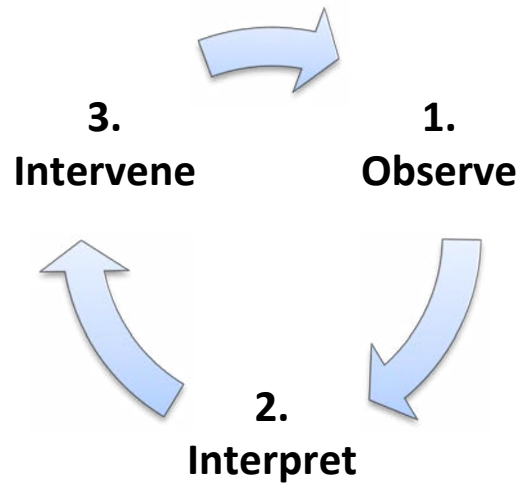


Practicing Adaptive Leadership

(From: *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*. Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky. Harvard Business Press, 2009.)

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 you repeatedly refine your observations, interpretations, and interventions.

An Adaptive Intervention/Design Process

1. Identify three of the most significant adaptive challenges confronting your organization. Select one.

2. Make the interpretive mind-shift:

Technical (expertise) → Adaptive (leadership)

As people identify the adaptive elements of the challenge, they will legitimize the need to learn new ways, begin to identify the losses that they will have to take in order to make progress.

Benign → Conflictual

If you can make interpretations that surface the conflictual aspects of the problem, you can lead people to begin identifying which losses are negotiable and which are not, engage in the courageous conversations needed to work through these conflicts, and create an environment in which the conflicts can be surfaced and managed so that new adaptations emerge.

Individual → Systematic

If people see the issues as systemic rather than personal, they will begin to look for the leverage points in the system as targets or attention to effect change.

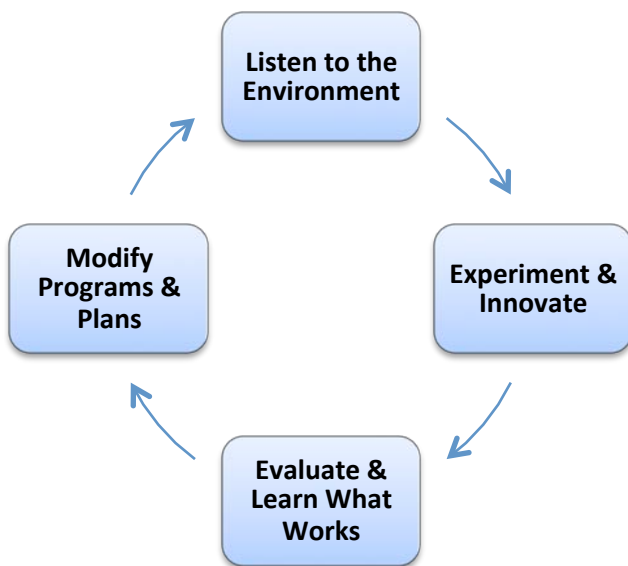
3. Interpret what you are observing about this adaptive challenge—developing multiple hypotheses about what is really going on.

- ✓ Is there any part of this challenge/situation that is new to use and that therefore might need a different strategy than what we usually call do?
- ✓ Who are the key stakeholders in this situation, and how might they be positively affected or negatively affected? How would they describe the situation and the stakes for them?
- ✓ How generalized in our organization is the urgency to do anything about it, or do we have to figure out how to ripen the issue? (How resilient and ready are people to tackle the issue?)
- ✓ What are the adaptive elements of this challenge/situation, and what are the technical aspects?
- ✓ Are we the only ones in this organization or “industry” facing this challenge/situation? What responses are others making?

4. Identify interventions that could address the adaptive challenge.

5. Design interventions based on the observations and interpretations to address the adaptive challenge.

- ✓ **Experiment and innovate** with new practices, processes, programs, and/or activities.
- ✓ **Evaluate** the results of the intervention, learn what works, and decide what needs to be improved.
- ✓ **Modify** the intervention using the evaluation results.
- ✓ **Continue** the cycle of innovating and learning.



6. 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.

7. 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. The key is to stay present and keep listening.

8. Analyze the factions that begin to emerge. As people begin to discuss the intervention, pay attention to who seems engaged, who starts using the new 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.

9. 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.