

1. Adaptive Leadership-Research Summary

Ambiguity, Uncertainty and Transition

The present, and certainly the future require us to manage ambiguity, uncertainty and transition. This requires, as Bruce Wellman suggests in his article, "Living with an Adaptive Stance", that we navigate the "liminal space". This represents the threshold between what was and what comes next.

Given that one of the few constants we have moving forward is change, we are advised to maintain that adaptive stance which allows us to be pro-active, make adaptive changes and adjustments that help us stay true to our intentions while and because we are harnessing and being responsive to a variable landscape.

In fact, as Heifitz and Linsky note, "Adaptive Leaders create conditions that enable dynamic networks and environments to achieve common goals in an environment of uncertainty". Managing adaptive versus technical challenges means that solutions are often unclear, not evident and require learning. Problems are usually systemic with no ready answers! This requires a "stance" of flexibility, resourcefulness and collaboration.

We can, and must, have processes and ways of working together that can be constants as well. The gift therein is their intrinsic ability to expect and manage the "new" in every situation.

2. Learning

An individual or organization's ability to become adaptive is directly related to their commitment to learning. Growth mindsets are driven by continual change and learning in ways that align with intentions and goals. In fact, "companies fail... because they have created cultures that inhibit their ability to learn (Argyris).

The dynamics of adaptive learning include "broadening our view", interrogating beliefs and assumptions, becoming "omnivores of new ideas" (Bruce Wellman), making mistakes (HGL) and giving voice to all people (Heifitz and Linsky). It also requires that we encourage illustration, encourage inquiry, encourage testing (Chris Argyris).

There is a need to assume that our present knowledge base is, at best, tentative. This does not mean that it is irrelevant or unreliable. It means that it is modifiable, fluid and correctly intended. Adding to and modifying our knowledge base are adaptive skills. By definition, if we don't add to or adjust what we know, we cannot be adaptive. Knowledge is cumulative and dynamic. Once we see that "learning" is a healthy and productive mode of travel, we will go far. It fuels adaptivity!

3. Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive Leadership facilitates change, growth and survival. Leaders, by necessity, must consider new information, new parameters and a changing professional landscape. This requires an examination of where you are, what you should keep and what you should change or replace. Heifitz, Grashow and Linsky (2009) advise adaptive leaders to acknowledge "the adaptive phase when you tackle the underlying cause of a crisis and build the capacity to thrive in a new reality".

It is possible to continue to align practices with core values and operate with more efficient and responsive practices. Heifitz, Grashow and Linsky suggest "hitting the organizational reset button... to build on and bring closure to the past". Keep what's working and replace or change what is not. The vehicle for doing this most successfully is the harnessing the skills, experience and commitment of everyone in the organization. This is what Costa, Garmston and Zimmerman (2014) refer to as Cognitive Capital. This may require significant changes in organizational structures, decision-making and problem solving.

"Solutions to adaptive challenges reside not in the executive suite but in the collective intelligence of employees at all levels"(Heifitz and Laurie (1997). The adaptive leader is tasked with shepherding this organizational evolution.

4. The Skill Set

The Adaptive Leader's toolbox is not a dense container in terms of the list of contents. It is, however, dependent upon commitment, consistency and modelling. The skills are values based. The leaders align their behaviour with the belief that these are the skills needed to foster organizational evolution.

Specifically, demonstrating empathy and appreciation for the perspectives of others is essential. In addition, "listening, paraphrasing for understanding and not alignment, and asking questions that surface perspectives and increase collective understanding" (Garmston & Wellman, 2009) are the interpersonal skills that an adaptive leader employs in professional conversations. Heifitz and Laurie (1997) even suggest that "one can lead with only a question."

The leader creates a professional culture that listens to itself and constantly learns and grows. Leadership is a series of actions. These behaviours are founded in beliefs and values and become central to the leader's professional and personal reflexes. When authentic adaptive communication skills are modelled for the organization they become infectious and embedded and the nature and quality of interactions improve exponentially.

5. Empowering others

"Human Resources" is not an office! They are the experiences, talents and commitments of everyone in the organization. (Costa, Garmston and Zimmerman, 2014) Adaptive leaders must make that acknowledgement and act in ways consistent with accessing and surfacing the contributions of everyone in the organization. Chris Argyris observed, "we are seeing more and more CEO's who are interested in the management of knowledge" and they know that they can't get flexible organizations that really correct themselves without human beings doing it in dialogue.

Research consistently recommends that flattening decision-making strategies and embedding shared leadership are just some of the structural elements of adaptive organizations. Solutions are not the sole responsibility of the formal leader. In fact, that belief is a limitation of the ability of an organization to be adaptive.

A professional culture that values synergy, collaboration and shared leadership must embrace norms of behaviour and working agreements that create safety, shared accountability, ownership and engagement. Adaptive challenges must be met by all stakeholders (Heifitz and Linsky (2009); Marzano). However they will do so only in an environment that is safe and inclusive. Day to day interactions are constant validations that that environment exists.

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