

Adaptive Leadership: A Slightly Snarky Introduction

By Jan Gartner

Have you heard of Adaptive Leadership? Let me be perfectly honest. When I first heard people throwing around this term, to me it just sounded like code language for, “We’re leaders and we don’t know what to do....but all will be well.” The basic outline of Adaptive Leadership, as I initially understood it, seemed to be this:

1. Call a problem an “adaptive challenge.”
2. Reassure the flock that it’s *supposed* to be messy.
3. Wait for divine intervention or for people to get distracted by a different crisis.

My understanding and appreciation of Adaptive Leadership, as a concept and as a leadership tool, has improved – I think. I hope I do it justice as I introduce you to a few of the basics.

Adaptive Leadership is a framework developed by Ron Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky. It is a way of helping organizations adapt and thrive in challenging environments. Let’s use my original, snarky take on Adaptive Leadership as an organizing principle to explore some Adaptive Leadership concepts.

1. Call a problem an adaptive challenge.

There’s some truth to this! We often approach difficulties as technical problems when they would be better understood as adaptive challenges. (Some problems are indeed purely technical problems. Some are largely adaptive challenges. Many situations contain elements of each.) Here’s how technical problems and adaptive challenges differ (adapted from *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, by R. Heifetz, A Grashow, M Linsky):

Technical Problem or Adaptive Challenge?

Technical Problems

Easy to identify
Solved by authority or expert
Solved using known tools/expertise
Usually isolated

Adaptive Challenges

Often hard to identify/describe
Community needs to be involved in solution
Requires learning and change
Re-emerge in different forms

So, let’s look at this technical problem: you discover that the church photocopier isn’t working and you need to copy handout packets for a meeting tonight. It’s easy enough to name the problem and identify possible solutions. Someone on staff may be able to fix the copier. Or you can call a repairperson. Or you pay out of pocket to get your copies made at Staples, then submit the receipt for reimbursement. Or you can get away without handouts by projecting the

information instead. You and the Office Administrator have the expertise, the resources, and the authority to choose an option and implement a solution.

But what about this scenario? It's the third time the copier has been on the fritz this month. It's out of warranty. To save money, the church stopped paying for the maintenance plan, which would have covered a repair visit. The church is on an austerity budget right now, which means that permission is needed from the Finance Committee Chair to call and pay for a visit from a service technician – but the chair is out of town and unreachable. You actually had planned to save paper by projecting most of your info rather than copying everything, but you discovered this morning that the ministerial intern borrowed the projector for their UUMA chapter retreat. You aren't authorized to use the church credit card, and the last time you paid out of pocket for an item, the expense received what felt like excessive scrutiny by the Treasurer. Once it was finally approved, reimbursement was delayed because the bookkeeper was in the hospital – again. So it became a financial and an emotional hardship. And while the particulars are different, you can't help but think back to last month's e-newsletter debacle, which left you and others feeling disempowered and stressed.

I hope that situation doesn't sound too familiar. (Any resemblance to actual people or congregations is purely on purpose, LOL.)

If you only concentrate on finding a workaround for your copies, and your coworkers likewise just keep trying to solve their own seemingly technical problems, you'll miss the bigger picture – the system, where adaptive challenges live. In the above situation, what would various people say is the problem? Is this year's budget struggle about a "scarcity mentality" in the congregation, or the new young members who aren't paying "their share," or the simmering conflict about worship music? When a staff member notes frustration with policies and procedures, their teammate may view it as a systemic lack of trust, but key lay leaders say the protocol fixed problems with accountability and provides a consistent process.

When you have trouble naming the problem – or agreeing on it, and/or when it seems like similar problems keep surfacing at different times and different places within the system (so resolving them is like playing whack-a-mole), there are most likely underlying adaptive challenges that won't get addressed simply by applying technical fixes to each isolated manifestation of the problem as it occurs. Have you heard the expression "get off the dance floor and onto the balcony"? This comes from adaptive leadership. When you're on the dance floor, you only see the part of the action that's closest to you. Getting up on the balcony means positioning yourself to see the whole picture.

We tend to treat things as technical problems because that's what we know how to manage. Moreover, adaptive challenges can take months or years to work through. In the meantime, making practical, technical improvements will be helpful and necessary. The difficulty comes when people think that the technical fix (buying a new copier, recruiting a healthier bookkeeper, changing a policy) will resolve the systemic issues. Note the importance of involving the whole church community when working through an adaptive challenge. The role of the leader is not to "solve" it but to engage others in addressing it.

Recognizing that you are in an adaptive environment (and we all are!) will impact how you think about your role as a leader. Again, simplifying from *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, here is the gist of the distinction between leadership in a technical environment versus an adaptive one:

Role of Leader(s)

Technical Problems

Look at parts of the system
 Define the problem and solution
 Maintain/restore order
 Maintain norms

Adaptive Challenges

Look at the whole system
 Frame questions and issues
 Allow conflict and disorientation
 Encourage challenging of norms

Going back to polarity thinking, in reality, you'll probably want to be leveraging both types of leadership roles. Does one feel more natural or familiar to you? How do you feel about "allowing conflict"?

Now what about the second of my three "Snarky Adaptive Leadership" points?

2. Reassure the flock that it's *supposed* to be messy.

Actually, I'm not so far off on this one either. As you allow for the raising of larger issues and the confusion that comes when you open things up, by all means, it's a great idea to convey to the congregation that you are all doing important work together and that bumps in the road are to be expected.

I have found the **productive zone of disequilibrium** an incredibly useful model for understanding congregational change work. For copyright reasons, I'm not including an image of the Productive Zone of Disequilibrium here. But there are many images online, including the one partway down this Adaptive Leadership article in Easy Small Business HR:

<https://easysmallbusinesshr.com/2013/09/adaptive-leadership-holding-environment-part-5/>.

Note that the horizontal axis is time, with the level of "disequilibrium" (discomfort¹ and "off-kilter-ness") on the vertical axis.

Let's explore this illustration. First, on the left side, look at the black line arrow labeled "technical problem." When a technical problem is discovered, discomfort ensues and tensions rise as immediate needs go unmet and people figure out a solution. A technical problem might take just minutes to fix, or weeks or months, but the idea is that the fix is identified through existing expertise; the skills, knowledge, and resources are procured; and the solution is

¹ I use the word "discomfort" in this article as it is a feeling that most people can relate to. Comfort has a relationship to privilege. If you are in a position of privilege, does your comfort come at the expense of others?

implemented. See how that arrow swoops down quickly, even before a problem is completely resolved? People's discomfort quickly lessens once they know that a solution is in the works.

Now look at the longer, squigglier solid line representing the adaptive challenge. The imbalance in the system remains high as the community wrestles with the issue. Learning and progress happen when you are in the productive zone of disequilibrium, the gray band. What is meant by this? Well, we all need to experience a certain amount of discomfort in order to motivate us to change, right? If you don't think anything is wrong or it's not really bothering you, you are unlikely to do anything about it. Same with a congregation. There are lots of little issues that are easy to ignore. But as a problem becomes more noticeable, disequilibrium increases and people eventually get motivated to engage. The **threshold of change** is the amount of disequilibrium needed in order for people to be motivated to learn and change so that they can deal with an adaptive challenge. (This is the lower end of the productive zone.)

What happens as the congregation experiences more and more disequilibrium? At some point, the instability and uncertainty either become paralyzing or throw the system into chaos, and once again it is not productive. This upper edge of the productive zone is the **limit of tolerance**. (Have you ever experienced an organization that seemed temporarily beyond its limit of tolerance?) Your job is to help the system stay within the productive zone of disequilibrium – above the threshold of change and below the limit of tolerance.

I have come up with an enhancement to this model: I believe that your work as a leader, especially as an interim leader, is to **widen the zone**. By that I mean that you should be striving to **lower the threshold of change** by getting people to notice and engage an issue sooner – well before it becomes a crisis. Indeed, interim professionals often point to things that have gone unseen or unaddressed by the congregation. One of our interim ministers helps congregations understand her purpose by describing herself as a real estate agent. In other words, she walks through your house (congregation) with you before you put it on the market – allowing you to see it more objectively, making sure you showcase its best features, and encouraging you to fix the things that don't work quite right – often things you don't even notice. She is helping lower the threshold of change, causing enough discomfort to get people's attention.

The other piece of widening the zone is **raising the limit of tolerance**. You've heard the expression, "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen." Raising the limit of tolerance means helping people stay "in the kitchen" productively as the heat goes up. Looking again at the leader's role in an adaptive environment, this is where allowing conflict and disorientation really comes into play. By widening the zone, you *increase the congregation's capacity to participate* in working on an adaptive challenge. In the illustration of the productive zone of disequilibrium, imagine that gray band – the productive zone – getting thicker as you lower the threshold of change and raise the limit of tolerance.

Remember the **STABILITY and CHANGE** polarity? This dovetails with the productive zone of disequilibrium. Change is important and necessary. But if too much changes too fast, the system is likely to experience the downside of the change pole – possibly exceeding its limit of tolerance. What often happens then is that people will cling to stability. Remember? Stability is

the “solution” to change. On the polarity diagram, this is where you swing from the downside of one pole (change) to the upside of the other (stability).

One more point about the productive zone: someone might implement a short-term technical fix or a work avoidance strategy (notice the dotted line on the diagram and see below!) which reduces the discomfort...but puts the system back below their threshold of change, meaning they are no longer motivated to learn or to do anything differently. Again, keep them in the zone – and widen the zone.

And what about that third snarky Adaptive Leadership point?

3. Wait for divine intervention or for people to get distracted by a different crisis.

I was more on the money than you might think with this third point, too! Let me introduce you to the concept of *work avoidance*. Once you get it, you’ll start seeing it everywhere. Work avoidance refers to the ways that organizations sidestep the messiness of adaptive challenges. There are two general forms of work avoidance: **1) displacing responsibility** (potentially divine intervention?) and **2) diverting attention** (the distraction thing!).

Here are some examples of displacing responsibility:

- Blaming a particular person. (*This is the “identified patient” in systems parlance.*)
- Expecting one person to deal with a systemic issue. (*Not quite “divine” intervention, but close.*)
- Creating a task force to study and report back on the issue. (*The UU strategy I love to hate!!*)
- Bringing in an expert. (*“Yes, we’re doing something about this – our Congregational Life Consultant is coming to facilitate a workshop.”*)

Remember, adaptive challenges 1) need to involve the community and 2) require learning and change. When’s the last time you saw a task force report or a one-off event result in organizational learning and systemic change? It’s possible, if ongoing and whole-community work is built in. I rarely see this happen.

So that’s displacing responsibility. What about the other form of work avoidance – diverting attention? Here are a few examples of that:

- Making a joke when tension builds during a meeting.
- Discovering an urgent issue that demands everyone’s attention.
- Devoting your energy to a technical fix.

None of these are necessarily “wrong” at any given time. But they can become strategies (intentional or not) for dodging engagement with complex issues. If you see work avoidance happening, can you find a way to name it (candor/diplomacy polarity!) and get people re-engaged?

Examples of adaptive challenges abound, within and beyond our congregations and our faith. Two challenges I've worked with a lot in my UUA roles are 1) staff relations and 2) economic sustainability (of congregations, of professionals, of the UUA). Our current institutional and societal conversations and conflicts about race, privilege, and power reflect our collective wrestling with longstanding adaptive challenges.

Outside of work (yes, I have a life), I'm involved in Citizens' Climate Lobby. We need everyone to "stay in the kitchen" on the issue of climate change as the heat literally gets turned up. I see my role largely as helping widen that productive zone of disequilibrium – getting people to pay attention and engage (long before it becomes a crisis for them personally), affirming every person's agency to effect broad systemic change, and keeping them from hitting their limit of tolerance (where they feel too overwhelmed to be productive).

In attempting to solve these multidimensional issues, we bring in experts. We offer events and programs. We create targeted staff positions to focus on these areas. We feel like we're doing good things, but the overall picture doesn't seem to improve. Here are prevalent sticking points I've noticed:

- 1. People don't get off the dance floor and onto the balcony.** Going back to the copier story, this is when each person stays focused on the immediate problem in their area, failing to see the larger systemic patterns.
- 2. Persistent attention and accountability over time are lacking.** Everyone is enthusiastic and poised for progress during the special workshop, but nobody takes the lead on follow-through with action items. Commitment to ongoing work fades (because it's hard!).
- 3. The "community," however that needs to be defined, doesn't get involved.** How often do you see a large or recurring problem given to a small group of leaders to figure out?
- 4. Organizational silos get in the way of system-wide approaches.** Adaptive challenges transcend programmatic lines, but we aren't set up well to strategize and mobilize across departments.
- 5. There is resistance to learning and/or change.** This is probably the biggest obstacle – and it's human nature.

Consider our efforts to better live up to the anti-racist, anti-oppressive ideals of Unitarian Universalism – within our UUA as an institution, and within individual congregations. What are the personal, congregational, and institutional responses you've observed or been involved in? Where is there evidence of good adaptive leadership? What do you see as potential pitfalls?

May this slightly snarky introduction to some Adaptive Leadership concepts gives you new perspectives and inspires fresh ways of approaching some of your organization's needs and challenges.