

LEADING THROUGH CHANGE

Quotations from *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world*, by Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, 2009

For reflection: How does your experience of ministry during a pandemic affect your reading of these texts?

“What is needed from a leadership perspective are new forms of improvisational expertise, a kind of process expertise that knows prudently how to experiment with never-been-tried-before relationships, means of communication, and ways of interacting that will help people develop solutions that build upon and surpass the wisdom of today’s experts” (2-3).

“*Adaptive leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive.* The concept of thriving is drawn from evolutionary biology, in which a successful adaptation has three characteristics: “1) preserves the DNA essential for the species’ continued survival, 2) it discards (reregulates or rearranges) the DNA that no longer serves the species’ current needs, 3) it creates DNA arrangements that give the species’ the ability to flourish in new ways and in more challenging environments. Successful adaptations enable a living system to take the best from its history into the future” (14).

“*Successful adaptive changes build on the past, rather than jettison it...successful adaptations are thus both conservative and progressive.* They make the best possible use of previous wisdom and know-how. The most effective leadership anchors change in the values, competencies, and strategic orientations that should endure in the organization” (15).

“*Organizational adaptation occurs through experimentation...those seeking to lead adaptive change need an experimental mind-set.* They must learn to improvise as they go, buying time and resources along the way for the next set of experiments” (15).

“*New adaptations significantly displace, reregulate, and rearrange old DNA.* By analogy, leadership on adaptive challenges generates loss. Learning is often painful. One person’s innovation can cause another person to feel incompetent, betrayed, or irrelevant. Not many people like to be “rearranged.” Leadership therefore requires the diagnostic ability to recognize those losses and the predictable defensive patterns of response that operate at the individual and systemic level. It also requires knowing how to counteract these patterns” (15).

“*Adaptation takes time.* Most biological adaptations that greatly enhance a species’ capacity to thrive unfold over thousands, even millions, of years. Progress is radical over time yet incremental in time...Although organizational and political adaptations seem lightning fast by comparison, they also take time to consolidate into new sets of norms and processes. Adaptive leadership thus requires persistence. Significant change is the product of incremental experimentations that build up over time. And cultures change

slowly. Those who practice this form of adaptive leadership need to stay in the game, even while taking the heat along the way” (16-17)

TECHNICAL *and* ADAPTIVE CHANGE

“The most common cause of failure in leadership is produced by treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems. What’s the difference? While technical problems may be very complex and critically important (like replacing a faulty heart valve during cardiac surgery), they have known solutions that can be implemented by current know-how. They can be resolved through the application of authoritative expertise and through the organization’s current structures, procedures, and ways of doing things. Adaptive challenges can only be addressed through changes in people’s priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties. Making progress requires going beyond any authoritative expertise to mobilize discovery, shedding certain entrenched ways, tolerating losses, and generating a new capacity to thrive anew.” (19).

FIGURE 2-1
Distinguishing technical problems and adaptive challenges

Kind of challenge	Problem definition	Solution	Locus of work
Technical	Clear	Clear	Authority
Technical and adaptive	Clear	Requires learning	Authority and stakeholders
Adaptive	Requires learning	Requires learning	Stakeholders