

Adaptive Leadership

Lesson 8-1: Introduction

Discussion Guide – Confidentiality Reminder

One Word Check-in

Update – Personal, Business, Leadership

“If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking.” James 1:5 (NLT)

Adaptive leadership is a practical leadership framework that helps individuals and organizations adapt and thrive in challenging environments. It encourages leaders to recognize the need for change, to challenge the status quo, and to empower others to step up and make those changes. According to Ronald Heifetz,⁽¹⁾ one of the originators of the concept, adaptive leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive. It requires a leader, including the CEO, to address organizational and people problems and then adapt.

Adaptive leadership begins by seeing the adaptive challenge. Adaptive challenges are often ignored because the issues are unprecedented or, at a minimum, difficult to confront. Since there is no precedent in tackling these challenges, leaders and managers continue to do what they have always done; they bury their heads in the sand and hope the problem disappears. The problem becomes the “elephant-in-the-room” that everyone tiptoes around, pretending it does not exist. Confronting adaptive challenges like this requires courageous leadership.

Adaptive challenges can be categorized in multiple ways. For this series we are going to focus on two types of adaptive challenges:

- 1) Current challenges that have been ignored over time
- 2) Future challenges to an organization that leaders are ignoring or are just unaware of

Leaders must adapt whether they are in a business or a non-profit. To help us understand these challenges, we interviewed approximately 20 local business leaders across all industries. Some were small business leaders while others ran billion-dollar companies. The following are a summary of the most consistent answers to two important questions:

What do you see as the most significant issues that business leaders are ignoring today?

- *People issues:* dealing with difficult people, shrinking workforce, staff engagement, generational issues, remote work, inability to communicate, immaturity, family dynamics, difficulty in hiring good people, productivity
- *Leadership issues:* lack of delegation, words inconsistent with actions, managing different personalities, inability to change, poor communication, leadership development
- *Business issues:* businesses feel they are irreplaceable, ownership transition, leadership transition, financial performance, political pressure, creating value

What are the most significant business issues coming in the next five years that business leaders are ignoring?

- *Artificial intelligence (AI):* will change every business, organization, and educational institution
- *People issues:* all of the above plus developing leaders, inability to communicate effectively
- *Business issues:* geopolitical issues, potential financial catastrophe, high level of debt (global, U.S., and personal), inflation, potential housing market decline

Shared Experiences:

- Can someone share how well their organization identifies and tackles issues in a meaningful manner?
- What is a current issue your company should address?
- What is a future issue your company should address?

Bottom line: Adaptive leaders have the courage and the wisdom to tackle difficult issues for the betterment of the company and its staff. If not addressed properly, there is a reasonable chance your organization will falter.

Dig Deeper

Want to learn more?

- ⁽¹⁾*Book:* [The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World](#) by Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky, published by Harvard Business Press. This is an excellent book.
- *Video:* [Ronald Heifetz - On Leadership](#) speaking at The Brainwaves Video Anthology. Mr. Heifetz founded the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard Kennedy School.
- *Article:* [What It Takes to Lead Through an Era of Exponential Change](#) by Aneel Chima and Ron Gutman, published by Harvard Business Review
- *Article:* [Success Through Adaptive Leadership: Principles To Cultivate](#) by Michael Shribman published in Forbes.com
- *Book:* [Transforming Church: Bringing Out the Good to Get to Great](#) by Kevin Ford. This book is cited by Heifetz in reference 1.
- *Video:* [Is Change Hard?](#) Nick Tasler, Keynote Speaker at SpeakInc

This series is a brief introduction to adaptive leadership. If your organization desires to identify and tackle adaptive challenges, we highly recommend you read the reference above, "The Practice of Adaptive Leadership."

Assumption-the foundation of adaptive leadership

This series assumes that the leaders within the organization seek input from others in the organization before making decisions. Typically, leaders make decisions in one of three ways: 1) decide on their own without seeking input, 2) seek input but ignore the information, or 3) seek input and recommendations from talented people. The first two types of leaders likely make poor to marginal decisions. The third type of leader achieves the best decision possible because of good communication. This is the foundation of adaptive leadership.

A historic and current adaptive challenge

A simple example of an adaptive challenge is how many churches have closed their doors in the last 20 years. The number is huge and appears to be accelerating because these organizations are not able to adapt to the challenges of today. According to Lifeway Research, 4,500 churches closed in 2019 (the last year data is available).

The world is changing at an unprecedented rate.

This affects all aspects of society globally. Typically, we do not appreciate a change ahead of time, but as time progresses, we begin to see its benefits. A significant number of businesses are not willing to adapt or change; eventually, they just go out of business. [An Accelerating Pace of Change... and an exponential growth in computing power...](#) is a graphic prediction from 2011 about the pace of change (note that this is on a logarithmic scale instead of an arithmetic scale). One of the predications shown is that artificial intelligence (AI) will surpass human intelligence in 2023. Recently, an article was published saying AI will surpass human knowledge in 2024. What is interesting to read is the comments in 2011 basically dismissing this idea and its implications.

Max Deprea coined the phrase "leadership is an art," which also became the title of his first book in 1989.

Being a great leader isn't about following a simple three-step or 21-step process; it's an art form. You can recognize a great leader when you see him or her in action, much like an artist who envisions a masterpiece and brings it to life on canvas or from a block of stone. One often overlooked aspect of leadership is the ability to adapt and change as business conditions or organizational circumstances evolve. This series on adaptive leadership aims to guide you through this crucial aspect of effective leadership.

We recommend that you create a list of issues your company, organization, or even family need to address.

As the next lessons unfold, you will be able to seek the input from your group on how you might move forward.