



# Becoming an Adaptive Leader

Based on the work of Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky

**A** *adaptive leadership is the activity 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) it 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; and (3) it creates DNA arrangements that give the species' the ability to flourish in new ways and in more challenge environments. Successful adaptations enable a living system to take the best from its history into the future.*

What does this suggest as an analogy for adaptive leadership?

1. *Adaptive leadership is specifically about change than enables the capacity to thrive. New environments and new dreams demand new strategies and abilities, as well as the leadership to mobilize them. As in evolution, these new combinations and variations help organizations thrive under challenging circumstances rather than perish, regress, or contract. Leadership, then, must wrestle with normative questions of value, purpose, and process. What does thriving mean for organizations operating in any particular context?*
2. *Successful adaptive changes build on the past rather than jettison it. In biological adaptations, though DNA changes may radically expand the species' capacity to thrive, the actual amount of DNA that changes is miniscule. A challenge for adaptive leadership, then, is to engage people in distinguishing what is essential to preserve in their organization's heritage from what is expendable. 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.*
3. *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*

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along the way for the next set of experiments. For example, companies must often be willing to lose money in failures until they bring a successful product to market.

4. *Adaptation relies on diversity.* By diversifying the gene pool, nature markedly increases the odds that *some* members of the species will have the ability to survive in a changing ecosystem. The secret of evolution is variation, which in organizational terms could be called distributed or collective intelligence. For an organization, adaptive leadership would build a culture that values diverse views and relies less on central planning and the genius of the few at the top, where the odds of adaptive success go down.
5. *New adaptations significantly displace, reregulate, and rearrange some 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 levels. It also requires know-how to counteract these patterns.
6. *Adaptation takes time.* Most biological adaptations that greatly enhance a species' capacity to thrive unfold over thousands, even millions of years. In organizations, it takes time to consolidate adaptations into new sets of norms and processes. Adaptive leadership thus requires persistence. Significant change is the product of incremental experiments that build up over time. And cultures change slowly. Those who practice this form of leadership need to stay in the game, even while taking the heat along the way.

Mobilizing people to meet their immediate adaptive challenges lies at the heart of leadership in the short term. Over time, these and other culture-shaping efforts build an organization's adaptive capacity,

fostering processes that will generate new norms that enable the organization to meet the ongoing stream of adaptive challenges posed by a world every ready to offer new realities, opportunities, and pressures.

(Source: *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, pages 14-17)

## Distinguishing Technical Problems from Adaptive Challenges

*Adaptive leadership is the activity of mobilizing people to tackle the toughest problems and do the adaptive work necessary to achieve progress.*

Leadership would be an easy and safe undertaking if organizations and communities only faced problems for which they already knew the solutions. Everyday, people have problems for which they do, in fact, have the necessary know-how and procedures—what leadership experts Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky call *technical problems*. But there are also a whole host of problems that are not amenable to authoritative expertise or standard operating procedures. They cannot be solved by someone who provides answers from on high. Heifetz and Linsky refer to these problems as *adaptive challenges* because they require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community. Without learning new ways—changing attitudes, values, and deep-seated behaviors—people cannot make the adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the new environment. The sustainability of real change depends on having the people with the problem internalize the change itself.

Sharon Daloz Parks, in *Leadership Can Be Taught*, describes the distinction between technical and adaptive issues in this way:

*Technical problems* (even though they may be complex) can be solved with knowledge and procedures already in hand. In contrast, *adaptive challenges* require new learning, innovation, and new patterns of behavior. In this view, leadership is the activity of mobilizing people to address adaptive challenges—those challenges that cannot be resolved by expert knowledge

and routine management alone. Adaptive challenges often appear as swamp issues—tangled, complex problems composed of multiple systems that resist technical analysis and thus stand in contrast to the high, hard ground issues that are easier to address but where less is at stake for the organization or the society. They ask for more than changes in routine or mere performance. They call for changes of heart and mind—the transformation of long-standing habits and deeply held assumptions and values. (Parks, 10)

### Distinguishing Technical Problems and Adaptive Challenges

Kind of Challenge	Problem Definition	Solution	Locus of Work
Technical	Clear	Clear	Authority
Technical & Adaptive	Clear	Requires Learning	Authority & Stakeholders
Adaptive	Requires Learning	Requires Learning	Stakeholders

Technical problems are well defined: Their solutions are known and those with adequate expertise and organizational capacity can solve them. For example, a church that sees the participation of children and their families decline in the summer, can develop a multi-week vacation Bible school program that engages children and their parents during the summer months. It is a technical problem because the resources are available for purchase and the implementation tasks, while requiring plenty of work, are well known and within the existing skill-set of the church’s faith formation leadership.

Adaptive challenges are entirely different. The challenge is complex and not so well defined; and the answers are not known in advance. Adaptive challenges require innovation and learning. For example, developing a plan for the faith formation of Baby Boomers in a church is an adaptive challenge today. People in this generation present a whole new set of challenges and opportunities for churches. They bring new spiritual and religious needs, and are creating a new “stage of life” that combines work, retirement, volunteerism, and family. There

are few established models or resources for faith formation with this generation. This adaptive challenge will require creating new models and approaches, experimenting, evaluating, redesigning, and continuous learning.

In the view of Heifetz and Linsky, leadership is mobilizing a congregation to engage its own most pressing problems and deepest challenges. Leadership builds capacity and sustainability within a congregation as it mobilizes a congregation to engage and make progress on its deepest challenges. Leaders help people understand the changed nature of their situation, and develop new ways of doing faith formation and being church. Mobilizing people for adaptive work is to help them enter into that zone of risk where new learning and new self-understanding, as well as new ways of acting, can be discerned.

What Heifetz describes as adaptive work is, at its heart, spiritual work. It involves the central dynamics of the spiritual life and of transformation, which includes loss, risk and trust, even death and resurrection. Our sacred Scriptures, sacraments and our symbols are all powerful resources for adaptive challenges and adaptive work that we face at this time. No program, effort at restructuring, or ‘right’ pastor alone will meet this challenge. It involves our own changes of minds and hearts. (Robinson, 45)

## Moses and Adaptive Leadership

Anthony Robinson in *Leadership for Vital Congregations* presents Moses as an excellent illustration of adaptive work and leadership.

Moses, who over the long stretch of the Exodus and wilderness journey engaged in helping former slaves make the transition from one reality, slavery, to a new and different one, freedom lived in covenant with Yahweh. As the author of the First Letter of Peter would later put it, “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people” (1 Peter 2:10). But this change is a long and labored one, filled with difficult learning for all concerned. And even if Moses was granted some rather impressive technical moves, like a staff transformed from wood to snake with a simple toss, in the end of the work

of this transformation is adaptive work which the people themselves must do.

Time and again, during the years of the wilderness sojourn Moses was confronted by those who wanted a quick fix, a technical solution. “Give us bread,” they demanded. Manna was provided, but the gift of manna only points to a deeper source of provision and to the new reality that is emerging, the reality of living in a trusting relationship with God. As in adaptive work, the problem or challenge that Moses and the people faced was not clearly known or defined at the outset. It was much more than making it through the Red Sea and gaining freedom from Egypt. That was the “freedom from” aspect of the story. But that story was followed by the “freedom for” element. To discern what they were free for required learning and change of hearts and minds. Nor was there any readily apparent or clearly applicable solution for this huge adaptive challenge. The solution, such as it was, required making the journey, living into the new reality of God’s faithful people in the midst of an uncertain solution. Heifetz describes the leader’s task as ‘mobilizing adaptive work.’ Moses mobilized adaptive work in a most literal way, leading people on a journey of learning and transformation. (Robinson, 44)

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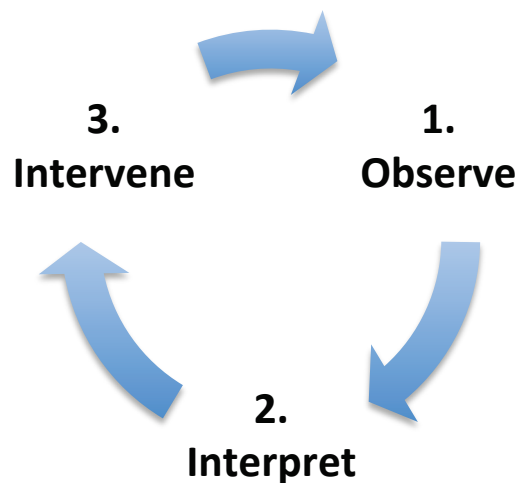
### Seven Ways to Know if You Are Facing an Adaptive Challenge

1. If the solution requires operating in a different way than you do now. . . you may be facing an adaptive challenge.
2. If the problem AND the solution require learning. . . you may be facing an adaptive challenge.
3. If the solution requires shifting the authority and responsibility to the people who are actually affected. . . you may be facing an adaptive challenge.
4. If the solution requires some sacrifice of your past ways of working or living. . . you may be facing an adaptive challenge.
5. If the solution requires experimenting before you’re sure of the answer. . . you may be facing an adaptive challenge.

6. If the solution will take a long time. . . you may be facing an adaptive challenge.
  7. If the challenge connects to people’s deeply held values. . . you may be facing an adaptive challenge.
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## The Process of Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive leadership is an iterative process involving three key activities: (1) *observing* events and patterns around you; (2) *interpreting* what you are observing—developing multiple hypotheses about what is really going on; and (3) *designing* interventions based on the observations and interpretations to address the adaptive challenge you have identified. Each of these activities builds on the ones that come before it; and the process overall is iterative: you repeatedly refine your observations, interpretations, and interventions.



One of the tendencies in organizations is that leaders feel pressure to solve problems quickly, to move to action. So they minimize the time spent in diagnosis, collecting data, exploring multiple interpretations of the situation, and alternative potential interventions. To diagnose an organization while in the midst of action requires the ability to achieve some distance from the “on-the-ground” events. Heifetz and Linsky use the metaphor of “getting on the balcony” above the “dance floor” to depict what it means to gain the distanced perspective necessary to see what is really happening. When a leader can move back and forth between balcony and dance floor, he or she can



continually assess what is happening in the organization and take corrective action. When leaders perfect this skill, they are able to simultaneously keep one eye on the events happening immediately around them and the other eye on the larger patterns and dynamics.

A second tendency is that people begin analyzing the problem by personalizing them (“If only this person was a better leader...”) or attributing the situation to interpersonal conflict (“these two people don’t work well because their work styles are so at odds”). This tendency often obscures a deeper, more systemic (and perhaps more threatening) understanding of the situation, for example conflict between two people can be structural, not personal, even if it’s taken on a personal tone. To counteract the personalization of problems start with diagnosing and acting on the system (“moving outside in”) and then do the same for the self (“moving inside out”).

## Designing Effective Interventions

Effective interventions mobilize people to take an adaptive challenge. Here is a checklist, a series of practices that can make your interventions more effective. They are presented as they might be employed more or less sequentially, but you can think of them as individual practices as well.

### Step 1. Get on the Balcony

Observe what is going on around you. Stay diagnostic even as you take action. Develop more than one interpretation. Watch for patterns. Reality test your interpretations when it is self-serving or close to your default. Debrief with partners as often as you can to assess the information generated by your actions, and the interventions of others, in order to think through your next move.

### Step 2. Determine the Ripeness of the Issue in the System

How resilient and ready are people to tackle the issue? An issue is ripe when the urgency to deal with it has become generalized across the organization. If only a subgroup or faction cares passionately, but

most other groups in the system have other priorities on their mind, then the issue is not yet ripe.

The ripeness of an issue, then, is a critical factor in planning a strategy of intervention. Is the urgency localized in one subgroup and not yet widespread across the larger organization? Or, on the other hand, are people avoiding the hard work of dealing with the adaptive challenge at hand because the pain of doing so has reached too-high levels of disequilibrium? Is the prevailing momentum to treat the situation as a technical problem or an adaptive challenge? Your answer to these questions will affect how you frame your intervention strategy and the timing of your actions.

### Step 3. Ask, Who Am I in This Picture?

How are you experienced by the various groups and subgroups? What role do you play in them? What perspectives on the adaptive issues do you embody for them? Because they are comfortable with the way you usually act, they are probably quite proficient at managing you in that role to ensure that you do not disturb their equilibrium.

Consistency is a high value in management but a significant constraint in leading adaptive change.

You will have to be less predictable than usual to get constructive attention and make progress on an adaptive issue.

### Step 4. Think Hard About Your Framing

Thoughtful framing means communicating your intervention in a way that enables group members to understand what you have in mind, why the intervention is important, and how they can help carry it out. A well-framed intervention strikes a chord in people, speaking to their hopes and fears. That is, it starts where they are, not where you are. And it inspires them to move forward.

Think about the balance between reaching people above and below the neck. Some groups and some people need data first, before the emotion. For others, it is the reverse. Connect your language to the group’s espoused values and purpose. Consider the balance between strong attention-getting

language and language that is loaded as to trigger flight-or-fight responses rather than engagement.

## Step 5. Hold Steady

When you have made an intervention, think of it as having a life of its own. Do not chase after it. The idea will make its way through the system, and people will need time to digest it, think about it, discuss it, and modify it. If you think of it as “yours,” you are likely to get overly invested in your own image of it.

Once you have made an intervention, your idea is theirs. You cannot control what people do with your intervention. So as this process unfolds, resist the impulse to keep jumping in. Let people work with your idea. Listen closely to how various subgroups are responding to your ideas, so you can calibrate your next move. Watch for the ways and the elements of it that are taking hold. Watch for avoidance mechanisms, like an immediate rejection or silence.

Your silence is a form of intervention. It creates a vacuum for others to fill. The key is to stay present and keep listening.

Holding steady is a poised and listening response. People will appreciate, even if they never say so, the patience and respect it shows.

## Step 6. Analyze the Factions That Begin to Emerge

As people in your own close-in group begin to discuss your intervention, pay attention to who seems engaged, who starts using your language or pieces of your idea as if it were their own. Listen for who resists the idea. Use these observations to help you see the contours of the factions that various people represent on the issue. Faction mapping of your close-in group will give you valuable information about the ways the larger system of people will deal with the issue, which is critically important because refining and implementing your change initiative will usually require the involvement of people from the larger system.

## Step 7. Keep the Work at the Center of People’s Attention

Avoiding adaptive work is a common human response to the prospect of loss. Avoidance is not shameful; it is just human.

Expect that your team will find ways to avoid focusing on the adaptive challenge in doing their diagnosis as well as in taking action. Resistance to your intervention will have less to do with the merits of your idea and mostly to do with the fears of loss your idea generates.

It falls to you, your allies, and others who lead in the organization to keep the work at the center. Begin by trying to understand the impact of new directions on the constituents behind the people in your working group, and how the pleasure or displeasure of those constituents is going to play out in the behavior of the person. Then think about how you can help that person with their problem, e.g., presenting the idea to their group or making sure the person receives credit for making the new idea happen.

A second strategy is to help the members of your team who are worried about their own people, interpret their group’s resistance in terms of threat and loss. Dealing with the fears of loss requires a strategy that takes these losses seriously and treats them with respect.

Finally, get allies. You need to share the burden of keeping the work at the center of people’s attention.

(Source: Chapter 9. Design Effective Interventions in *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*)

*Each of these seven steps can be understood as a skill set. Rate yourself on a scale from 1 to 10 for each of the seven steps. What are your strengths? Where do you need to build your skills?*

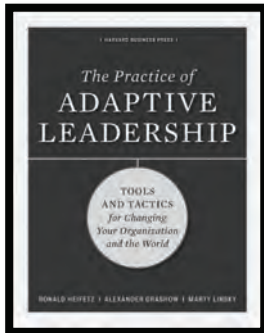
### Works Cited

- Heifetz, Ronald, Marty Linsky, and Alexander Groshow. *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*. Cambridge: Harvard Business School, 2009.
- Parks, Sharon Daloz. *Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World*. Cambridge: Harvard Business School, 2005.
- Robinson, Anthony B. *Leadership for Vital Congregations*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006.

## Video Presentations

Faith & Leadership Website (Duke University):  
[www.faithandleadership.com/multimedia/ronald-heifetz-the-nature-adaptive-leadership](http://www.faithandleadership.com/multimedia/ronald-heifetz-the-nature-adaptive-leadership)

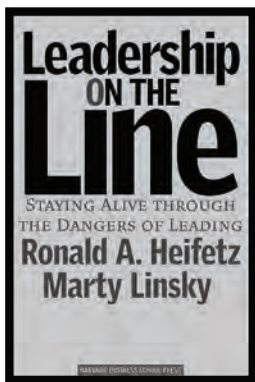
Institute for Educational Leadership (Ontario, Canada): [www.education-leadership-ontario.ca/videos06-07.shtml](http://www.education-leadership-ontario.ca/videos06-07.shtml)  
Vimeo: <http://vimeo.com/13117695>



## The Practice of Adaptive Leadership

Ronald Heifetz, Martin Linsky, and Alexander Grashow (Cambridge: Harvard Business, 2009)

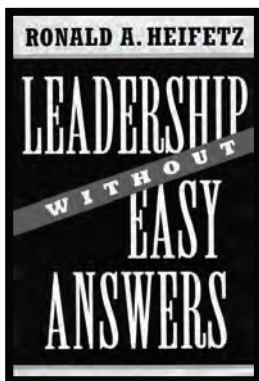
*The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* is a hands-on, practical guide containing stories, tools, diagrams, cases, and worksheets to help you develop your skills as an adaptive leader, able to take people outside their comfort zones and assess and address the toughest challenges. *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* can be your handbook to meeting the demands of leadership in a complex world.



## Leadership on the Line

Martin Linsky and Ronald A. Heifetz (Cambridge: Harvard Business, 2002)

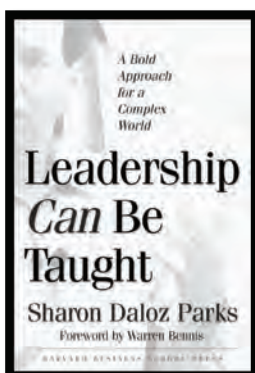
For all its passion and promise, for all its excitement and rewards, leading is risky, dangerous work. Why? Because real leadership—the kind that surfaces conflict, challenges long-held beliefs, and demands new ways of doing things, causes pain. And when people feel threatened, they take aim at the person pushing for change. In *Leadership on the Line* Heifetz and Linsky show that it is possible to put ourselves on the line, respond effectively to the risks, and live to celebrate our efforts. With compelling examples the authors illustrate proven strategies for surviving and thriving amidst the dangers of leading.



## Leadership without Easy Answers

Ronald A. Heifetz (Cambridge: Harvard Business, 1998)

Ronald Heifetz offers a practical approach to leadership for those who lead as well as those who look to them for answers. Fitting the theory and practice of leadership to our extraordinary times, the book promotes a new social contract, a revitalization of our civic life just when we most need it. Drawing on a dozen years of research, Heifetz presents clear, concrete prescriptions for anyone who needs to take the lead in almost any situation, under almost any organizational conditions, no matter who is in charge. His strategy applies not only to people at the top but also to those who must lead without authority.



## Leadership Can Be Taught

Sharon Daloz Parks (Cambridge: Harvard Business, 2005)

If leaders are made, not born, what is the best way to teach the skills they need to be effective? Sharon Daloz Parks invites readers to step into the classroom of Harvard leadership virtuoso Ronald Heifetz and his colleagues to understand a dynamic type of leadership and experience a mode of learning called “case in point.” Case-in-point uses individuals’ own experiences—and the classroom environment itself—as a “crucible” for learning. *Leadership Can Be Taught* reveals how we can learn, practice, and teach the art of leadership in more skilled, effective, and inspired forms.

# A Guide for Adaptive Leadership

*Problems that we can solve through the knowledge of experts are technical challenges. Problems that experts cannot solve are called adaptive challenges. Solutions to technical problems lie in the head and solving them requires intellect and logic. Solutions to adaptive problems lie in the stomach and the heart and rely on changing people's beliefs, habits, ways of working or ways of life. (Ronald Heifetz and Martin Linsky)*

*Adaptive challenges require experiments, discoveries and adjustments from many places in the organization or community. To make the adaptive leap to survive in the new environment requires people to learn new ways of behaving and adopt new values and attitudes. Sustaining change requires the people with the problem to internalize the change itself. (Ronald Heifetz and Martin Linsky)*

## 1. Define the Challenges Confronting Leadership

Technical Problems	Adaptive Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem is well defined.</li> <li>• Answer is known.</li> <li>• Implementation is clear.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Challenge is complex.</li> <li>• Answers are not known.</li> <li>• Implementation requires innovation and learning.</li> </ul>
Examples of Technical Problems	Adaptive Challenges in Your Church

## 2. Apply the Adaptive Leadership Process

*Take a new adaptive challenge and plan your response using the adaptive leadership process:*

Process	How Will You Do This?
1. Observing events and patterns around you <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stayed tuned to external clues from the environment and opportunities for innovation</li> </ul>	
2. <b>Interpreting</b> what you are observing (developing multiple hypotheses about what is really going on	
3. <b>Designing</b> interventions based on the observations and interpretations to address the adaptive challenge <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experiment and innovate with new practices, processes, programs, and/or activities</li> <li>• Evaluate the results of the intervention; learn; decide what needs to be improved</li> <li>• Modify the intervention using the evaluation results</li> <li>• Continue the cycle of innovating and learning</li> </ul>	

## 3. Facilitate the Process of Implementing an Intervention

*Use the seven practices in the article to facilitate the process of making an intervention, and making your intervention more effective.*