

Adaptive Leadership Skills: Into Uncharted Territory

Dr. Ken Cochrum

“Management is about coping with complexity.
Leadership, by contrast, is about coping with change.” John Kotter

Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. (Gal. 5:25)

What is Adaptive Leadership?

“Adaptive leadership is the capacity to enable a people to grow so they can face their biggest challenges,” according to Ronald Heifetz, Marty Linsky and Alexander Grashow in *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*.

It is about developing an ongoing process that allows an organization to confront reality and make hard decisions while remaining focused on the mission. Adaptive leaders help everyone in the group build new muscle memory so that ongoing adaptation to challenges becomes a normal part of the culture. It’s about “letting go, learning as we go, and keeping going,” says Tod Bolsinger in his excellent book, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*.

Five Skills Adaptive Leaders Exhibit

1. **Developing Trust.** Trust deepens when those we seek to influence experience three critical elements in our relationships. Whether you are responsible for leading five people on a team or 5,000 people across an organization, **your ability to influence others depends on their level of trust in your character, your competency in your role, and your concern for their well-being.** We trust other people’s character when they consistently do what is just and do what they say they will do.

Self evaluation:

2. **Learning Fast.** Stuck systems can't become unstuck through more meetings, longer workdays, or spending more money. If you and your team aren't actively naming and letting go of old approaches, researching, and experimenting, you're not practicing adaptive leadership. This ongoing process is described in *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* and has three key activities:

- **Observing** events and patterns around you;
- **Interpreting** what you are observing (developing multiple hypotheses about what is really going on); and
- **Designing interventions** based on the observations and interpretations to address the adaptive challenge you have identified.
- Examples: KODAK, Southwest Airlines

Self-evaluation:

3. **Navigating Competing Values.** Every individual has a set of values - some are stated, some are implicit - but we all have them. When our values are affirmed, we feel connected. When my values are challenged, or perhaps your level of priority of a certain value isn't as high as mine is, then this creates conflict. To foster an authentic environment, we need to be able to "Name the Elephants" in the room.

Self-evaluation:

4. **Dealing with Loss.** "People don't resist change, per se, people resist loss" say Heifetz, Linsky and Grashow. Do you agree with that statement?

When change is in the air people want to know how the anticipated changes will affect them personally. God wired us for self-preservation, so we tend to underestimate the benefits and overemphasize the losses involved in seasons of change. This is particularly true for senior staff transitions.

Self-evaluation:

5. Understanding Sabotage. Once you begin designing interventions, expect pushback. Any intervention that challenges assumptions, traditions, or non-productive approaches will be resisted. Bolsinger advises that “sabotage is natural. It’s *normal*. It’s part and parcel of the systemic leadership process. Saboteurs are usually doing nothing but unconsciously supporting the status quo.” So, don’t take it personally, but be ready to keep moving forward, staying in step with the Spirit of God.

Self-evaluation:

Some Tips for Leading People Through Change

- Help people (and yourself) name losses, both perceived and real. Possible areas to probe: Status, Control, Autonomy, Relationships, and a sense of Fairness.
- Beware of “softening the blow”
- Beware of “failure of nerve,” the tendency among leaders to adapt to immaturity
- Keep the bigger vision of where we are going in front of everyone.
- The desire is to grow the **adaptive capacity** of people and thus the organization. “Adaptive capacity is the resilience of people and the capacity of systems to engage in problem-defining and problem-solving work in the midst of adaptive pressures and the resulting disequilibrium,” say Heifetz, Linsky and Grashow.

Final thought: Your job as a servant leader is to bring necessary change to your organization. Growing your adaptive leadership skills will help you and your team survive and thrive as you move into uncharted territory.

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