

Adaptive leadership: principles and a framework for the future

Leading well may be harder than it's ever been. Here's how Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky in their seminal book, [Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading](#) (Harvard Business School Press), suggest leaders can overcome the conflict, challenges, long-held beliefs and demands inherent in new ways of doing things. It is no secret that in promoting organizational change, oftentimes people feel threatened and take aim at the person (leader) pushing for change. The authors offer ways leaders can work through the dangers of leading and anchor changes in their organization's culture ("the way we do things around here").

Imagine strolling into the office a hundred years ago. We were doing business on typewriters, storing data in filing cabinets, and driving around in Ford Model Ts.

Fifty years later, and things basically looked the same, just with groovier hairdos and cars.

But now, fifty years after *that*, we're typing on tiny glass pocket screens, talking to colleagues we'll never meet face-to-face, and retrieving data from something called The Cloud.

What gives? Exponential growth, that's what. On a near-daily basis, we're faced with new changes and challenges, from COVID-19 to ChatGPT to geopolitical instability. How we work has changed forever, and traditional top-down leadership isn't [fast](#) or [flexible](#) enough to keep up.

Enter adaptive leadership – a collaborative, responsive way to lead that feels right for our modern age. It can help you adapt to change, bring out the best in people, and tackle complex, multifaceted problems.

What is adaptive leadership?

In conventional leadership models, one or a few people are in charge. They might consult with others to make decisions, but ultimately the approach is built on authority and hierarchy.

Adaptive leaders, though, tap into everyone's beliefs and ideas – not just the leaders at an organization. The approach also helps people evolve those beliefs in the face of each new challenge and opportunity.

Adaptive leadership was pioneered in the 1990s and early 2000s. Authors Ronald Heifetz, and Marty Linsky established its core principles in books like [Leadership Without Easy Answers](#) and [Leadership on the Line](#). But because our working lives are getting more complex, adaptive leadership feels more relevant than ever. In fact, scholars like [Nick Obolensky have argued](#) that it's the *only* way to keep up in today's rapidly changing and often-chaotic business world.

4 principles of adaptive leadership

The adaptive leadership framework dictates that we need to adapt to grow, both as individuals and as organizations; the adaptive leader's role is to facilitate that collective process, not make authoritative decisions on how it should play out.

By definition, adaptive leadership is cooperative – it’s not something a leader can impose on their organization. To make it work, you’ll need a strong foundation of trust, communication, and workplace relationships, stemming from the following principles:

- **Emotional intelligence:** Adaptive leaders deal in individuals’ beliefs, values, talents, hopes and dreams. These are human, amorphous things that can’t be understood with logic alone, so adaptive leaders need a keen sense of emotional intelligence to succeed.
- **Organizational justice:** When organizations face unfamiliar challenges, everyone’s voice has a place in the conversation. Thus, an adaptive leader must make sure everyone feels heard and take responsibility for both the positive and negative impacts of the changes they lead.
- **Development:** Adaptive leadership involves experimenting, trying new things, and venturing outside your expertise. Adaptive leaders must be committed to growing and developing their own leadership skills and admit when they’re wrong and what they don’t know. And those values extend to the entire organization – fostering an adaptive culture means embracing learning and development in every department and at every level of seniority.
- **Character:** To make it through challenging times, people must have complete trust in their leader’s intentions. Through their choices and behavior, adaptive leaders need to show integrity, live by their values, and act on the best interests of their colleagues, before and after they’re entrusted with a leadership role.

Adaptive leaders shine in the face of complex challenges

Tapping into a diversity of ideas allows adaptive organizations to tackle complex problems.

Of course, challenges at work are nothing new – most of us solve tricky problems every day! But typically, we know what kind of challenges to expect, and our professional experience has prepared us to deal with them.

Technical challenges

Technical challenges aren’t always a walk in the park, but they’re within the range of what you might expect when you walk into work each morning.

- Can be solved by one person or team
- Are usually an expected part of operations
- Are clear and understandable, even if they aren’t easy to solve
- Are fixable with the resources you already have

Examples: *In a hospital setting, a patient requires multiple high-risk surgeries. In a trial court, a new case processing approach needs buy-in from a number of justice system stakeholders outside the control of the court.*

Adaptive challenges

Adaptive challenges are unexpected, more complex and multifaceted, with impacts reaching across an organization. They don't have an obvious solution, and they often live outside the scope of what a single leader could realistically solve.

- Can be difficult to identify and understand
- Aren't solvable with existing knowledge and resources
- Require collaboration from everyone facing the challenge
- Indicate solutions involving changing beliefs, values, and approaches
- Might require radical change within the organization

***Examples:** After a legislative change, a new criminal case type appears. In a budget crisis, your court is required to cut a significant number of staff and you, as a court leader, must salvage culture and morale.*

In a world that's more complex than ever, adaptive challenges aren't going away. The more interconnected and technologically advanced the world grows, the more adaptive challenges we'll have to deal with.

The inherent “dangers” of adaptive leadership

As leaders approach adaptive challenges their leadership teams need to be ready to experiment often, fail and recover fast, and deal with constant change. That kind of process is never comfortable, and that's why adaptive leadership can be quite risky, in a sense. Unless you're Marie Antoinette, your [leadership style](#) won't put you in *physical* danger – but it can be an emotionally fraught, highly sensitive process.

Confronting adaptive challenges sometimes means changing deeply held beliefs, habits, and behaviors – and leaders are inevitably the face of the resulting discomfort. Falling back on those adaptive leadership principles – emotional intelligence, organizational justice, development, and character – will help you navigate those treacherous waters.

Leading without authority

Adaptive leadership represents a fundamental paradigm shift from leadership as an individual responsibility to a social, collective process. It's an ethos that Heifetz, Linsky, and others have described as “[leading without authority](#).”

It might sound counterintuitive, but in this model, leadership isn't about exercising power over others. Rather, it's a responsibility bestowed upon a leader, so they can help the organization overcome nuanced challenges while keeping everyone's best interests at heart.

Trial courts have often be described as “loosely coupled organizations” where individual elements display a relatively high level of autonomy vis-à-vis the larger system within which they exist. Not only do the professionals within them operate independently, but the work units frequently do as well. Actions in one part of the system can have little or no effect in another or may unpredictably trigger responses out of proportion to the initial issues raised. Presiding judges, as leaders, are often described as “first among equals,” their roles revolve around leadership not management; the goal inherent in leading is to set the right purpose, example and direction for other professionals to follow.

Adaptive leadership traits

Adaptive leaders exhibit some specific traits that uphold stringent ethical standards and operate in a just capacity. Some of the key traits of such leaders include:

- **A Focus on Goals:** Adaptive leaders use the organization's short and long term goals to structure their problem-solving processes. This means they strive towards these goals and operate with the intention of developing strategies to meet them.
- **Receptivity to New Ideas:** Adaptive leaders typically maintain an open mind as they strive toward building a progressive and welcoming working environment. This means that they're receptive to new ideas from all employees, not just senior figures.
- **Strong Commit to the Organization (Courage):** This type of leader recognizes that adaptive challenges take time and patience to understand and overcome. Adaptive leaders require commitment to remain focused on the organization's development and overcome these challenges.
- **Active Involvement:** Adaptive leaders are proactive rather than reactive. They act in advance to deal with expected changes or difficulties. In doing so, they focus on mitigation and preventative measures to ensure problems don't pose wider challenges to the organization.
- **Support for their Leadership Team:** Adaptive leaders always support their leadership team, advocating for them. Advocating for a team means that leaders celebrate successes and give credit where it's due, support their team through challenging changes and voice the thoughts and opinions of their team members to others.