Adaptive Leadership
Lesson 8-4: Tackling an Adaptive Challenge

Discussion Guide – Confidentiality Reminder
One Word Check-in
Update – Personal, Business, Leadership

"These are the proverbs of Solomon, David's son, king of Israel. Their purpose is to teach people wisdom and discipline, to help them understand the insights of the wise. Their purpose is to teach people to live disciplined and successful lives, to help them do what is right, just, and fair. These proverbs will give insight to the simple, knowledge and discernment to the young."
Proverbs 1:1-4

When implementing adaptive solutions to adaptive challenges, it is necessary for staff to take ownership in the challenge, define the current reality, and then move forward exploring solutions. This can be a messy process because it involves people who have a stake in the proposed changes. There is not one perfect solution, but a menu of possibilities. Here are the key steps to solve an adaptive challenge: [1]

1. **Identify the adaptive challenge:** Once a problem has been recognized as an adaptive challenge and not a technical problem, the nature and scope of the challenge should be determined. It must be acknowledged that solving the problem will involve changes in behavior and attitudes.

2. **Diagnose the system:** The underlying causes of the adaptive challenge may be a system problem. This involves understanding the underlying dynamics, the stakeholders impacted, and the current power structures and cultural aspects involved. To get a complete view of the issue, data and insights must be gathered from various stakeholders and various perspectives.

3. **Distinguish between technical and adaptive work:** Even an adaptive challenge will contain aspects that are technical, and therefore can be solved with existing expertise. In contrast, adaptive aspects will require new learning and approaches. Clear communication to stakeholders needs to make this distinction and set realistic expectations.

4. **Engage stakeholders:** Those who are impacted by the problem should be involved in the problem-solving process. Leadership should facilitate open dialogue to mine differing viewpoints and create a shared understanding. Done effectively, this will build coalitions and foster collaboration among diverse groups. Establishing a climate of trust and safety will allow people to feel comfortable sharing their perspective, experimenting with new approaches, and learning from failures.

5. **Generate and test new ideas:** Encouraging creative and innovative thinking can lead to small-scale experiments to test new approaches. Gather feedback from those experiments and use that feedback to refine new adaptive strategies.

6. **Mobilize people to implement the change:** Once a path forward is selected, appropriate individuals and teams take ownership of the problem. Provide the resources and authority needed to take effective action. Involve leadership at all levels of the organization to bring about the needed change and develop clear plans to implement the successful small-scale approaches on a larger scale. Progress needs to be monitored, outcomes should be measured, and adjustments should be made as needed. Changes made need to be reinforced through continuous learning and adaptation.

7. **Institutionalize the change:** The new behaviors, values and practices must be embedded into the organization's culture and systems. This can be accomplished by ensuring that changes made are sustainable. The adaptive changes are reinforced in the culture by celebrating successes and acknowledging the efforts of those involved.

Shared Experiences:
- Can someone share a process that they or their organization have followed to solve a difficult problem?
- What has been your biggest issue when working through a difficult problem?
- What type of conflicts have you experienced when trying to implement change? How did you resolve the conflict?

Bottom line: It takes wisdom, discipline, and insight to achieve a good outcome to an adaptive challenge. Wisdom is learned from others and takes time to grow. Change is difficult because it always involves people.

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.
- *Article:* [A Survival Guide for Leaders](#) by Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky published by Harvard Business Review
- *Book*: [Domino: The Simplest Way to Inspire Change](#) by Nick Tasler

Framing the discussion to find adaptive solutions involves asking questions that encourage critical thinking, inclusivity, and deep understanding of the underlying issues. Here are some good questions to ask:

1. **Understanding the challenge:**
   - What are the key symptoms indicating that we have an adaptive challenge rather than a technical problem?
   - What are the underlying issues and root causes contributing to this challenge?
   - Who are the stakeholders affected by this challenge, and what are their perspectives?
2. **Exploring perspectives:**
   - How do different stakeholders view this challenge, and what are their main concerns?
   - What values, beliefs, or assumptions might be influencing our current approach to this challenge?
   - What historical, cultural, or social factors are at play here?
3. **Identifying the gap:**
   - What is the gap between our current situation and our desired outcome?
   - What are the specific behaviors, attitudes, or processes that need to change to bridge this gap?
   - What resistance might we face in making these changes, and why?
4. **Engaging stakeholders:**
   - Who needs to be involved in the conversation to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the challenge?
   - How can we create a safe space for open dialogue and diverse viewpoints?
   - What mechanisms can we put in place to ensure ongoing stakeholder engagement and feedback?
5. **Generating solutions:**
   - What small-scale experiments or pilot projects can we implement to test new approaches?
   - How can we encourage creativity and innovation in finding potential solutions?
   - What criteria will we use to evaluate the success of these experiments?
6. **Implementing change:**
   - What resources, support, and authority do we need to implement the changes?
   - How will we monitor progress and measure the impact of our interventions?
   - What processes will we put in place to learn from failures and adjust our strategies accordingly?
7. **Sustaining change:**
   - How can we embed the new behaviors, values, and practices into our organizational culture?
   - What mechanisms can we use to ensure that the changes are resilient and sustainable?
   - How will we celebrate successes and acknowledge the contributions of those involved?

By asking these questions, you can guide the discussion towards a deeper understanding of the adaptive challenge and foster a collaborative, inclusive approach to developing effective solutions.