Adaptive Leadership in Organisations

Future proofing your culture

Date
By Joe Ellis

Think. Believe. Achieve.
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptive Leadership</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Benefits of Creating an Adaptive Organisation</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming an Adaptive Leader</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Problems versus Adaptive Challenges and the role of disequilibrium in organisations</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining an Adaptive Challenge</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical and Adaptive Intertwined</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional ideas about leadership are seductive</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have an Adaptive Culture?</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptive Leadership Glossary</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

A fresh, more inclusive idea of leadership is required to help overcome the adaptive challenges facing modern organisations. The role of leadership in these new organisations is to create safe holding environments where constructive disequilibrium can flourish. Leadership in this sense can come from anywhere within an organisation, and should permeate its very DNA. Adaptive leadership theory offers a practical framework, language and philosophy that give organisations a fighting chance to face the future with the tools required to keep pace with the prolific change they face. It does this by borrowing ideas from evolutionary biology and psychology, to give organisational systems the flexibility to change when required but also the clear self-awareness to remain steadfast and hold onto the useful elements when it’s expedient to do so.

After the US Federal Government closedown in 2013, Mike Myatt in Forbes Magazine wrote of the modern crisis in leadership being “a systemic problem that pervades every level of society”. It’s difficult not to agree. Recently we’ve seen everything from major border disputes to banking governance crises requiring good leadership, yet everywhere we look leadership seems to be struggling to keep pace with what is required of it.

This paper discusses the changing role of leadership and how the best organisations are adapting to embrace a more holistic view of what leadership’s role is in a company. The efficacy of the traditional heroic leader is being compromised in a world where challenges are so complex that one person, or leadership group, cannot hope to have all the answers. A different approach is required if organisations are to have a hope of adapting to stay relevant and competitive in the 21st century.

We argue that leadership needs to be exercised by everyone in an organisation, and we talk about successful leadership organisations seeing leadership as an active verb not simply a noun attached to the job title of a senior cohort. We suggest that leadership needs to be something that everyone in the organisational system takes responsibility for, every day. The role of leadership therefore needs to be defined and practiced so that it delivers this cultural outcome.

Is the work of leadership creating an organisational system that leads?

To ask a question like this you need to be open to a radical rethink about what leadership is and also be open to the idea that the things we traditionally associate with ‘good’ leadership may no longer be as useful in a changed world. This somewhat radical idea is starting to take hold as leaders struggle to cope with a constantly changing environment, still using traditional methods and ideas that can fail to deliver definite answers. If the world has changed then maybe a new approach to leading within that changed world is also required?
The Psychological Contract

In general workforce engagement has been really battered by the global economic storms of recent years and many people feel that their relationship with their employers has been damaged beyond repair. They may never see that relationship in the same way again given the damage caused by this breakdown in the that the psychological contract between employer and employee.

Maybe this will improve as the economy delivers good news – however nothing so far has yet replaced the comfortable status quo that previously existed between leaders and their organisations, and many commentators talk about the ‘new normal’ that will emerge, however even this will be defined by unrelenting change.

It is not just the relationships between the leaders and the led, or employers and the employed that has suffered; the very basis of the psychological contract people have within the work dynamic has been fundamentally challenged.

People are now struggling to find answers that previous generations would have taken for granted. The questions do not seem to have an easy alternative.

Questions like:

- Is a university education actually worth the time/money we invest in it?
- How do we develop skills when we don’t really understand future work requirements?
- Do permanent or temporary jobs offer more security?
- How will we manage retirement? What will retirement even mean in the future?
- Is it better to work for a big or a small company? How do we achieve a work/life balance?

The list of self-evident ‘truths’ that have been challenged goes on and on. In business however, the over-riding truth about leadership was: if you worked hard in a business with competent leadership (noun), leadership would deliver strategies that produced ever greater success; but again this is no longer an evident truth. Even the most competent leaders with the noblest motivations are struggling to steer organisations in markets that change from week to week - markets that seem to be disrupted by social and technological changes at a faster rate than at any time in living memory.

You could argue that it is unfair to expect a leader to hold all the answers under these circumstances – as a society we are actually lining up leadership to fail. We still hold a deep seated attraction to heroic leaders that offer simple straightforward solutions to highly complex problems. It’s particularly evident when we examine the attraction of a political party that can offer a panacea to all our woes, for example: pulling out
of Europe, or accession from another state. We’re not suggesting these solutions are wrong, just that history tells us that silver bullets don’t exist.

The issue is that many contemporary challenges are messy; and in the majority of circumstances they require new ways of thinking, such as a psychological adaptation of some sort; often with the requirement to sacrifice a core belief. This of course is hard work. This is work that can only be accomplished by utilising the full capacity of the organisation which is mobilised towards adaptations and working to exercise leadership in all senses.

A paradigm shift

Maybe the role of the contemporary leader is to carry out ‘less leadership’ in the traditional sense? Maybe its role is to create an environment where leadership can be exercised by all? In adaptive organisations leadership creates a strong secure holding environment where everyone can become leaders. This is not as radical as it may first seem, but it does require a paradigm shift in thinking.

In this paper we attempt to explore how your organisation can start to adapt its idea of leadership so that it is embraced as a responsibility by the whole organisation. We also look at how, as a leader, you have a role to play in this journey. We will argue that the time is right to wean organisations off the traditional top down dynamic which has served organisations in the past. One where leaders ‘did’ and the rest simply followed. But this approach no longer engages or motivates in this fast-changing world we live in. This paradigm worked well in the industrial economy of the past where all the variables could be mapped and, with some good management practices, controlled but in 2014 it is becoming more difficult each year to understand the terrain yet alone navigate it successfully.
Adaptive Leadership

Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky working at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government developed Adaptive Leadership to give organisations a different way of organising themselves to cope within an ever changing environmental world.

Adaptive Leadership, rather than being a methodology or process is more akin to a philosophy, or ideology, with its own language and mind-set. However don’t let that put you off; the essence of Adaptive Leadership is incredibly simply and pragmatic. Heifetz was originally an MD and practiced as a Psychiatrist before turning to organisational leadership. He realised that evolutionary biology could teach us a lot about how to thrive as organisations (which for the purposes of explanation we can compare to living organisms). In nature every living organism has to adapt: we call this evolution. But in a changing world, organisations also need to adapt and evolve. Whoever adapts quickest and most successfully wins while for organisms/organisation that fail to adapt, the opposite is the case.

So what does adaptation mean for organisations?

Adaptation is thinking, feeling, and behaving in a different way. An Adaptive Leader is simply someone who engages in the activity of ‘mobilising adaptive work’. So anyone within an organisational system can exercise adaptive leadership and therefore can be, in this sense, an adaptive leader. If we can create a latticework of leadership that threads throughout an organisational system and if leadership is not restricted to the top of the hierarchy, then the evolutionally process can be accelerated.

“A successful adaptation enables an organism to thrive in a new or challenging environment. The adaptation process is both conservative and progressive in that it enables the living system to take the best from its traditions and identity into the future.”

What makes an Adaptive Organisation?

Below we see the traditional top down triangle shape of leadership that tended to exist in the late 20th century and we compare this to the lattice of leadership that can exist in adaptive organisations; where leadership comes from all parts of the organisations engage in the adaptive process.

Organisations that can engage the entire system in the task of leadership have a higher chance of successfully adapting to complex changes.
In table 1 we see some of the fundamental differences between more traditional organisations (Type A) and Adaptive Organisations (Type B) and compare how the role of leadership exists differently within each.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type A Organisations (20&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Century)</th>
<th>Type B Organisations (Adaptive)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership is perceived as a noun – usually a person or a team.</td>
<td>Leadership is a Verb – exercised by all (<em>that is not to say that leadership teams don’t exist in Type B Orgs., rather their role is focused on facilitating more leadership and mobilising adaptation and creating strong holding environments).</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership cascades from the top down. Leadership is seen as something ‘someone else does’ by the majority of players.</td>
<td>Leadership permeates from all directions like a lattice, because the primary role of leadership is asking questions not creating diktats it is not the exclusive reserve of a leadership team; everyone sees it as their responsibility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dogmatic strategy – cascaded down.</td>
<td>Strategically nimble, experimental. Strategy evolves and involves all players.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower tolerance to failure</td>
<td>Higher tolerance to failure (<em>experiments do not always go to plan – this is accepted in a Type B Adaptive Organisation</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lip-service paid to empowerment</td>
<td>Opportunities to empower sought constantly by Adaptive Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower levels of communication and debate</td>
<td>Higher levels of communication and debate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaders are tired and stressed and feel they have to have all the answers</td>
<td>Leadership is energising – failure can be seen as a stepping stone to success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lower feeling of shared responsibility</td>
<td>A higher feeling of shared responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People feel leaders should have the answers</td>
<td>People feel leaders are meant to ask questions</td>
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</table>
The Benefits of Creating an Adaptive Organisation

If organisations can move from the top down model of leadership (A) to one that looks more like a lattice, where Adaptive Leadership is exercised throughout the system (B) they can utilise as much of the organisational leadership potential as possible and the benefits are potentially great.

Below we have identified a number of potential benefits that can grow from this changed paradigm:

- **Organisations utilise more of their intellectual horsepower** - If the ‘sum of the parts is worth more than the whole’ then organisations that can call upon all the players in the system to step up and take responsibility for finding solutions to challenges. By asking powerful questions, we increase the likelihood of finding solutions to messy problems. With a traditional top down model there is a belief that those in leadership positions have exclusive rights to own problems or challenges – this is simply not true. Everyone in a system plays a role in ‘making the mess’, therefore they all have a responsibility to lead the charge towards solutions. Only by all players taking responsibility for identifying problems, challenges and their potential solutions will the solution be fully understood.

- **Increased engagement** - If everyone in the system is emotionally and cognitively engaged in leading the organisation, ownership and therefore engagement increases. There tends to be a correlation between engagement and success. Organisations that have higher levels of engagement have higher levels of the ‘good stuff’ and less of the bad; higher profits, higher innovation, more flexibility and less absenteeism (this list is not definitive but you get the idea).

- **A reduction in organisational stress points** - The pressure of leadership in top down organisations is often unbearable for leaders, and the system. We can recognise this by looking at the example of the revolving door culture that exists for managers in premiership football. These leaders have little scope to experiment and fail, and if they do they are demonised and scapegoated. In the business world the attitude that leaders are totally responsible for success is also deeply embedded in the collective psyche. This has the effect of ‘heroising’ or ‘demonising’ the individuals based on short-term gains or losses.

In 2011, Lloyds Banking Group’s new CEO António Horta-Osório took an enforced leave of absence, only eight months into the job citing exhaustions and stress. When this story was reported in the press this one act wiped almost £1 billion off the value of the publicly owned bank in just one day. Such is the responsibility carried by certain leaders, it’s no wonder they crumble under the strain.

If leadership responsibility is shared, there is less likelihood that unreasonable pressure points occur that end in failure and dismissal. Sharing responsibility is not the same as not having accountability. On
the contrary, in a shared leadership situation everyone is encouraged to reflect honestly on their effectiveness and take ownership of their part of the mess or success.

- **A reduction in Groupthink** - Whenever a small group of people are engaged in decision-making there is a danger of Groupthink. Groupthink is a psychological phenomenon that occurs when the desire for harmony or conformity in the group results in an irrational or dysfunctional decision-making process. Group members try to minimize conflict and reach a consensus without critical evaluation of alternative viewpoints, by actively suppressing dissenting viewpoints, and by isolating themselves from outside influences. We see this happen when leadership groups close ranks - and doors - and cease to engage in constructive conflict. By creating an environment where people feel they are able to take responsibility for the leadership and ask powerful questions safely without fear of reprisal or disenfranchisement, organisations can counter the damaging effect of Groupthink. *The phenomena of Groupthink is not the same as ‘alignment’ which manifests via a subconscious tacit complicity within a group that does not want to be seen to ‘rock the boat’.

- **A move toward Organisational Actualisation** – Goldstein and later Maslow’s idea of ‘Self-Actualisation’ for the individual can be extrapolated to encompass the entire system in a Type B organisation where there is an opportunity to drive the organisation to achieve its full potential. If we see actualisation as: self-discovery, self-reflection, self-realisation and self-exploration, then Type B organisations (Adaptive) clearly hold greater promise as they achieving the environmental conditions for actualisation.

- **A fair and more inclusive environment** – By encouraging more and more players in an organisation to mobilise themselves and their colleagues to adaptive work, the organisation becomes a fairer and more inclusive place where dialogue and decisions about the future of the organisation are made collectively. This idea counters the cultural siloing and protectionism that occurs when times are bad. Of course these are natural proclivities in competitive environments however a paradigm change in thinking can create a difference; one where they do not need to become a forgone conclusion.

**Adaptive Leadership - An idea that is ripe for harvest in many organisations**

We believe many organisations are ready for a new way of thinking about leadership. People are reaching out to understand how they can make sense of a world where so many traditional rules and ideas have been challenged so fundamentally, which makes them question the basis of their core values. Indeed leaders themselves wrestle with these same issues and wonder how they fit into a system where answers do not come easily.

Although the recent recession acted as a further catalyst for change – many changes were already taking place in the wider system. People were starting to question inequality and the role of ‘fat cat’ bonuses and
the gap between the developed and developing world, sustainability and fairness, and how to achieve the right work life balance. The role technology plays in our lives is also crucial and in many ways traditional leadership was failing to deliver satisfying answers to all these concerns, not because of apathy or a lack of intellect, but because these are ‘big’ questions without easy answers. Adaptive organisations would call these ‘adaptive challenges’.

Few people are absolutely satisfied with the status quo and they often cite leadership as either the problem or the answer, but this is an abdication of responsibility that perpetuates the situation they are dissatisfied with and traditional ideas of leadership are partly to blame. Ghandi said: “be the change you want to see”, and what he meant was that to change a situation you first need to change yourself. Too often in organisations there is little opportunity to exercise this aspect of leadership because the environment does not sustain it. The true role of leadership in the 21st century is not solving problems but creating environments where problems can be solved.

But where do we start?

**Becoming an Adaptive Leader**

An Adaptive Leader is simply someone who mobilises adaptive work; so if we can understand what adaptive work is, we can start to identify whether we are moving towards an adaptive way of thinking about leadership. The entire body of knowledge associated with adaptive leadership is huge and outwith the scope of a paper like this. However, there are a few interesting ideas that are easy to adopt that we will explore below.

The definition of an adaptive leader is actually very simple, but to fully understand the ideas we first of all need to explain some of the fundamental tenets and concepts.

**An Adaptive Leader**

An Adaptive Leader is anyone who “holds people through a sustained period of disequilibrium during which they identify what cultural DNA to conserve and which to discard, and invent and discover the new cultural DNA that will enable them to thrive anew; i.e. the learning process through which people in a system achieve a successful adaptation.”

Technical Problems versus Adaptive Challenges and the role of disequilibrium in organisations

One of the things Adaptive Leadership provides is a pragmatic lexicon that creates clarity for all. The idea is simple. Even if the problems are complex and vague, the language doesn’t need to be. This one idea is very powerful because it combats miscommunication and misunderstanding.

If the players in a system ‘speak the same language’, there’s less propensity to avoid the real work of adaptation because of missed meaning and misinterpretation.

There are two concepts that we will look at that make the work of understanding easier for those new to adaptive leadership:

1. Correctly identifying Technical Problems versus Adaptive Challenges
2. The role leadership plays in managing disequilibrium in the system

Technical Problems versus Adaptive Challenges

Fundamentally organisations face two categories of issues which Adaptive Leadership categorises as Technical Problems and Adaptive Challenges. Much of the initial work of adaptive leaders when they start relates to the correct identification and naming of these issues in the system.

Conversely, dysfunction in organisations can often stem from an endemic misinterpretation and misnaming of issues: identifying Adaptive Challenges as Technical Problems and vice versa.

Adaptive Theory helps create a framework to enable different factions to agree on the type of issue being faced. As you will see from the table below if leaders categorise and try to solve Adaptive Challenge using technical thinking and methods the outcome is at best short lived and at worse ineffectual.

Defining a Technical Problem

Technical Problems — “Problems that can be diagnosed and solved, generally within a short time frame, by applying established know-how and procedures. Technical problems are amenable to authoritative expertise and management of routine processes.”

For example, building a bridge is a Technical Problem, even though the bridge may be unique in size and scale we have a body of knowledge and tried and tested project management methods to construct bridges. The solution does not generally require a change in our mind-set or behaviour.

Defining an Adaptive Challenge

Adaptive Challenges – “The gap between the values people stand for (that constitute thriving) and the reality they face (their current lack of capacity to realize those values in their environment).”


Classic examples of Adaptive Challenges often exist in the HR or public health arena, but of course they can and do exist anywhere the problem is difficult to define, involves multiple stakeholders and the probable solution is not clear cut. The response involves a sophisticated interrelationship of factors and a change in behaviour or mind-set.

Let us use an example taken from the book, The Practice of Adaptive Leadership by Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky to demonstrate the difference between technical and adaptive:

“Marty’s mother, Ruth is in good health at the age of ninety-five with not a grey hair on her head. She lives alone and still drives, even at night. When Marty goes back to Massachusetts to teach, his mother often drives from her apartment to have dinner with him. Some time ago, Marty began noticing new scrapes on her car each time she arrived for their dinner date. Now one way to look at the issue is: the car should be taken to the body shop for repair. In that sense this situation has a technical component: the scrapes can be solved by the expertise found at the body shop. But an Adaptive Challenge is also lurking below the surface. Ruth is the only one of her contemporaries who still drives at all, never mind at night. Doing so is a source of enormous pride, and convenience, for her as is living alone rather than in a retirement community.

To stop driving, even to stop driving at night, would require a momentous adjustment for her – an adaptation. The technical part is that she would have to pay for cabs or ask friends for lifts and so forth. The adaptive part can be found in the loss this change would represent, a loss of an important part of the story she tells herself about who she is as a human being, namely that she is the only ninety-five year old person she knows who still drives at night.

It would rip out her heart, and take away a central element of her identity as an independent woman. Addressing the issue solely as a technical problem would fix the car (although only temporarily, since the
trips to the body shop would likely become more frequent) but it would not get at the underlying Adaptive Challenge: refashioning an identity and finding ways to thrive within new constraints.”

In business we regularly run employee incentive schemes or diversity awareness programmes in an attempt to create the changes we want to see and sometimes they are affective. But unless we identify and name the Adaptive Challenges correctly we run the risk of putting a sticking plaster on a broken leg. Or to put it another way, we take the car to the body shop to polish out the scratches!

Adaptive Challenges are messy, complex and difficult to pin down. They require an adaptation in thinking and a multi-faceted approach to even start to address them.

What are the Adaptive Challenges in your organisation?

**Understanding and naming work avoidance**

To help identify the technical and adaptive components of an issue, Adaptive Leadership asks leaders to recognise work avoidance tactics/behaviours in themselves and in others. It may also occur if the system is trying to solve adaptive challenges using a purely technical approach - as in fixing the scratches in the body shop. Below we have identified a few classical examples of work avoidance, or misdiagnosis of the issue:

- The problem persists even after numerous technical attempts to ‘fix it’
- The issue becomes the ‘elephant in the room’ that no one wants to talk about - or it goes underground and is only discussed around the water cooler
- The issue becomes ‘toxic’ and it gets passed around or scapegoats are sought
- Anyone who dares raise the issue for further exploration becomes the ‘lightning rod’ for this issue – they get ‘shot down’ or de-authorised. The ultimate iteration of this is character assassination where the person and not the issue becomes the main focus.

Adaptive Leadership categorises all the above behaviours as ‘work avoidance’. Although work avoidance may not be conscious within the individual or system, it is a real phenomenon and it does deflect an organisation from mobilising and facing Adaptive Challenges.
Below we have included two tables based on Heifetz and Linsky’s work. Table 2 helps the reader differentiate between technical problems and adaptive challenges while Table 3 gives examples of technical and adaptive approaches to commonly encountered issues.

**Table 2 - Technical Problems versus Adaptive Challenges**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technical Problem?</th>
<th>Adaptive Challenge?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Easy to identify root cause.</td>
<td>Difficult to identify root cause and easy to deny.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often lend themselves to quick and easy cut and dried solutions.</td>
<td>Require changes in values, beliefs, roles, relationships and approaches to work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often can be solved by an authority or expert.</td>
<td>People with the problem work to solve it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Require change in just one or a few places; often contained within organisational boundaries.</td>
<td>Require change in numerous organisational places; usually across organisational boundaries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People are generally receptive to technical solutions (strategies).</td>
<td>People often resist even acknowledging adaptive challenges.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solutions can often be implemented quickly – even by edict.</td>
<td>'Solutions’ require experiments and new discoveries; they can take a long time and cannot be implemented by edict.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 – example of technical approach versus adaptive approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technical-focused Solutions</th>
<th>Adaptive-focused Solution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Take medication to lower blood pressure.</td>
<td>Change lifestyle to eat healthily, get more exercise and lower stress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implement electronic ordering and dispensing of medications in</td>
<td>Encourage nurses and pharmacists to ask questions and even challenge illegible or dangerous prescriptions by physician.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hospitals to reduce errors and drug interactions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase financial penalty for drink driving.</td>
<td>Raise public awareness of the dangers and effects of drink driving, targeting teenagers in particular.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legisl ate against smoking in public places.</td>
<td>Educate and inform around perceptions towards smoking especially the young. Focus on behavioural change.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Technical and Adaptive Intertwined

One last point on technical and adaptive; they are not mutually exclusive. Often there are technical and adaptive component in each situation that exist concurrently. Adaptive Leadership can help us to identify where it is appropriate to focus on a Technical Problem first before diving headlong into adaptive work.

Adaptive Leadership - Change management and creating a strong holding environment

One example of this would be in change management; there will be both Technical Problems and Adaptive Challenges enmeshed within the effort. It would be tempting for the Adaptive Leader to run headlong into mobilising the players in the system for adaptation ahead without due consideration of the very real technical problems that exist within their system and this would be a mistake.

If the IT systems don’t work or the toilets are not being serviced adequately or payroll is always late for example (Technical Problems), then attempting adaptive work would be folly because the required work had not been done to prepare the system for adaptation.

We call this ‘creating a holding environment’. One of the roles of leadership is making sure that the holding environment is strong enough to accommodate the adaptive process. Many change efforts fall foul because they skip this work.

‘Getting on the balcony’ to analyse what’s happening in the system

To be able to correctly analyse what is happening within a system an adaptive leader uses a technique called ‘getting on the balcony’. The analogy is that the organisational system is a dance floor. When a leader is on or in the dance floor they cannot gather the data required to work out what is actually happening.

Only when they step off the dance floor and get up onto the balcony can they see the full picture and gain a wider perspective. Adaptive Leadership advocates coaching, self-reflection and using multiple data sources, including your own body, as a way of understanding what’s going in in a particular system.
Managing disequilibrium to sustain adaptation

Adaptive Leadership uses the analogy of a cook in a kitchen; the role of a leader is to turn the heat up or down just enough to allow adaptation in thinking and behaviour to occur within the system. We call this the productive zone of disequilibrium. There are many examples of when leaders get this balancing act wrong. If the system is too cold, change doesn’t happen; if the system is too hot, the change becomes psychologically unsafe for people.

The adaptive leader has many tools available to control the temperature, however all the tools have one aim and that is to keep the system in the productive zone of disequilibrium long enough for adaptive work to happen.

On the following page we have a graph showing the productive zone of disequilibrium and a table identifying a number of tools / methods a leader can use to optimise the amount of time spent in the zone.

Diagram 2 – The Productive Zone of Disequilibrium
Table 3 – Examples of tactics for Staying in the Zone

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Increase heat in the System</th>
<th>Decrease heat in the system</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Give more responsibility – give the problem to the system</td>
<td>Address technical aspects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bring conflict to surface</td>
<td>Employ structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protect dissenting voices</td>
<td>Reclaim responsibility temporarily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek other perspectives</td>
<td>Slow down the process</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adaptive Leadership as Open Source

Heifetz and Linsky liken Adaptive Leadership to Open Source software. Much in the same way the Open Source movement in IT uses collaboration to refine the product and end user experience, Adaptive Leadership is available to all as intellectual material to use as the system sees fit. This means that proponents are often refining and experimenting with the ideas in their own systems to the benefit of all.
The Adaptive Leadership diagnostic Matrix

When using an adaptive leadership it is essential to adopt a systematic approach and adaptive leadership gives us a wide array of tools to use; however these fall into four broad categories.

Table 4 – Diagnostic Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Diagnosis / System</th>
<th>2. Action / System</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. Diagnosis / Self</td>
<td>4. Action / Self</td>
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</table>

We can help clients work through the Adaptive Leadership diagnostic matrix systematically to make sure that they are not falling into the trap of misdiagnosing Adaptive Challenges as Technical Problems. We also help them gain a deeper understanding of the part they play within their system and because the process is systematic, we mitigate much of the risk of jumping to solutions when change is required.
Traditional ideas about leadership are seductive

Why should we bother striving to become adaptive leaders? This is a good question to ask because becoming an adaptive leader is not an easy path. Self-reflection, understanding and reassessing our role in the system is difficult and often requires the humility to accept a degree of incompetence which is tough for many who have got to the top of the food chain.

It is a seductive idea to equate the idea of the heroic leaders as being a panacea solution in times of change; we want saviours, people who make quick decisions. It is seductive for both parties; those who lead can feel they are making progress to solve problems quickly without the inconvenient need to involve the system in the analysis and action diagnosis; and seductive for those who consider themselves led in the system, because they can abdicate the tough task of responsibility. This model however does the system an injustice, by selling short the innate capacity within all people to be creative in their solutions and adapt when the environment compels them to do so.

Final Thoughts

You may already be an Adaptive Leader. You may already operate within an Adaptive Environment. Many of us can identify with some of the ideas in this paper but may not have yet named them in the same way. Once you start to think about your role as ‘mobilizing adaptation in the system’ rather than being the person with the answers you are on the path to creating an adaptive environment.

Adaptive Leadership is both simple and highly complex. Just as Darwin’s *Theory of Evolution* is incredibly straightforward, how it can be used to explain the world around us is the work of a life-time.
Do you have an Adaptive Culture?

Finally, we finish with a quiz, if you can answer yes to the following questions you are well on your way to towards an Adaptive Culture, if not we look forward to discussing how OnTrack can help:

The Five tests of an Adaptive Culture:
- Is it always OK in your organisation to ‘name the elephant in the room’?
- Does everyone share responsibility for the organisation’s future?
- Do people exercise independent judgement?
- Does the organisation develop leadership capacity in all?
- Is self-reflection and continuous learning institutionalised?

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Adaptive Leadership Glossary

act politically: Incorporate the loyalties and values of the other parties into your mobilisation strategy. Assume that no one operates solely as an individual but represents, formally or informally, a set of constituent loyalties, expectations, and pressures.

adaptation: A successful adaptation enables an organism to thrive in a new or challenging environment. The adaptive process is both conservative and progressive in that it enables the living system to take the best from its traditions, identity, and history into the future.

adaptive capacity: The resilience of people and the capacity of systems to engage in problem defining and problem-solving work in the midst of adaptive pressures and the resulting disequilibrium.

adaptive challenge: The gap between the values people stand for (that constitute thriving) and the reality that they face (their current lack of capacity to realise those values in their environment).

adaptive culture: Adaptive cultures engage in at least five practices. They (1) name the elephants in the room, (2) share responsibility for the organisation’s future, (3) exercise independent judgment, (4) develop leadership capacity, and (5) institutionalise reflection and continuous learning.

adaptive leadership: The activity of mobilising adaptive work.

adaptive work: Holding people through a sustained period of disequilibrium during which they identify what cultural DNA to conserve and discard, and invent or discover the new cultural DNA that will enable them to thrive anew; i.e. the learning process through which people in a system achieve a successful adaptation.

ally: A member of the community in alignment on a particular issue.

ancestor: A family or community member from an earlier generation who shapes a person’s identity.

assassination: The killing or neutralising (through character assassination) of someone who embodies a perspective that another faction in the social system desperately wants to silence.

attention: A critical resource for leadership. To make progress on adaptive challenges, those who lead must be able to hold people’s engagement with hard questions through a sustained period of disequilibrium.

authority: Formal or informal power within a system, entrusted by one party to another in exchange for a service. The basic services, or social functions, provided by authorities are: (1) direction; (2) protection; and (3) order.
**bandwidth**: The range of capacities within which an individual has gained comfort and skill.

**below the neck**: The non-intellectual human faculties: emotional, spiritual, instinctive, kinetic.

**carrying water**: Doing the work of others that they should be doing for themselves.

**casualty**: A person, competency, or role that is lost as a by-product of adaptive change.

**classic error**: Treating an adaptive challenge as a technical problem.

**confidant**: A person invested in the success and happiness of another person, rather than in the other person’s perspective or agenda.

**courageous conversation**: A dialogue designed to resolve competing priorities and beliefs while preserving relationships.

**dance floor**: Where the action is. Where the friction, noise, tension, and systemic activity are occurring. Ultimately, the place where the work gets done.

**dancing on the edge of your scope of authority**: Taking action near or beyond the formal or informal limits of what you are expected to do.

**default**: A routine and habitual response to recurring stimuli.

**deploying yourself**: Deliberately managing your roles, skills, and identity.

**disequilibrium**: The absence of a steady state, typically characterised in a social system by increasing levels of urgency, conflict, dissonance, and tension generated by adaptive challenges.

**elephant in the room**: A difficult issue that is commonly known to exist in an organisation or community but is not discussed openly.

**engaging above and below the neck**: Connecting with all the dimensions of the people you lead. Also, bringing all of yourself to the practice of leadership. Above the neck speaks to intellectual faculties, the home of logic and facts; below the neck speaks to emotional faculties, the home of values, beliefs, habits of behaviour, and patterns of reaction.

**experimental mind-set**: An attitude that treats any approach to an adaptive issue not as a solution, but as the beginning of an iterative process of testing a hypothesis, observing what happens, learning, making midcourse corrections, and then, if necessary, trying something else.
faction: A group with (1) a shared perspective that has been shaped by tradition, power relationships, loyalties, and interests and (2) its own grammar for analysing a situation and its own system of internal logic that defines the stakes, terms of problems, and solutions in ways that make sense to its own members.

faction map: A diagram that depicts the groups relevant to an adaptive challenge, and includes the loyalties, values, and losses at risk that keep each faction invested in its position.

finding your voice: The process of discovering how to best use yourself as an instrument to frame issues effectively, shape and tell stories purposefully, and inspire others.

formal authority: Explicit power granted to meet an explicit set of service expectations, such as those in job descriptions or legislative mandates.

getting on the balcony: Taking a distanced view. The mental act of disengaging from the dance floor, the current swirl of activity, in order to observe and gain perspective on yourself and on the larger system. Enables you to see patterns that are not visible from the ground.

giving the work back: The action of an authority figure in resisting the pressure to take the responsibility for solving problems off of other people’s shoulders, and instead mobilising the responsibility of the primary stakeholders in doing their share of the adaptive work.

holding environment: The cohesive properties of a relationship or social system that serve to keep people engaged with one another in spite of the divisive forces generated by adaptive work. May include, for example, bonds of affiliation and love; agreed-upon rules, procedures, and norms; shared purposes and common values; traditions, language, and rituals; familiarity with adaptive work; and trust in authority. Holding environments give a group identity and contain the conflict, chaos, and confusion often produced when struggling with complex problematic realities.

holding steady: Withholding your perspective, not primarily for self-protecting, but to wait for the right moment to act, or act again. Also, remaining steadfast, tolerating the heat and pushback of people who resist dealing with the issue.

hunger: A normal human need that each person seeks to fulfil, such as (1) power and control, (2) affirmation and importance, and (3) intimacy and delight.

illusion of the broken system: Every group of human beings is aligned to achieve the results it currently gets. The current reality is the product of the implicit and explicit decisions of people in the system, at least of the dominant stakeholders. In that sense, no system is broken, although change processes are often driven by the idea that an organisation is broken. That view discounts the accumulated functionality for many people of the system’s current way of operating.
informal authority: Power granted implicitly to meet a set of service expectations, such as representing cultural norms like civility or being given moral authority to champion the aspirations of a movement.

interpretation: Identifying patterns of behaviour that help make sense of a situation. Interpretation is the process of explaining raw data through digestible understandings and narratives. Most situations have multiple possible interpretations.

intervention: Any series of actions or a particular action, including intentional inaction, aimed at mobilising progress on adaptive challenges.

leadership with authority: Mobilising people to address an adaptive challenge from a position of authority. The authority role brings with it resources and constraints for exercising leadership.

leadership without authority: Mobilising people to address an adaptive challenge by taking action beyond the formal and informal expectations that define your scope of power, such as raising unexpected questions upwards from the middle of the organisation, challenging the expectations of your constituents, or engaging people across boundaries from outside the organisation. Lacking authority also brings with it resources and constraints.

leap to action: The default behaviour of reacting prematurely to disequilibrium with a habituated set of responses.

lightning rod: A person who is the recipient of a group’s anger or frustration, often expressed as a personal attack and typically intended to deflect attention from a disturbing issue and displace responsibility for it to someone else.

living into the disequilibrium: The gradual process of easing people into an uncomfortable state of uncertainty, disorder, conflict, or chaos at a pace and level that does not overwhelm them yet takes them out of their comfort zones and mobilises them to engage in addressing an adaptive challenge.

naming the elephant in the room: The act of addressing an issue that may be central to making progress on an adaptive challenge but that has been ignored in the interest of maintaining equilibrium. Discussing the undiscussable.

observation: Collection of relevant data from a detached perspective and from as many sources as possible.

opposition: Those parties or factions that feel threatened or at risk of loss if your perspective is accepted.

orchestrating the conflict: Designing and leading the process of getting parties with differences to work them through productively, as distinguished from resolving the differences for them.
pac ing the w ork: Gauging how much disturbance the social system can withstand and then breaking down a complex challenge into small elements, sequencing them at a rate that people can absorb.

partners: Individuals or factions that are collaborators, including allies and confidants.

personal leadership work: Learning about and managing yourself to be more effective in mobilising adaptive work.

pressure cooker: A holding environment strong enough to contain the disequilibrium of adaptive processes.

productive zone of disequilibrium: The optimal range of distress within which the urgency in the system motivates people to engage in adaptive work. If the level is too low, people will be inclined to complacently maintain their current way of working, but if it is too high, people are likely to be overwhelmed and may start to panic or engage in severe forms of work avoidance, like scapegoating or assassination.

progress: The development of new capacity that enables the social system to thrive in new and challenging environments. The process of social and political learning that leads to improvement in the condition of the group, community, organisation, nation, or world.

purpose: The overarching sense of direction and contribution that provides meaningful orientation to a set of activities in organisational and political life.

reality testing: The process of comparing data and interpretations of a situation to discern which one, or which new synthesis of competing interpretations, captures the most information and best explains the situation.

regulating the heat: Raising or lowering the distress in the system to stay within the productive zone of disequilibrium.

repertoire: The range of capacities within which an individual has gained comfort and skill.

resilience: The capacity of individuals and the holding environment to contain disequilibrium over time.

ripeness of an issue: The readiness of a dominant coalition of stakeholders to tackle an issue because of a generalised sense of urgency across stakeholding groups.

ritual: A practice with symbolic import that helps to create a shared sense of community.

role: The set of expectations in a social system that define the services individuals or groups are supposed to provide.

sanctuary: A place or set of practices for personal renewal.
**scope of authority**: The set of services for which a person is entrusted by others with circumscribed power.

**social system**: Any collective enterprise (small group, organisation, network of organisations, nation, or the world) with shared challenges that has interdependent and therefore interactive dynamics and features.

**song beneath the words**: The underlying meaning or unspoken subtext in someone’s comment, often identified by body language, tone, intensity of voice, and the choice of language.

**taking the temperature**: Assessing the level of disequilibrium currently in the system.

**technical problem**: Problems that can be diagnosed and solved, generally within a short time frame, by applying established know-how and procedures. Technical problems are amenable to authoritative expertise and management of routine process.

**technical work**: Problem defining and problem solving that effectively mobilises, coordinates, and applies currently sufficient expertise, processes, and cultural norms.

**thrive**: To live up to people’s highest values. Requires adaptive responses that distinguish what’s essential from what’s expendable, and innovates so that the social system can bring the best of its past into the future.

**tuning**: An individual’s personal psychology, including the set of loyalties, values, and perspectives that have shaped his/her worldview and identity, and cause the individual to resonate consciously and unconsciously, productively and unproductively, to external stimuli.

**work avoidance**: The conscious or unconscious patterns in a social system that distract people’s attention or displace responsibility in order to restore social equilibrium at the cost of progress in meeting an adaptive challenge.

**Reference**:

Heifetz, R., Grashow, A. & Linsky, M., The Practice of Adaptive Leadership
