

Adaptive Leadership

Lesson 8-2: Technical Problems vs Adaptive Challenges

Discussion Guide – Confidentiality Reminder

One Word Check-in

Update – Personal, Business, Leadership

“Leave your simple ways behind ... learn to use good judgement. ... Instruct the wise, and they will be even wiser.”

Proverbs 9:6, 9a (NLT)

Leaders should be the primary change agents in an organization. If leaders are unwilling to adapt, the organization will eventually go out of business – whether it happens overnight or in ten years, it is inevitable. Potential challenges leaders may face include changes in the market, regulatory requirements, environmental issues, and demands from staff and customers. Most of these challenges fall into one of two categories:

Technical problem: A technical problem refers to a clearly defined issue that can be solved by implementing existing knowledge and procedures. These challenges typically involve straightforward, routine tasks that can be solved by experts through known solutions.

Adaptive challenge: An adaptive challenge involves problems that are complex and do not have straightforward solutions. These challenges require people to learn new ways of doing things, change their attitudes and behaviors, and often address deeply rooted issues. Solving adaptive challenges usually requires collaboration, innovation, and a willingness to experiment and take risks.

Correctly identifying the type of problem is necessary to solve it. Successful leaders can identify technical problems, implement the best solutions to those challenges, and establish systems to offer those solutions to clients. But even great leaders and organizations will struggle if they constantly look at their business through the lens of technical problems. That lens will prevent them from seeing that they may be facing an adaptive challenge, which is very different than a technical problem. Adaptive challenges require a change in thinking to develop and implement solutions to those they serve.

Proven technical skills can be an impediment to solving an adaptive challenge. Individuals and organizations often fall back on what has served them well in the past. When you have a great hammer, every problem begins to look like a nail. But erroneously applying that technical expertise to an adaptive challenge will be frustratingly ineffective. For example, organizations often promote high-performing individuals into higher levels of responsibility in which they must manage a team. But the skills honed by a high-performing engineer, accountant, or salesperson often don't translate well into the skills needed to cast vision and lead a group of others. They will succeed only if they adapt and learn new skills and perspectives that weren't required of them in previous roles.

Shared Experiences:

- Describe a situation in your personal or family life in which you needed to adapt and learn new behavior to solve the problem.
- Share a time in your professional life in which you had to solve a problem by going beyond your technical skills.
- Describe a time your organization attempted to use known technical skills and processes to solve an adaptive challenge.
- Share a situation in which your organization successfully solved an adaptive problem. What were the costs and benefits to the organization?

Bottom line: Tackling technical problems may be straightforward, but adaptive challenges are difficult. It takes wisdom and good judgement to do it successfully. Both technical and adaptive problems will take courage and determination to tackle and solve.

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Dig Deeper

Want to learn more?

- *Article:* [A Survival Guide for Leaders](#) by Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky
- *Article:* [Checkers or Chess: Technical vs Adaptive Leadership Challenges](#) by Jayne Jenkins
- *Book:* [Leadership Without Easy Answers](#) by Ronald Heifetz
- *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?](#) by Nick Tasler, Keynote Speaker at SpeakInc

Adaptive challenges are not unique to just one industry or sector of the economy. They are faced by both for-profit and non-profit organizations.

For-profit example of office printers: For years, the market leaders in office printing were those most successful at solving technical problems for their customers. Their solutions were often touted on the basis of their products' "speeds and feeds." Competitors worked to constantly increase the technical specs of how many pages could be printed per minute, and how many dots per inch could be placed on a page. New printer models boasted higher print speeds with a higher print quality, but eventually most competitors boasted similar technical capabilities. The entire industry faced a huge adaptive challenge. Customers were no longer interested in printing faster and better to capture information. They sought solutions involving data imaging and data storage to replace paper. The market leaders had to identify solutions that no longer resembled what they had spent decades trying to perfect.

Non-profit example of churches: For decades, evangelism assumed that most people had some belief in God and were therefore considered "seekers," looking for spiritual answers when faced with life's challenges. But in the 2000s, the U.S. experienced significant changes in the secular world, technology, family dynamics, and social structures. These changes chipped away at this foundational assumption of faith. Churches now face the challenge of reaching the "nones," individuals without church affiliation who don't see the need for spiritual answers to life's challenges. Churches have had to change their programming aimed at "seekers" and attempt to reach the "nones," who have little interest in a personal relationship with Jesus.