” They experience uncertainty. Often it leaves them unsure of what to do, which can lead them to feeling incompetent or angry. No wonder people resist!

Kind of Challenge	Problem Definition	Solution	Locus of Work
Technical	Clear	Clear	Authority
Technical and Adaptive	Clear	Requires learning	Authority & stakeholders
Adaptive	Requires learning	Requires Learning	Stakeholders

Authority vs. Leadership

Authority: formal or informal power within a system entrusted by one party to another in exchange for a service; is granted by one or more people on the assumption that you will do what they want you to do. Power and trust given to an authority in return for services that maintain tolerable levels of stress. If you do that really well, you are rewarded with the coin of the realm. One way to reward people is to call them a “leader.”

Adaptive leadership is not about meeting or exceeding your authorizers’ expectations. It is about *challenging* some of those expectations, finding a way to disappoint people without pushing them over completely over the edge. The dangers reside in the need to challenge the expectations of the very people who give you formal and informal authority.

- Exercising adaptive leadership is radically different from doing your job really, really well.
- It is different from authoritative expertise.
- Authority, power, and influence can be used for all sorts of purposes and tasks that have little or nothing to do with leadership.
- Leadership is a verb, not a job.
- Authority, power, and influence are critical tools, but they do not define leadership.

Conflating leadership and authority is an old and understandable habit. We all want to believe that we can exercise leadership by just doing really, really well at the job we are expected to carry out. But the distinction between exercising leadership and exercising authority is crucial. By practicing adaptive leadership beyond authoritative management, you risk telling people what they need to hear rather than what they want to hear, but you can also help your organization, community, or society make progress on its most difficult challenges.