11 Adaptive Leadership

Description

As the name of the approach implies, adaptive leadership is about how leaders encourage people to adapt—to face and deal with problems, challenges, and changes. Adaptive leadership focuses on the *adaptations* required of people in response to changing environments. Simply stated, adaptive leaders prepare and encourage people to deal with change. Unlike the trait approach (Chapter 2) or authentic leadership (Chapter 9), which focus predominantly on the characteristics of the leader, adaptive leadership stresses the *activities of the leader* in relation to the *work of followers* in the *contexts* in which they find themselves.

Since Heifetz first published *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (1994), the seminal book on adaptive leadership, this approach has occupied a unique place in the leadership literature. Adaptive leadership has been used effectively to explain how leaders encourage effective change across multiple levels, including self, organizational, community, and societal. However, most of the writing about adaptive leadership has been prescriptive and based on anecdotal and observational data rather than data derived from rigorous scientific inquiry. Scholars and practitioners have recognized the merits of the approach, but the theoretical underpinnings of adaptive leadership remain in the formative stages.

Adaptive Leadership

Ronald Heifetz on Adaptive Leadership

Development of the adaptive leadership framework emerged largely from the work of Heifetz and his associates (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Sinder, 1988; Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). From the beginning, they set out to create a different approach to leadership. Rather than seeing the leader as a savior who solves problems for people, they conceptualized the leader as one who plays the role of mobilizing people to tackle tough problems (e.g., drug abuse or sexism in the workplace). An adaptive leader challenges others to face difficult challenges, providing them with the space or opportunity they need to learn new ways of dealing with the inevitable changes in assumptions, perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that they are likely to encounter in addressing real problems.

Adaptive Leadership Defined

Although people often think of adaptive leadership as being leader centered, it is actually more follower centered. It focuses primarily on how leaders help others do the work they need to do, in order to adapt to the challenges they face. Generally, adaptive leadership is concerned with how people change and adjust to new circumstances. In this chapter, we emphasize the process leaders use to encourage others to grapple with difficult problems.

In the leadership literature, Heifetz and his colleagues suggest that "adaptive leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive" (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 14). In contrast to emphasizing the position or characteristics of the leader, this definition suggests that leadership is concerned with the *behaviors* of leaders. This approach also makes a distinction between leadership and authority (Heifetz and Sinder, 1988). Leadership revolves around work and how people are mobilized to do work. It is not defined by position, so anyone can exhibit leadership. In contrast, authority revolves around power and how it is formally (e.g., position) and informally (e.g., admiration) conferred to leaders by followers. Authority allows leaders to do what followers expect them to do and is a primary tool for exercising leadership and giving followers a sense of security and protection.

Adaptive leaders engage in activities that *mobilize, motivate, organize, orient, and focus the attention of others* (Heifetz, 1994). In addition, this approach to leadership is about helping others to explore and change their values. The goal of adaptive leadership is to encourage people to change and learn new ways of living so that they may do well and grow. In short, adaptive leadership is the behavior of leaders and the actions they take to encourage others to address and resolve changes that are central in their lives. To better understand how adaptive leadership works, Table 11.1 provides some examples of "real world" situations in which adaptive leadership would be ideal.

Nature of Adaptive Leadership

Table 11.1 Adaptive Leadership in Practice

Adaptive leaders mobilize, motivate, organize, orient, and focus the attention of others to address and resolve changes that are central in their lives. The first step will be to help followers address the challenges they are experiencing. These are some examples of cases where adaptive leadership would be beneficial:

Church Membership

Over the past decade, the membership of a large traditional denomination of churches in the United States has shrunken by 200,000 members, which many attribute to the denomination's stand against same-sex marriage. If the church wants to reverse the trend and begin to grow, the church leadership and its membership need to confront the social implications of their doctrinal stand on marriage and members of the LGBT community.

Company Merger

A midsize family-owned paper company merges with another similar paper company. The merger creates tensions between the employees regarding job titles and duties, different wage schedules, overtime, and vacation pay. The new owners must bring these disparate groups of employees together to have their company function successfully. They will have to identify their adaptive challenges and then decide what work needs to be done (e.g., learning new ways of performing, shedding old ways that no longer work, and reevaluating their beliefs and values).

Merit Pay

In an established engineering company, a small group of young high-achieving engineers wants to change the way merit pay is given by removing seniority and years of service as part of the criteria. Longtime employees are resisting the change. The management must find a way to address this issue without alienating either group.

Condominium Rules

You are president of a small condo association, and two groups in the association are at odds about an association rule requiring condo owners to be 55 years old or older. Some think it is important to have young people around while others do not. In addition, in this area, young, new homeowners are buying condos at higher rates than empty nesters. The president must guide the association to reach consensus in a way that will benefit the association.

Conceptually, the process of adaptive leadership incorporates ideas from four different viewpoints: the systems, biological, service orientation, and psychotherapy perspectives (Heifetz, 1994). First, adaptive leadership takes a *systems perspective,* in that this approach assumes that many problems people face are actually embedded in complicated interactive systems. Problems are viewed as complex with many facets, dynamic in that they can evolve and change, and connected to others in a web of relationships. Second, the *biological perspective* to adaptive leadership recognizes that people develop and evolve as a result of having to adapt to both their internal cues/state and external environments. The ability to adapt allows people to thrive in new circumstances. Third, adaptive leadership assumes a *service orientation.* Similar to a physician, an adaptive leader uses his or her expertise or authority *to serve* the people by diagnosing their problems and prescribing possible solutions. Fourth, this approach incorporates the *psychotherapy perspective* to explain how people accomplish adaptive work. Adaptive leaders understand that people need a supportive environment and adapt more successfully when they face difficult problems directly, learn to distinguish between fantasy and reality, resolve internal conflicts, and learn new attitudes and behaviors. Taken together, these four viewpoints help explain and characterize the nature of adaptive leadership.

In addition to the way Heifetz and his colleagues defined adaptive leadership, it has been conceptualized as an element or subset of Complexity Leadership Theory, a framework designed to explain leadership for organizations of the 21st century that concentrate on knowledge or information as a core commodity rather than the production of goods that was prevalent in the industrial era (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). Complexity Leadership Theory (which includes administrative, adaptive, and enabling leadership) focuses on the strategies and behaviors that encourage learning, creativity, and adaptation in complex organizational systems. Within this framework, adaptive leadership is described as a complex process that emerges to produce adaptive change in a social system. It originates in struggles or tensions among people over conflicting needs, ideas, and preferences. It is conceptualized not as a person or a specific act (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007), but rather as a dynamic process.

Adaptive leadership is a unique kind of leadership that focuses on the dynamics of mobilizing people to address change. In the next section, we will describe the various components of adaptive leadership and discuss how each component contributes to the overall process of adaptive leadership.

A Model of Adaptive Leadership

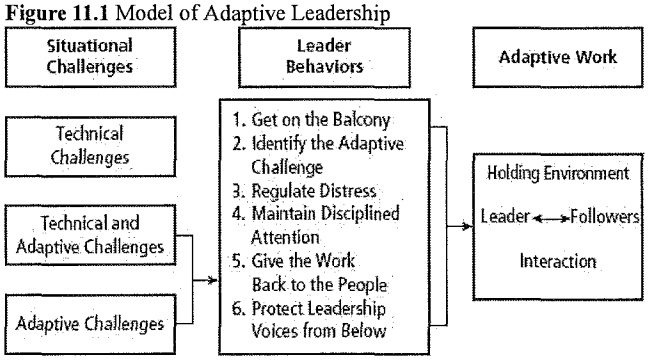
Although adaptive leadership is in the early stages of theoretical development, the initial writings about this approach provide a basis for formulating a model of the adaptive leadership process. Based on the work of Heifetz and his associates (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Sinder, 1988; Heifetz et al., 2009; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002), Figure 11.1 offers a visual representation of the major components of adaptive leadership and how they fit together, including situational challenges, leader behaviors, and adaptive work. Heuristically, this model provides a basis for clarifying the process of adaptive leadership as well as generating empirical research to validate and refine the concepts and principles described by the model.

Adaptive Leader Behaviors

Situational Challenges

As illustrated on the left side of Figure 11.1, the practice of leadership requires that leaders address three kinds of situational challenges. There are challenges or problems that are primarily *technical* in nature, challenges that have both *a technical and an adaptive dimension*, and challenges that are primarily *adaptive* in nature. Not all situational challenges are adaptive challenges. While addressing technical challenges is important, adaptive leadership is concerned with helping people address adaptive challenges.

Figure 11.1 Model of Adaptive Leadership



Peace Corps Challenges

Technical Challenges

Technical challenges are problems in the workplace or community that are clearly defined with known solutions that can be implemented through existing organizational rules and procedures. They are problems that can be solved by experts. For technical challenges, people look to the leader for a solution, and they accept the leader's authority to resolve the problem. For example, if employees at a tax accounting firm are frustrated about a newly adopted tax software program, the manager at the firm could assess the software issues, identify the weaknesses and problems with the software, contact the company that provided the software, and have the programs modified in accordance with the accountants' needs at the tax firm. In this example, the problem is identifiable, it has an achievable solution, and the manager at the tax firm has the authority to address it through the accepted structures and procedures of the organization. The employees look to the manager to solve the technical problem and accept her or his authority to do so.

Technical and Adaptive Challenges

Some challenges have both a technical and an adaptive dimension. In this case, the challenges are clearly defined but do not have distinct straightforward solutions within the existing organizational system. The responsibility of tackling this type of challenge is shared between the leader and the people. The leader may act as a resource for others and provide support, but the people need to do the work—they need to learn to change and adapt. For example, if an urban hospital with a traditional approach to care (i.e., providers are the experts, and patients are the visitors) wanted to establish a patient-centered culture, the goal could be clearly laid out. To reach the goal, the hospital leadership, through its hierarchical authority, could provide in-service training on how to involve patients in their own care. New rules could be designed to preserve patients' personal routines, to give them access to their own records, and to give them more control of their own treatment. However, the staff, doctors, patients, and family members would need to accept the proposed change and learn how to implement it. Making the hospital a model of patient-centered care would require a lot of work and adaptation on the part of many different people.

Technical or Adaptive Challenge

Adaptive Challenges

Central to the process of adaptive leadership are adaptive challenges. Adaptive challenges are problems that are not clear-cut or easy to identify. They cannot be solved by the leader's authority or expertise or through the normal ways of doing things in the organization. Adaptive challenges require that leaders encourage others, with their support, to define challenging situations and implement solutions. Not easy to tackle and often resisted, adaptive challenges are difficult because they usually require changes in people's assumptions, perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. An example of adaptive challenges would be the problems and concerns a family confronts when placing a parent in hospice care. In a hospice, there is a great deal of uncertainty for patients and families about how and when the patient will die and how to best comfort the patient during this time. While hospice workers can give support and informal feedback about the dying process, the patient and his or her family have to come to grips with how they want to approach the patient's final days. What does the impending loss mean? How can they prepare for it? How will they cope with the loss going forward? In this context, adaptive leadership is about mobilizing the patient and family members to address the many questions and concerns that surround the death of the family member. Hospice nurses, social workers, and staff all play an important role in helping families cope, but at the same time, it is the families that have to confront the complexities and concerns of the impending loss.

Leader Behaviors

As shown in the middle of Figure 11.1, six leader behaviors, or activities, play a pivotal role in the process of adaptive leadership. Based on the work of Heifetz and his colleagues (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997), these behaviors are general prescriptions for leaders when helping others confront difficult challenges and the inevitable changes that accompany them. Although there is a general order as to which leader behavior comes first in the adaptive leadership process, many of these behaviors overlap with each other and should be demonstrated by leaders at the same time. Taken together, these leader behaviors suggest a kind of recipe for being an adaptive leader.

1. Get on the Balcony

A prerequisite for the other adaptive leader behaviors, "getting on the balcony" is a metaphor for stepping out of the fray and finding perspective in the midst of a challenging situation. It is an allusion to a dance floor and that one needs to be above the dancing to understand what's going on below. Being on the balcony enables the leader to see the big picture—what is really happening. On the balcony, the leader is momentarily away from the noise, activity, and chaos of a situation, allowing him or her to gain a clearer view of reality. It allows the leader to identify value and power conflicts among people, ways they may be avoiding work, and other dysfunctional reactions to change (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). Getting on the balcony can include such things as taking some quiet time, forming a group of unofficial advisers for alternative discussions about organizational issues, or simply attending meetings as an observer. In the model, the adaptive leader is urged to step away from the conflict in order to see it fully, but never to dissociate entirely from the conflict. Effective leaders are able to move back and forth as a participant and observer between the struggles of their people and the intentions of the group, organization, or community.

To understand what it means to stand on the balcony, imagine yourself as the principal of an elementary school. From the balcony, you see all the pieces that go into educating your students: federal and state requirements, teachers and staff, budgets, teacher evaluations, parents and discipline, not to mention the children themselves. From above, you can see how these issues relate to and affect one another, and who is dancing with which partners, all while working toward the common goal of educating children.

Another example would be a chief union negotiator, who in the midst of difficult labor talks steps away from the table for a moment to separate from the emotion and intensity and reflect on the goals of the talks. Once this leader feels she again has a grasp of the issues at hand, she dives directly back into negotiations. In both of these examples, the leader takes time to see the "big" picture as an observer but also stays engaged as a participant with the challenges his or her people are confronting.

2. Identify Adaptive Challenges

In addition to getting on the balcony and observing the dynamics of the complex situations people face, leaders must analyze and diagnose these challenges. Central to this process is differentiating between technical and adaptive challenges. Failures in leadership often occur because leaders fail to diagnose challenges correctly. The adaptive leadership process suggests that leaders are most effective using adaptive leadership behaviors for adaptive challenges and technical leadership for technical challenges. Treating challenges with the wrong kind of leadership is maladaptive.

Member Expertise

If challenges are technical in nature, leaders can fix the problem with their own expertise. For example, in a manufacturing environment, problems that arise in scheduling, product sales quotas, facility expansion, or raising the minimum wage are all problems the leader can use his or her authority to resolve. However, it is essential that a leader also know when his or her authority is not sufficient or appropriate to address a particular challenge. When people's beliefs, attitudes, and values are affected by a problem, leaders need to take an adaptive approach. How a leader decides if he or she faces an adaptive challenge is to determine whether or not the challenge strikes at the core feelings and thoughts of others. Adaptive challenges are usually value laden and stir up people's emotions. Furthermore, if challenges require that people learn new ways of coping, they are adaptive. Take the manufacturing environment that was discussed earlier. If another company buys that manufacturing facility and the new owners implement production procedures and standards that the facility's workers are unfamiliar with, these changes would create adaptive challenges for the workers. Identifying adaptive challenges means leaders need to focus their attention on problems they cannot solve themselves and that demand collaboration between the leader and followers. For adaptive challenges, leaders do what is necessary (e.g., give support, challenge, or even take themselves out of the picture) to mobilize others to do the work they need to do.

To more easily identify complex adaptive challenges and also distinguish them from technical challenges, there are four archetypes or basic patterns of adaptive change to consider (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Archetype 1: Gap Between Espoused Values and Behavior. This archetype is present when an organization espouses, or claims, to adhere to values that it doesn't in reality support by its actions. For example, a company that promotes itself as a family-friendly place to work but does not have a flexible-hour work policy, an extended maternity leave policy, or in-house child care doesn't have behaviors that match the family-friendly image it promotes itself as having.

Archetype 2: Competing Commitments. When an organization has numerous commitments and some come into conflict with each other, this archetype is in play. For example, a health and fitness center wants to grow and expand its services but at the same time sees the best way to reduce costs is by trimming the number of trainers and staff it employs.

Archetype 3: Speaking the Unspeakable. The phrases "sacred cow" and "elephant in the room" are examples of this archetype—when there are radical ideas, unpopular issues, or conflicting perspectives that people don't dare address because of their sensitive or controversial nature. Speaking out

about these is seen as "risky." Consider an organization with a well-liked, established owner who is perceived by the employees as "over the hill" and not in touch with the current business climate, but no one is willing to discuss the matter. It is easier to suffer the consequences of the owner's dated leadership than confront the man and risk hurting him.

Archetype 4: Work Avoidance. This archetype represents a situation where people avoid addressing difficult issues by staying within their "comfort zone" or by using diversionary methods. For example, coworkers at a company refuse to confront or discuss a very skilled employee who is not participating in organizational planning because he feels the company suffers from institutional racism. It is easier to continue to do the same things and avoid the concerns of the disgruntled employee. Another example would be an ad agency that has a graphic designer who is not able to produce the quality of creative work needed, so, rather than address the problem directly, that designer is assigned menial jobs that are essentially busy work. The agency then hires a second graphic designer to do the more creative work despite the cost and the fact that the agency doesn't have enough work to justify two designers.

These four archetypes are representative of some of the common challenges that require adaptive change. Although they do not describe every possible type of adaptive change, they are useful as frames of reference when trying to identify adaptive challenges in a particular organizational setting.

3. Regulate Distress

A third behavior, or activity, important for adaptive leaders is to regulate distress (Figure 11.1). Psychologically, we all have a need for consistency—to keep our beliefs, attitudes, and values the same. In fact, it is quite natural for individuals to be more comfortable when things are predictable and their way of doing things stays the same. But adaptive challenges create the need to change, and the process of change creates uncertainty and distress for people. Feeling a certain level of distress during change is inevitable and even useful for most, but feeling too much distress is counterproductive and can be debilitating. The challenge for a leader is to help others recognize the need for change but not become overwhelmed by the need for the change itself. The adaptive leader needs to monitor the stress people are experiencing and keep it within a productive range. This is what it means to regulate distress. The model suggests three ways that leaders can maintain productive levels of stress: *(1) create a holding environment; (2) provide direction, protection, orientation, conflict management, and productive norms; and (3) regulate personal distress.*

Creating a holding environment.

This refers to establishing an atmosphere in which people can feel safe tackling difficult problems, but not so much so that they can avoid the problem. You can think of a holding environment in terms of a child learning to swim—the instructor is within a watchful distance, but allows the child to do the hard work of overcoming his or her fears and learning to kick, breathe, and stroke in sync. A holding environment is a structural, procedural, or virtual space formed by cohesive relationships between people. It can be physical space, a shared language, common history, a deep trust in an institution and its authority, or a clear set of rules and processes that allow groups to function with safety. As illustrated in Figure 11.1, the holding environment represents the space where the work of adaptive leadership gets played out. The idea of a holding environment has its roots in the field of psychotherapy where the counselor creates a therapeutic setting and uses effective communication and empathy to provide a sense of safety and protection for the client (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Modell, 1976). Within the holding environment, adaptive leaders use authority to help people attend to the issues, to act as a reality test regarding information, to orchestrate conflicting perspectives, and to facilitate decision making (Heifetz, 1994, p. 113).

Creating a holding environment also allows a leader to regulate the pressures people face when confronting adaptive challenges. It can be described as analogous to a pressure cooker because initially a leader turns up the heat on the issues. This gets dialogue started and also allows some of the pressures from the issues to escape. If too much tension concerning issues is expressed, the holding environment can become too intense and ineffective for addressing problems. However, without the leader's initial catalyst of the issues, little dialogue would transpire.

Similar to labor negotiations in organizations, the holding environment is the place where all parties gather to begin talking to each other, define issues, and clarify competing interests and needs. If this discussion is too heated, negotiations reach a quick impasse. However, as negotiation develops, newer issues can be addressed. Over time the holding environment provides the place where new contractual relationships can be agreed upon and enacted.

Providing direction, protection, orientation, conflict management, and productive norms.

These are specific ways leaders can use their formal and informal authority to help people manage the uncertainty and distress that accompany adaptive work. They are prescribed behaviors for adaptive leaders.

Adaptive Work

- *Providing direction* involves helping identify the adaptive challenges that others face and then framing these so they can be addressed. In difficult situations it is not uncommon for people to be unclear or confused about their goals. Sometimes the goal is unknown, sometimes it is obscure, and at other times it is entangled with competing goals. By providing direction, the leader helps people feel a sense of clarity, order, and certainty, reducing the stress people feel in uncertain situations.
- *Protection* refers to a leader's responsibility to manage the rate of adaptive change. It includes monitoring whether the change is too much or too fast for people. Furthermore, it requires monitoring external pressures people are experiencing and keeping these within a range they can

tolerate.

- *Orientation* is the responsibility a leader has to orient people to new roles and responsibilities that may accompany adaptive change. When a change requires adopting new values and acting in accordance with those values, people may need to adopt entirely new roles within the organization. Orientation is the process of helping people to find their identity within a changing system.
- *Conflict management* refers to the leader's responsibility to handle conflict effectively. Conflict is inevitable in groups and organizations during adaptive challenges and presents an opportunity for people to learn and grow. Although conflict can be uncomfortable, it is not unhealthy, nor is it necessarily bad. The question is not "How can people avoid conflict and eliminate change?" but rather "How can people manage conflict and produce positive change?"
- Establishing *productive norms* is a responsibility of the adaptive leader. Norms are the rules of behavior that are established and shared by group members and are not easily changed. When norms are constructive, they have a positive influence on the progress of the group. However, when norms are unproductive and debilitating, they can impede the group. A leader should pay close attention to norms and challenge those that need to be changed and reinforce those that maximize the group's effectiveness and ability to adapt to change.

Collectively, the five prescribed behaviors above provide a general blueprint for how adaptive leaders can mitigate the frustrations people feel during adaptive change. While not inclusive, they highlight some of the many important ways leaders can help people during the change process.

Regulating personal distress.

This is a third way leaders can maintain a productive level of stress during adaptive change. As we discussed previously, change and growth within an organization do not occur without uncertainty and stress. Because stress is inherent in change, adaptive leaders need to withstand the pressures from those who want to avoid change and keep things the same. While moderate amounts of tension are normal and necessary during change, too much or too little tension is unproductive. Leaders need to keep people focused on the hard work they need to do and the tension that accompanies that, while at the same time being sensitive to the very real frustrations and pain that people feel when doing adaptive work.

To help others through the adaptive process, adaptive leaders need to make sure they have their own act together. They must be strong and steady because people look to and depend on them for support in situations that can be very trying and painful. Adaptive leaders need to be role models and exhibit confidence and the emotional capacity to handle conflict. This is not a stress-free role. Adaptive leaders need to be willing to experience the frustrations and pain that people feel during change but not to the extent that they lose their own sense of who they are as leaders.

An example of the demands of regulating personal distress can be seen in the leadership of a therapist who runs a support group for high school students recovering from substance abuse. In her role as a group facilitator, the therapist faces many challenges. She has to listen to students' stories and the challenges they face as they try to stay clean. She also has to push people to be honest about their successes and failures regarding drug use. She cannot push so hard, however, that group members feel threatened, stop communicating, or stop attending the group sessions. In the holding environment, she has to be able to show nurturance and support, but not enable destructive behavior. The pain and frustrations recovering addicts feel are tremendous, and the therapist has to be in touch with this pain without losing her role as therapist. Hearing stories of recovery and failed recovery can be heartbreaking, while hearing success stories can be uplifting. Throughout all of this, the therapist needs to monitor herself closely and control her own anxieties regarding recovery. Group members look to the therapist for direction and support. They want the therapist to be strong, confident, and empathic. Regulating her own stress is essential in order to make herself fully available to students who are recovering from substance abuse.

4. Maintain Disciplined Attention

As illustrated in Figure 11.1, the fourth leader behavior described by the adaptive leadership process is to *maintain disciplined attention.* This means that the leader needs to encourage people to *focus* on the tough work they need to do. This does not come easily; people naturally do not want to confront change, particularly when it is related to changing their beliefs, values, or behaviors. It is common for all of us to resist change and strive for a sense of balance and equilibrium in our day-to-day experiences. People do not like things "out of sync," so when their sense of balance is disrupted by the need to change, it is natural for them to engage in avoidance behavior. Maintaining disciplined attention is about the leader helping people address change and not avoid it.

Wicked and Tame Problems

Avoidance behaviors can take many forms. People can ignore the problem, blame the problem on the authority, blame coworkers for the problem, attack those who want to address the problem, pretend the problem does not exist, or work hard in areas unrelated to the problem. No matter the form of avoidance, the leader's task is to mobilize and encourage people to drop their defenses and openly confront their problems. Adaptive leaders help people focus on issues. If some topics are deemed to "hot" in the organization, the leader should support people in getting these topics on the agenda for discussion. If some issues create deep divisions between people, the leadership should provide a vessel of safety where competing sides can address the issues without feeling as if the organization will explode. If there is an "elephant in the room"—an issue no one wants to address but that is pivotal in making change—the leader needs to nudge people to talk about it. Whatever the situation, the adaptive leader gets people to focus—to show disciplined attention to the work at hand.

An example of disciplined attention can be seen in how the director of an assisted care facility responds to the members of a family who are struggling with their decision to move their 80-year-old mother into nursing care. The mother has early signs of dementia, but has successfully lived alone since her husband died 10 years earlier and prides herself on being able to cook, drive, and live independently. Although her forgetfulness and physical problems have her two adult children very concerned about their mother's health and safety, they just cannot bring themselves to make their mother move from her home. They say things like "Mom just doesn't need it yet. She is so much better than those people at the care facility. She won't survive in a new environment. She just won't be herself if she's not at her own home." The director of the assisted care facility's challenge is to help

them make the decision—a decision they are afraid of making, and avoiding. He always gives a listening ear and sets up multiple appointments for the children to visit the care facility. In addition, he arranges for the children to talk to staff members and other families who have a parent at the facility. In all of these sessions, the director emphasizes the importance of the children communicating their concerns while letting them know that the children's concerns and hesitations are normal because accepting the failing health of a parent is very difficult. He continues to tell them gently, without sounding like he's selling something, the benefits of going into the assisted care facility: The parent will be safer, receive good care, and learn to thrive in her new home. In this example, the director is sensitive to the adaptive challenges the children face, and he makes a point of "standing by" and giving guidance and support. The director helps the children stay focused on the changes they need to make and mobilizes them to confront their decisions.

5. Give the Work Back to the People

A fifth leader behavior important for adaptive leaders is to *give the work back to the people* (Figure 11.1). People want leaders to provide some direction and structure to their work and want to feel secure in what they are doing, but too much leadership and authority can be debilitating, decrease people's confidence to solve problems on their own, and suppress their creative capacities. Overly directive leadership can result in people being dependent on their leaders and inhibit them from doing adaptive work. Even though it makes people feel comfortable and secure to have leaders tell them what to do, leaders need to learn ways to curtail their influence and shift problem solving back to the people involved.

Leaders need to be aware of and monitor the impact they have on others. Giving work back to the people requires a leader to be attentive to when he or she should drop back and let the people do the work that they need to do. This can be a fine line; leaders have to provide direction, but they also have to say, "This is your work—how do you think you want to handle it?" For adaptive leaders, giving work back to the people means empowering people to decide what to do in circumstances where they feel uncertain, expressing belief in their ability to solve their own problems, and encouraging them to think for themselves rather than thinking for them.

The famous boarding school Summerhill, on the east coast of England, provides a good example of where giving the work back to the people takes center stage. Summerhill is a self-governing, democratic school where adults and students have equal status. Summerhill's philosophy stresses that students have the freedom to take their own path in life and develop their own interests so long as it does not harm others. Classes are optional for students who have the freedom to choose what they do with their time. The schedules and rules of the school are established in weekly group meetings at which all participants have an equal vote. Summerhill's leaders give the work of learning back to the students. Instead of the teachers telling students what to study and learn, the students themselves make those decisions within a supportive environment. It is an unusual model of education and not without its problems, but it clearly demonstrates recognition of the need for students, and not their teachers, to identify and define their goals and take responsibility for meeting those goals.

Learning and Adaptive Leadership

6. Protect Leadership Voices from Below

A final leader behavior that is important to the adaptive leadership process is *protecting leadership voices from below* (Figure 11.1). This means that adaptive leaders have to be cautious to listen and be open to the ideas of people who may be at the fringe, marginalized, or even deviant in the group or organization. This is a challenge because when the leader gives voice to an out-group member, it is upsetting to the social equilibrium of the group. To be open to the ideas of low-status individuals, who often may express themselves ineffectively, is also challenging because it is disruptive to the "normal" way of doing things. Too often, leaders find it convenient to ignore the dissident, nonconforming voices in an effort to maintain things as they are and keep things moving. Adaptive leaders should try to resist the tendency to minimize or shut down minority voices for the sake of the majority. To give voice to others requires that a leader relinquish some control, giving other individual members more control. This is why it is a challenging process.

Protecting voices from below is important because it puts low-status individuals on equal footing with other members of the group. It means the leader and the other people of the group give credence to the out-group members' ideas and actions. When out-group members have a voice, they know their interests are being recognized and that they can have an impact on the leader and the group. Giving them voice allows low-status members to be more involved, independent, and responsible for their actions. It allows them to become more fully engaged in the adaptive work of the group, and they can feel like full members in the planning and decision making of the group.

Consider a college social work class in which students are required to do a service-learning project. For this project, one group chose to build a wheelchair ramp for an elderly woman in the community. In the initial stages of the project, morale in the group was down because one group member (Alissa) chose not to participate. Alissa said she was not comfortable using hand tools, and she chose not to do manual labor. The other team members, who had been doing a lot of planning for the project, wanted to proceed without her help. Alissa felt rejected and began to criticize the purpose of the project and the personalities of the other team members. At that point, one of the group's leaders decided to start listening to Alissa's concerns. He learned that while Alissa could not work with her hands, she had two other talents: She was good with music, and she made wonderful lunches. As a result, Alissa was asked to use her strengths for the group. During the construction of the ramp, Alissa kept up morale by playing each group member's and the elderly woman's favorite music while they worked on the ramp. In addition, Alissa made sandwiches and provided drinks that accommodated each of the group members' unique dietary interests. By the last day, Alissa felt so included by the group, and was praised so frequently for providing great food, that she joined in the manual labor and began raking up trash around the ramp site. Although Alissa's talents didn't tie in directly with constructing a ramp, she still contributed to building a successful team, which would not have happened if the leader had not given voice to Alissa's concerns and talents.

Wicked Problems and Public Policy

Adaptive Work

As represented on the right side of the model of adaptive leadership (Figure 11.1), *adaptive work* is the process toward which adaptive leaders direct their work. It is the focus and intended goal of adaptive leadership. Adaptive work develops from the communication process that occurs between the leader and followers but is primarily the work of followers. It occurs within a holding environment where people can feel safe as they confront possible changes in their roles, priorities, and values.

The model illustrates that the *holding environment* is the place where adaptive work is conducted. It is a real or virtual space where people can address the adaptive challenges that confront them. Because the holding environment plays a critical role in the adaptive process, leaders direct considerable energy toward establishing and maintaining it.

While the term *followers* is used in the holding environment portion of the model to depict individuals who are not the leader, it is important to note that throughout most of the writing on adaptive leadership, the term *follower* is not used because it implies a submissive role in relationship to the leader. In adaptive leadership, leaders do not use their authority to control others; rather, leaders *interact* with people to help them do adaptive work. The term *followers* is used in the model simply to distinguish the specific individuals who are doing adaptive work.

An example of adaptive work can be seen at a fitness center where a fitness instructor is running a class for a group of individuals who have had heart problems and struggle with being overweight. The goal of the instructor is to provide a safe place where people can challenge themselves to do training exercises that will help them to lose weight and reduce their risk for health problems. Because the people must change their lifestyles to live more healthfully, they must engage in adaptive work with the support of the fitness instructor.

Creative Holding Environment

Another example where adaptive work can be observed is in a public elementary school where the principal is asking the teachers to adopt the Common Core State Standards but the teachers, who have a proven record of success using their own student-centered curriculum, are resisting. To help the teachers with the intended change, the principal sets up a series of 10 open faculty meetings where teachers are invited to discuss freely their concerns about the new policies. The meetings provide a holding environment where teachers can confront their deeply held positions regarding the usefulness and efficacy of standardized testing and what it will mean for them to have to shift to the Common Core. The principal's role is to communicate in ways that support the teachers in their adaptive work.

How Does Adaptive Leadership Work?

Adaptive leadership is a complex process comprising multiple dimensions, including situational challenges, leader behaviors, and adaptive work. The overriding focus of the process is to engage individuals in doing adaptive work. This unique emphasis, on mobilizing individuals (followers) to confront adaptive challenges, makes adaptive leadership very different from other traditional leadership approaches that focus on leader traits (Chapter 2), skills (Chapter 3), behaviors (Chapter 4), and authenticity (Chapter 9). Adaptive leadership centers on the adaptations required of people in response to changing environments and how leaders can support them during these changes.

The process of adaptive leadership works like this: First, the leader takes time to step back from a challenging situation to understand the complexities of the situation and obtain a fuller picture of the interpersonal dynamics occurring among the participants. Second, in any situation or context where people are experiencing change, the leader first makes an assessment to determine if the change creates challenges that are technical or adaptive in nature. If the challenges are technical, the leader addresses the problems with his or her authority and expertise or through the rules and procedures of the organization. If the challenges are adaptive, the leader engages in several specific leader behaviors to move the adaptive process forward.

While the recipe for adaptive leadership is composed of many leader behaviors and activities, there is no particular order to the prescribed behaviors. Adaptive leadership incorporates many of these behaviors simultaneously, and interdependently, with some of them more important at the beginning of the process and others at the end. Some important adaptive leader behaviors are regulating distress, creating a holding environment, providing direction, keeping people focused on important issues, empowering people, and giving voice to those who feel unrecognized or marginalized.

Overall, it is safe to say that adaptive leadership works because leaders are willing to engage in all of these behaviors with the intention of helping followers do adaptive work.

Using Adaptive Leadership

Strengths

In its present stage of development, adaptive leadership has multiple strengths. First, in contrast to many other leadership theories, adaptive leadership takes a *process* approach to the study of leadership. Consistent with the process definition of leadership discussed in Chapter 1, adaptive leadership underscores that leadership is not a trait or characteristic of the leader, but rather a complex interactional event that occurs between leaders and

followers in different situations. The process perspective highlights that leaders and followers mutually affect each other, making leadership an interactive activity that is not restricted to only a formal, designated leader. This approach emphasizes that the phenomenon of leadership is a complex interactive process comprising multiple dimensions and activities.

Second, adaptive leadership stands out because it is *follower centered.* Adaptive leaders mobilize people to engage in adaptive work. The adaptive approach to leadership is other directed, stressing follower involvement and follower growth. The raison d'être of adaptive leaders is to provide a holding environment where others can learn, grow, and work on the changes that are needed. This approach encapsulates leadership as those behaviors and actions leaders need to engage in to give followers the greatest opportunity to do adaptive work.

Third, adaptive leadership is unique in how it directs attention to the use of leadership to help followers *deal with conflicting values* that emerge in changing work environments and social contexts. Change and learning are inherent in organizational life, and adaptive leadership focuses specifically on helping followers to confront change and examine the emergence of new values that may accompany change. No other leadership approach's central purpose is to help followers confront their personal values and adjust these as needed in order for change and adaptation to occur.

Adaptive Transformational Leadership

Another strength of adaptive leadership is that it provides a *prescriptive approach* to leadership that is useful and practical. In their writings, Heifetz and his colleagues (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Sinder, 1988; Heifetz et al., 2009; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002) identify many things leaders can do to facilitate adaptive leadership. The leader behaviors in Figure 11.1 are prescriptions for what an adaptive leader should do. For example, "get on the balcony," "regulate distress," and "give work back to the people" are all prescriptive behaviors leaders can use to mobilize followers to do the work they need to do to adapt or change. In a general sense, even the model is prescriptive. It suggests that followers should learn to adapt and leaders should set up a context where this is most likely to occur. In short, adaptive leadership provides a recipe for what leaders and followers should do to facilitate adaptive change. It describes the kind of work that followers should address and then the behaviors leaders should employ to help them accomplish this work.

Finally, adaptive leadership makes a unique contribution to the field of leadership studies by identifying the concept of *a holding environment* as an integral part of the leadership process. Few leadership theories discuss how leaders are responsible for creating a safe environment for followers to address difficult issues. The holding environment can be physical, virtual, or relational, but most importantly, it is an atmosphere where people should feel safe tackling difficult issues. It is a place where leaders get a dialogue started but do not let it become too heated or explosive. Although abstract, the concept of a holding environment can be easily visualized and is useful for anyone wanting to demonstrate adaptive leadership.

Criticisms

In addition to its strengths, adaptive leadership has several weaknesses. First, very little empirical research has been conducted to test the claims of adaptive leadership theory even though the conceptual framework for this approach was set forth more than 20 years ago in Heifetz's *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (1994). Originally intended as a practical framework for theory building, adaptive leadership is based on ideas and assumptions, but not on established research. Without evidence-based support for the tenets of the model, the ideas and principles set forth on adaptive leadership should be viewed cautiously.

Second, conceptualization of the process of adaptive leadership needs further refinement. Adaptive leadership was designed intentionally as a practical approach to leadership and is composed of a series of prescriptions about what leaders should do to help people engage in adaptive work. However, the major factors in the adaptive process and the way these factors relate to one another to facilitate adaptive work is not clearly delineated. Figure 11.1 provides a "first attempt" at modeling the phenomenon of adaptive leadership, but much more needs to be done to clarify the essential factors in the model, the empirical relationships among these factors, and the process through which these factors lead to adaptive change within groups and organizations.

Third, adaptive leadership can be criticized for being too wide ranging and abstract. For example, the approach suggests that leaders should "identify your loyalties," "protect leadership voices from below," "mobilize the system," "name the default," "hold steady," "act politically," "anchor yourself," and many more that were not discussed in this chapter. Interpreting what these prescriptions mean and their relationship to being an adaptive leader can become overwhelming because of the breadth and wide-ranging nature of these prescriptions. In addition, the recommended leader behaviors such as "give the work back to the people" often lack specificity and conceptual clarity. Without clear conceptualizations of recommended behaviors, it is difficult to know how to analyze them in research or implement them in practice. As a result, leaders may infer their own conceptualizations of these prescriptions, which may vary widely from what Heifetz and his colleagues (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Sinder, 1988; Heifetz et al., 2009; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002) intended.

Finally, from a theoretical perspective, adaptive leadership hints at but does not directly explain how adaptive leadership incorporates a moral dimension. Adaptive leadership focuses on how people evolve and grow through change. It implies that the evolution of one's values leads to a greater common good, but the way the evolution of values leads to a greater common good is not fully explicated. It advocates mobilizing people to do adaptive work but does not elaborate or explain how doing adaptive work leads to socially useful outcomes. The model acknowledges the importance of promoting values such as equality, justice, and community, but the link between adaptive work and achieving those social values is not clear.

Application

How can adaptive leadership be applied to real-life situations? There are several ways. On an individual level, adaptive leadership provides a conceptual framework made up of a unique set of constructs that help us determine what type of challenges we face (e.g., *technical vs. adaptive*) and

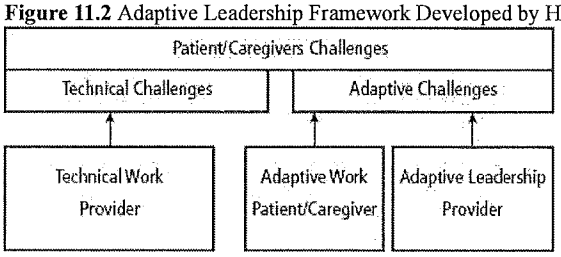
strategies for managing them (e.g., *establishing a holding environment*). Individuals can easily integrate these constructs into their own practice of leadership. Furthermore, it is an approach to leadership that people can apply in a wide variety of settings, including family, school, work, community, and societal.

Technical Leadership

On the organizational level, adaptive leadership can be used as a model to explain and address a variety of challenges that are ever present during change and growth. It has been studied as a model to train urban school superintendants (Chace, 2013) and to enhance the leadership education of aspiring school principals (Guilleux, 2010). Consultants have applied adaptive leadership at all levels in many different kinds of organizations. In particular, it has been an approach to leadership of special interest to people in nonprofits, faith-based organizations, and health care.

At this point in the development of adaptive leadership, the context in which most of the research has been conducted is health care. For example, one group of researchers suggests that adaptive leadership can improve the practice of medicine (Thygeson, Morrissey, & Ulstad, 2010). They contend that health professionals who practice from an adaptive leadership perspective view patients as complex adaptive systems who face both technical and adaptive challenges (Figure 11.2). Overall, they claim the adaptive leadership approach has promise to make health care more efficient, patient centered, and sustainable.

Figure 11.2 Adaptive Leadership Framework Developed by Heifetz & Linsky



SOURCE: Adapted from Adams, J. A., Bailey, D. E., Jr., Anderson, R. A., & Thygeson, M. (2013). Finding your way through EOL challenges in the ICU using Adaptive Leadership behaviours: A qualitative descriptive case study. Intensive and Critical Care Nursing, 29, 329–336 and Thygeson, M., Morrissey, L., & Ulstad, V. (2010). Adaptive leadership and the practice of medicine: A complexity-based approach to reframing the doctor-patient relationship. Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice, 16, 1009–1015.

Eubank, Geffken, Orzano, and Ricci (2012) used adaptive leadership as the overarching framework to guide the curriculum they developed for a family medicine residency program. They argue that if physicians practice the behaviors promoted in adaptive leadership (e.g., *get on the balcony, identify adaptive challenges,* or *regulate distress*), they can acquire the process skills that are necessary to implement and sustain true patient-centered care and healing relationships. Furthermore, to assist patients who are suffering, Eubank et al. contend that physicians need more than technical problem-solving competencies. Physicians also need adaptive skills that will enable them to help patients process and learn to live with the challenges resulting from changes in their health and well-being.

In two separate case studies, researchers found adaptive leadership could be used to help patients and family members confront health care challenges. Using the adaptive leadership framework, Adams, Bailey, Anderson, and Thygeson (2013) identified nurse and physician behaviors that can facilitate the transition from curative to palliative care by helping family members do the adaptive work of letting go. Similarly, Adams, Bailey, Anderson, and Galanos (2013) found adaptive leadership principles were useful in helping family members of patients in intensive care units to come to terms with loss and change, and to make decisions consistent with the patient's goals.

In summary, there are many applications for adaptive leadership, both on the personal and on the organizational level, as well as in the research environment. While further research needs to be done to support the tenets of adaptive leadership, it is clearly a leadership approach that can be utilized in many settings.

Case Studies

This section provides three case studies (Cases 11.1, 11.2, and 11.3) from very different contexts where adaptive leadership is present to a degree. The first case describes the challenges faced by two editors of a high school newspaper who wanted to lessen the stigma of mental illness by sharing other students' stories. The second case is about how two co-captains tried to change the culture of their college ultimate disc team. The third case describes the challenges faced by people in a small town when trying to change the name of a high school mascot. At the end of each case, questions are provided to help you explore dimensions of adaptive leadership and how it can be utilized in addressing "real" problems.

Case 11.1

Silence, Stigma, and Mental Illness

Madeline Halpert and Eva Rosenfeld had three things in common: Both were on the high school newspaper staff, both suffered from depression, and until they shared their experiences with each other, both felt the isolation of the stigma that comes with suffering from mental illness.

The two student editors knew they were far from the only ones in their high school who experienced these challenges, and in a concerted effort to support others and lessen the

stigma of mental illness, they decided to do an in-depth feature on the topic for their student newspaper. Recent cases of school shootings had brought mental illness in teens to the forefront, and evidence shows that depression is a major cause of suicide in young people (Halpert & Rosenfeld, 2014). Yet, the strong stigma that surrounds depression and mental illness often isolates those who suffer from it. The purpose of Eva and Madeline's feature was to open the dialogue and end the stigma. They interviewed a number of teens from schools in the surrounding area who agreed to use their real names and share their personal stories about mental illness including depression, eating disorders, and homelessness. The student editors even obtained waivers from the subjects' parents giving them permission to use the stories. However, their stories never made it to print.

While they were putting the story together, their school's principal called them into her office and told them about a former college football player from the area who struggled with depression and would be willing to be interviewed. The editors declined, not wanting to replace the deeply personal articles about their peers with one from someone removed from the students. The principal then told them she wouldn't support printing the stories. She objected to the use of students' real names, saying she feared potential personal repercussions such as bullying or further mental health problems that publishing such an article could have on those students. District officials stood by the principal's decision to halt printing of the piece, saying it was the right one to protect the students featured in the article.

This move surprised the two student editors because they felt that their school had a very tolerant atmosphere, which included offering a depression awareness group. "We were surprised that the administration and the adults who advocated for mental health awareness were the ones standing in the way of it," they wrote. "By telling us that students could not talk openly about their struggles, they reinforced the very stigma we were trying to eliminate."

Instead, the two editors penned an op-ed piece, "Depressed, but Not Ashamed," which was published in *The New York Times.* The article discussed their dismay with having the student articles halted by school administrators, an act that they believe further stigmatized those with mental illnesses.

"By interviewing these teenagers for our newspaper, we tried—and failed—to start small in the fight against stigma. Unfortunately, we've learned this won't be easy. It seems that those who are charged with advocating for our well-being aren't ready yet to let us have an open and honest dialogue about depression," they wrote.

The op-ed piece generated a response—and, interestingly, a dialogue—about the topic.

The two student editors were subsequently interviewed on the National Public Radio show *Weekend Edition.* In that interview, the editors acknowledged that they had experienced mostly positive reactions to their piece, with more than 200 comments after the initial publishing of their article. Many of those comments said the article resonated with readers and gave them the courage to talk to someone about their struggles with mental illness in a way they hadn't before.

"And I think, most importantly, it's opening a dialogue," said one of the editors in the interview. "There were negative comments. There were positive comments. But the most important thing is that it's so amazing to see people discussing this and finally opening up about it."

Questions

1. How do you define the problem the editors were trying to address? Was this a *technical* or an *adaptive* challenge?
2. What is your reaction to what the principal did in this situation? How do you think what she did fits in with *providing direction, protection, orientation, conflict management,* and *productive norms*?
3. Describe the *holding environment* in this case. Was the holding environment sufficient to meet the adaptive challenges in this situation? How would you improve it?
4. Based on Figure 11.1, discuss who were the adaptive leaders in this case. Which of the leader behaviors (*get on the balcony, identify adaptive challenges, regulate distress,* etc.) did these leaders exhibit?

Case 11.2

Taming Bacchus

Kyle Barrett is a serious ultimate disc player. He became involved in the sport—which is a bit like soccer only with a flying disc—in middle school and played competitively in high school. When he went to college at a small liberal arts school in the Pacific Northwest, he was excited to find the school had an ultimate disc team. His excitement quickly turned to dismay when he found the team members were more interested in partying than playing.

Kyle remembers this about his first year on the team: "The team really had this sort of fraternity culture in that there was light hazing, drinking was a priority, and tournaments were about parties, not competition. The team threw a lot of parties and had this reputation for exclusivity." Even the team's name, Bacchus (the Roman god of wine and drunkenness), reflected this culture.

Kyle found a like-minded soul in his teammate Harrison, and together they sought to turn the club team into a program that operated on a more competitive level. The pair was chosen as team co-captains and began to share their deeper knowledge of the sport with the team. They also communicated their aspirations for success. This flew in the face of some team members who were there for the parties. As one player put it, "You were either down with it, or you decided it was too intense and you left the club."

The two captains knew that the team's culture wasn't going to change just because they wanted it to. They also knew that they couldn't be captains, coach the team, and be players at the same time. So they began taking a number of steps to help the team change its own culture.

First, they brought in Mario O'Brien, a well-known ultimate disc coach, to help guide the team and teach the players skills and strategy. The team had had other coaches in the past, but none of those had the knowledge, experience, or reputation that O'Brien did.

"That really took some forethought," says a player, "to be able to step back and say, 'What does this team really need to become a strong program?' And then making a move to bring in someone of O'Brien's stature."

After a few weeks of practice with O'Brien, the captains and coach organized a team dinner. Before the dinner they asked each player to anonymously submit in writing what he thought of the team and what he wanted to see the team be. "There were no rules—just say what you need to say," says a player. Each submission was read aloud and discussed by team members.

"No one was put in the position of having to publically speak out and be embarrassed in front of the others," says a player. "We came out of that meeting more together, more bonded as a team. We hashed out a lot of issues, and came to the realization that we were looking for the same goals. The process helped filter out those who weren't as committed to those goals, but not in a confrontational way."

The goals agreed to at that dinner meeting were for the team to do well enough at the sectional competition to obtain a berth at the national collegiate competition. But the team was young with a number of inexperienced players, which sometimes caused stress, frustration, and friction. The captains, however, continued to have multiple meetings to talk about concerns, discussed the team's goals before and after each practice, and organized social events (with a minimum of drinking) where team members engaged in activities together other than playing ultimate disc. Older, more experienced players began mentoring the younger, newer players to help them improve their skills. Even Harrison, who was an exceptional offensive player, put himself on the defensive line to help improve those players' skills. While it wasn't optimal for his own enjoyment and playing abilities, he felt it was needed to help improve the team.

Bacchus reached its goals two years later; it came in second at sectionals and earned a spot in the national competition. After the team completed its last game at nationals, Kyle and Harrison gathered the team members together in a circle. "We accomplished something more than being here today," Kyle said. "We've become a family with goals, and with respect for one another and for our game. And that's a better victory than any other."

Questions

1. What changes were Kyle and Harrison trying to make? How did these changes affect the beliefs, attitudes, or values of the players?
2. Were the challenges the team faced technical, technical and adaptive, or adaptive? What examples can you give to explain your answer?
3. Citing examples, explain how the captains engaged in each of these adaptive leader behaviors: (1) *get on the balcony,* (2) *identify adaptive challenges,* (3) *regulate distress,* (4) *maintain disciplined attention,* (5) *give the work back to people,* and (6) *protect leadership voices from below.*
4. Describe the holding environment that the co-captains created for the team. Do you think it was successful? Why or why not?

Case 11.3

Redskins No More

When there became a vacancy on the school board for Gooding Public Schools, Scott Rogers decided to throw his hat into the ring for consideration. A former college professor who had retired with his wife to the small Midwestern town, Scott was hoping to help the board, which had for years been a "good old boy" network, focus more on educational pursuits than its traditional emphasis on high school athletics.

Shortly after Scott was appointed to the board, a local family with Native American ancestry came before the board to ask that the name of Gooding High School's athletic teams be changed from the Redskins. The family found the use of the name Redskins to be offensive. "The use of the word *Redskins* is essentially a racial slur," says Scott, "and as a racial slur, it needed to be changed."

The request set off a firestorm in the small town of 7,000. The school's athletic teams had competed as Redskins for 50 years, and many felt the name was an integral part of the community. People personally identified with the Redskins, and the team and the team's name were ingrained in the small town's culture.

"We went through months of folks coming to the school board meetings to speak on the issue and it got totally out of control," Scott says. "Locals would say, 'I was born a Redskin, and I'll die a Redskin.' They argued that the name was never intended to be offensive and that it honored the area's relatively strong Native American presence. The local family that raised the issue was getting all sorts of national support, and speakers came in from as far away as Oklahoma to discuss the negative ramifications of Native American mascots. Local groups argued back that these speakers weren't from Gooding and shouldn't even be allowed to be at the board meetings."

Scott felt strongly that the name needed to be changed. In meeting after meeting, he tried to explain to both his fellow board members and those in the audience that if the name was offensive to someone and recognized as a racial slur, then the intent of its original choosing was irrelevant. If someone was offended by the name, then it was wrong to maintain it.

Finally, Scott put forward a motion to change the name. That motion included a process for the students at Gooding High School to choose a new name for their athletic teams. The board approved the motion 5–2. The students immediately embraced the opportunity to choose a new name, developing designs and logos for their proposed choices. In the end, the student body voted to become the Redhawks.

There was still an angry community contingent, however, that was festering over the change. They began circulating petitions to recall the school board members and received enough signatures for the recall to be put up for an election.

"While the kids are going about the business of changing the name and the emblem, the community holds an election and proceeds to recall five of the seven members of the board," Scott says. The five recalled members included Scott and the other board members who voted in favor of the name change.

The remaining two board members, both of whom were ardent members of the athletic booster organization, held a special meeting of the board (all two of them) and voted to change the name back to the Redskins.

That's when the state Department of Civil Rights and the state's Commission for High School Athletics stepped in. They told the Gooding School Board there could not be a reversal of the name change and that Gooding High School's teams would have to go for four years without one, competing only as Gooding.

Over the course of those four years, new school board members were elected, and the issue quieted down. At the end of that period, the students again voted to become the Gooding Redhawks.

"You know, the kids were fine with it," says Scott. "It's been 10 years, and there's an entire generation of kids who don't have a clue that it was ever different. They are Redhawks and have always been Redhawks.

"It was the adults who had the problem. There's still a small contingent today that can't get over it. A local hardware store still sells Gooding Redskins T-shirts and other gear. There is just this group of folks who believe there was nothing disrespectful in the Redskins name. Once that group is gone, it will be a nonissue."

Questions

1. What change were the people in Gooding trying to avoid? Why do you think they wanted to avoid this change? What tactics did they use to resist change?
2. Would you describe the efforts of Scott Rogers or the school board as adaptive leadership? Why or why not?
3. How would you describe the holding environment created by the school board? Do you think it was successful? Why or why not?
4. Citing examples, describe how the school board engaged or didn't engage in each of these adaptive leader behaviors: (1) *get on the balcony,* (2) *maintain disciplined attention,* and (3) *give the work back to people.*
5. What group would you describe as the "low-status group"? How did the school board seek to give voice to this group?

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Leadership Instrument

To assist you in understanding the process of adaptive leadership and what your own style might be, the adaptive leadership questionnaire is included in this section. This questionnaire provides 360-degree, or multirater, feedback about your leadership. The adaptive leadership questionnaire is composed of 30 items that assess six dimensions of adaptive leadership discussed earlier in this chapter: *get on the balcony, identify the adaptive challenge, regulate distress, maintain disciplined attention, give the work back to people,* and *protect leadership voices from below.* The results you obtain on this questionnaire will provide you with information on how you view yourself and how others view you on these six dimensions of adaptive leadership. This questionnaire is intended for practical applications. It is not designed for research purposes. For research purposes, the psychometric properties of the questionnaire (i.e., reliability and validity) would need to be established.

Adaptive leadership is a complex process, and taking this questionnaire will help you understand the theory of adaptive leadership as well as your own style of adaptive leadership.

Adaptive Leadership Questionnaire

Instructions: This questionnaire contains items that assess different dimensions of adaptive leadership and will be completed by you and others who know you (coworkers, friends, members of a group you belong to).

1. Make five copies of this questionnaire.
2. Fill out the assessment about yourself; where you see the phrase "this leader," replace it with "I" or "me."
3. Have each of five individuals indicate the degree to which they agree with each of the 30 statements below regarding your leadership by circling the number from the scale that they believe most accurately characterizes their response to the statement. There are no right or wrong responses.

Key:	1 = Strongly disagree	2 = Disagree	3 = Neutral	4 = Agree	5 = Strongly agree

1.	When difficulties emerge in our organization, this leader is good at stepping back and assessing the dynamics of the people involved.	1 2 3 4 5
2.	When events trigger strong emotional responses among employees, this leader uses his/her authority as a leader to resolve the problem.	1 2 3 4 5
3.	When people feel uncertain about organizational change, they trust that this leader will help them work through the difficulties.	1 2 3 4 5
4.	In complex situations, this leader gets people to focus on the issues they are trying to avoid.	1 2 3 4 5
5.	When employees are struggling with a decision, this leader tells them what he/she thinks they should do.	1 2 3 4 5
6.	During times of difficult change, this leader welcomes the thoughts of group members with low status.	1 2 3 4 5
7.	In difficult situations, this leader sometimes loses sight of the "big picture."	1 2 3 4 5
8.	When people are struggling with a value conflict, this leader uses his or her expertise to tell them what to do.	1 2 3 4 5
9.	When people begin to be disturbed by unresolved conflicts, this leader encourages them to address the issues.	1 2 3 4 5
10.	During organizational change, this leader challenges people to concentrate on the "hot" topics.	1 2 3 4 5
11.	When employees look to this leader for answers, he/she encourages them to think for themselves.	1 2 3 4 5
12.	Listening to group members with radical ideas is valuable to this leader.	1 2 3 4 5
13.	When this leader disagrees with someone, he/she has difficulty listening to what the other person is really saying.	1 2 3 4 5
14.	When others are struggling with intense conflicts, this leader steps in to resolve their differences for them.	1 2 3 4 5
15.	This leader has the emotional capacity to comfort others as they work through intense issues.	1 2 3 4 5
16.	When people try to avoid controversial organizational issues, this leader brings these conflicts into the open.	1 2 3 4 5
17.	This leader encourages his/her employees to take initiative in defining and solving problems.	1 2 3 4 5
18.	This leader is open to people who bring up unusual ideas that seem to hinder the progress of the group.	1 2 3 4 5
19.	In challenging situations, this leader likes to observe the parties involved and assess what's really going on.	1 2 3 4 5
20.	This leader encourages people to discuss the "elephant in the room."	1 2 3 4 5
21.	People recognize that this leader has confidence to tackle challenging problems.	1 2 3 4 5
22.	This leader thinks it is reasonable to let people avoid confronting difficult issues.	1 2 3 4 5
23.	When people look to this leader to solve problems, he/she enjoys providing solutions.	1 2 3 4 5
24.	This leader has an open ear for people who don't seem to fit in with the rest of the group.	1 2 3 4 5
25.	In a difficult situation, this leader will step out of the dispute to gain perspective on it.	1 2 3 4 5
26.	This leader thrives on helping people find new ways of coping with organizational problems.	1 2 3 4 5
27.	People see this leader as someone who holds steady in the storm.	1 2 3 4 5
28.	In an effort to keep things moving forward, this leader lets people avoid issues that are troublesome.	1 2 3 4 5
29.	When people are uncertain about what to do, this leader empowers them to decide for themselves.	1 2 3 4 5
30.	To restore equilibrium in the organization, this leader tries to neutralize comments of out-group members.	1 2 3 4 5

Scoring

Get on the Balcony—This score represents the degree to which you are able to step back and see the complexities and interrelated dimensions of a situation.

Scoring

Get on the Balcony—This score represents the degree to which you are able to step back and see the complexities and interrelated dimensions of a situation.

To arrive at this score:

Sum items 1, 19, and 25 and the reversed (R) score values for 7 and 13 (i.e., change 1 to 5, 2 to 4, 4 to 2, and 5 to 1, with 3 remaining unchanged).

____ 1 ____ 7(R) ____ 13(R) ____ 19 ____ 25 ____ Total

Identify the Adaptive Challenge—This score represents the degree to which you recognize adaptive challenges and do not respond to these challenges with technical leadership.

To arrive at this score:

Sum items 16 and 20 and the reversed (R) score values for 2, 8 and 14 (i.e., change 1 to 5, 2 to 4, 4 to 2, and 5 to 1, with 3 remaining unchanged).

____ 2(R) ____ 8(R) ____ 14(R) ____ 16 ____ 20 ____ Total

Regulate Distress—This score represents the degree to which you provide a safe environment in which others can tackle difficult problems and to which you are seen as confident and calm in conflict situations.

To arrive at this score:

Sum items 3, 9, 15, 21, and 27.

____ 3 ____ 9 ____ 15 ____ 21 ____ 27 ____ Total

Maintain Disciplined Attention—This score represents the degree to which you get others to face challenging issues and not let them avoid difficult problems.

To arrive at this score:

Sum items 4, 10, and 26 and the reversed (R) score values for 22 and 28 (i.e., change 1 to 5, 2 to 4, 4 to 2, and 5 to 1, with 3 remaining unchanged).

____ 4 ____ 10 ____ 26 ____ 22(R) ____ 28(R) ____ Total

Give the Work Back to People—This score is the degree to which you empower others to think for themselves and solve their own problems.

To arrive at this score:

Sum items 11, 17, and 29 and the reversed (R) score values for 5 and 23 (i.e., change 1 to 5, 2 to 4, 4 to 2, and 5 to 1, with 3 remaining unchanged).

____ 5(R) ____ 11 ____ 17 ____ 23(R) ____ 29 ____ Total

Protect Leadership Voices From Below—This score represents the degree to which you are open and accepting of unusual or radical contributions from low-status group members.

To arrive at this score:

Sum items 6, 12, 18, and 24 and the reversed (R) score value for 30 (i.e., change 1 to 5, 2 to 4, 4 to 2, and 5 to 1, with 3 remaining unchanged).

____ 6 ____ 12 ____ 18 ____ 24 ____ 30(R) ____ Total

Scoring Chart

To complete the scoring chart, enter the raters' scores and your own scores in the appropriate column on the scoring sheet below. Find the average score from your five raters, and then calculate the difference between the average and your self-rating.

	Rater 1	Rater 2	Rater 3	Rater 4	Rater 5	Average Rating	Self-Rating	Difference
Get on the Balcony								
Identify the Adaptive Challenge								
Regulate Distress								
Maintain Disciplined Attention								
Give the Work Back to the People								
Protect Leadership Voices From Below								

Scoring Interpretation

- *High range:* A score between 21 and 25 means you are strongly inclined to exhibit this adaptive leadership behavior.
- *Moderately high range:* A score between 16 and 20 means you moderately exhibit this adaptive leadership behavior.
- *Moderate low range:* A score between 11 and 15 means you at times exhibit this adaptive leadership behavior.
- *Low range:* A score between 5 and 10 means you are seldom inclined to exhibit this adaptive leadership behavior.

This questionnaire measures adaptive leadership by assessing six components of the process: *get on the balcony, identify the adaptive challenge, regulate distress, maintain disciplined attention, give the work back to people,* and *protect leadership voices from below.* By comparing your scores on each of these components, you can determine which are your stronger and which are your weaker components. The scoring chart allows you to see where your perceptions are the same as those of others and where they differ. There are no "perfect" scores for this questionnaire. While it is confirming when others see you in the same way as you see yourself, it is also beneficial to know when they see you differently. This assessment can help you understand those dimensions of your adaptive leadership that are strong and dimensions of your adaptive leadership you may seek to improve.

Summary

Adaptive leadership is about helping people change and adjust to new situations. Originally formulated by Heifetz (1994), adaptive leadership conceptualizes the leader not as one who solves problems for people, but rather as one who encourages others to do the problem solving. Adaptive leadership occupies a unique place in the leadership literature. While the merits of the approach are well recognized, the theoretical conceptualizations of adaptive leadership remain in the formative stages.

While the name of this approach, adaptive leadership, makes one think it is concerned with how leaders adapt, it is actually more about the adaptations of followers. Adaptive leadership is defined as "the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive" (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 14). Consistent with complexity theory, adaptive leadership is about leader behaviors that encourage learning, creativity, and adaptation by followers in complex situations.

This chapter offers a model of the major components of adaptive leadership and how they fit together, including *situational challenges, leader behaviors,* and *adaptive work* (Figure 11.1). Leaders confront three kinds of *situational challenges* (technical, technical and adaptive, and adaptive); adaptive leadership is concerned with helping people address adaptive challenges. The six *leader behaviors* that play a major role in the process are (1) *get on the balcony,* (2) *identify adaptive challenges,* (3) *regulate distress,* (4) *maintain disciplined attention,* (5) *give the work back to people,* and (6) *protect leadership voices from below.* These six behaviors form a kind of recipe for being an adaptive leader. *Adaptive work* is the focus and goal of adaptive leadership. Central to adaptive work is creating *a holding environment,* a space created and maintained by adaptive leaders where people can feel secure as they confront and resolve difficult life challenges.

Adaptive leadership has several strengths. First, adaptive leadership takes a unique approach that emphasizes that leadership is a complex interactive process composed of multiple dimensions and activities. Second, unlike most other leadership theories, adaptive leadership clearly describes leadership as actions the leaders undertake to afford followers the best opportunity to do adaptive work. Third, adaptive leadership is unique in describing how leaders can help people confront and adjust their values in order to adapt and thrive. Fourth, adaptive leadership provides a useful and practical set of prescriptions for what leaders and followers should do to facilitate adaptive change. Last, adaptive leadership highlights the important role a holding environment plays in the leadership process.

The adaptive leadership process also has certain weaknesses. Foremost, there is very little empirical research to support the claims and tenets of adaptive leadership. Second, the conceptualizations of the process of adaptive leadership need further refinement. The major factors and how they fit together are not clearly delineated. Third, interpreting the prescriptions of adaptive leadership can become overwhelming because of the breadth and wide-ranging nature of these prescriptions. In addition, the abstract nature of the recommended leadership behaviors makes these behaviors difficult to analyze in research or implement in practice. Finally, on a theoretical level, adaptive leadership acknowledges the moral dimension of leadership and the importance of change for the common good, but does not show how doing adaptive work leads to such socially useful outcomes.

Overall, adaptive leadership offers a unique prescriptive approach to leadership that is applicable in many situations. Going forward, more research is needed to clarify the conceptualizations of adaptive leadership and validate the assumptions and propositions regarding how it works.

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