



ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

**ADAPTIVE VS
TECHNICAL: WHAT'S
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**WHAT IS ADAPTIVE
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ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP**

**THE ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION**

adaptiveleadershipfoundation.org

OVERVIEW

Adaptive leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive. In this book, we describe what adaptive challenges are and how they are often confused with technical challenges. We will dig further to give you scenarios and principles that will guide you when exercising leadership.

WHAT IS ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP?



ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

By definition, *“Adaptive leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive”*. Exercising adaptive leadership requires distinctive skills and insight to adapt to an environment or situation and help people tolerate the discomfort they may be experiencing.

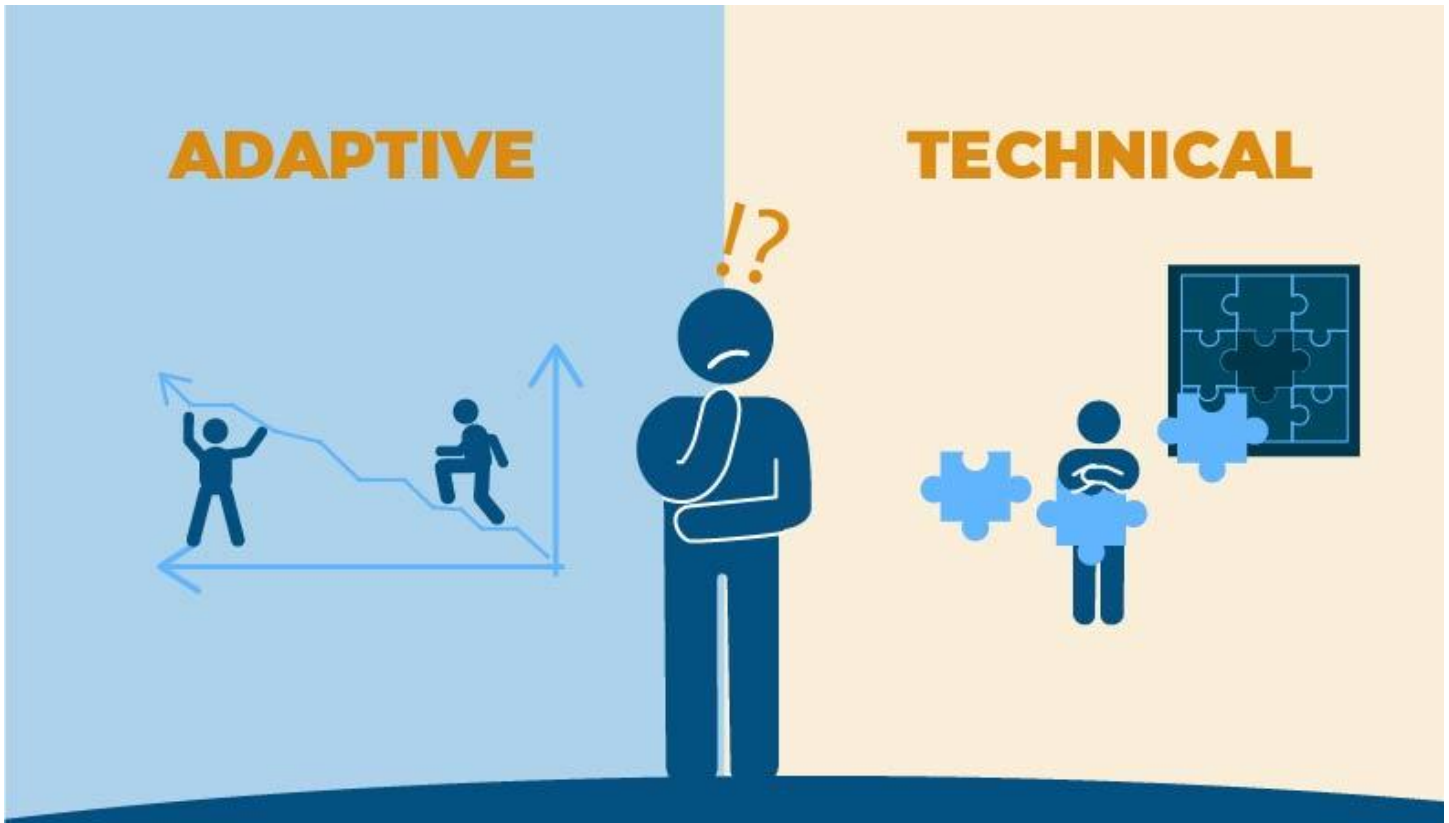
In determining the technical and adaptive elements, you take into account that adaptive challenges are typically grounded in the complexity of values, beliefs and loyalties rather than technical complexities.

This book will be divided into two parts.

- 1) *In the first part, we will look at what is adaptive challenge and help you distinguish between what makes a challenge technical or adaptive.***

2) *In the next part, we will explore the principles of adaptive leadership, delivering each principle using scenarios.*

ADAPTIVE VS TECHNICAL: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?



Think of a problem you have tried (and failed) to fix multiple times. What solution have you attempted to use? What story have you been telling to explain why the problem remains unfixed?

Challenges fall into two categories;

- 1) ***Technical challenges***
- 2) ***Adaptive challenges***

Technical challenges are challenges that can be addressed with facts, information, knowledge, use of authority and subject matter expertise. When faced with a problem, ask yourself these questions. Is the kind of work technical? Does the team understand the Problem? Do they know how to solve it? Who has the responsibility? Experts or authority figures? What are the key obstacles? time, money and resources?

SCENARIO

In a manufacturing company, production is halted because the machine is down. The company will likely to respond to this problem by:

- 1) ***Calling a mechanic.***
- 2) ***If you are a mechanic, you will purchase the replacement parts and repair it yourself***
- 3) ***Buying a new machine or***
- 4) ***Outsource production.***

Either way, there is a known solution to continue production. This example illustrates an instance where an organization is faced with a technical problem. Managers, especially seasoned ones, excel at solving technical challenges.

Adaptive challenges require confronting the status quo to change behavior, practices and ways of working to which you and others have been deeply committed. They are fluid and change with circumstances. Solutions to this type of challenge usually require people to learn new ways of doing things, change their attitudes, values and norms and adopt an experimental mind-set.

Adaptive challenges are especially difficult to identify because:

- a) Kind of work is adaptive.**
- b) Problem definition is unclear**
- c) Solution is unknown.**
- d) progress requires learning**
- e) Locus of responsibility are affected stakeholders as well as authorities**
- f) Type of work involve experiments and smart risks**
- g) Key obstacles are hearts, minds loyalty and deeply held values**

Adaptive challenges are systemic- they do not belong to one group. For example, a machine breaks down once every couple of months, despite regular maintenance. The adaptive challenge here is the lack of ownership and care towards the machine because staff members see the machine as company's property or rather, the company's problem.

This machine example also illustrates when most leadership failure occurs, exercising leadership by treating adaptive challenges as technical challenges. Each time the machine breaks down, a technical solution is applied to get the machine up and running. However, the underlying issue could be lack of ownership that remains unresolved.

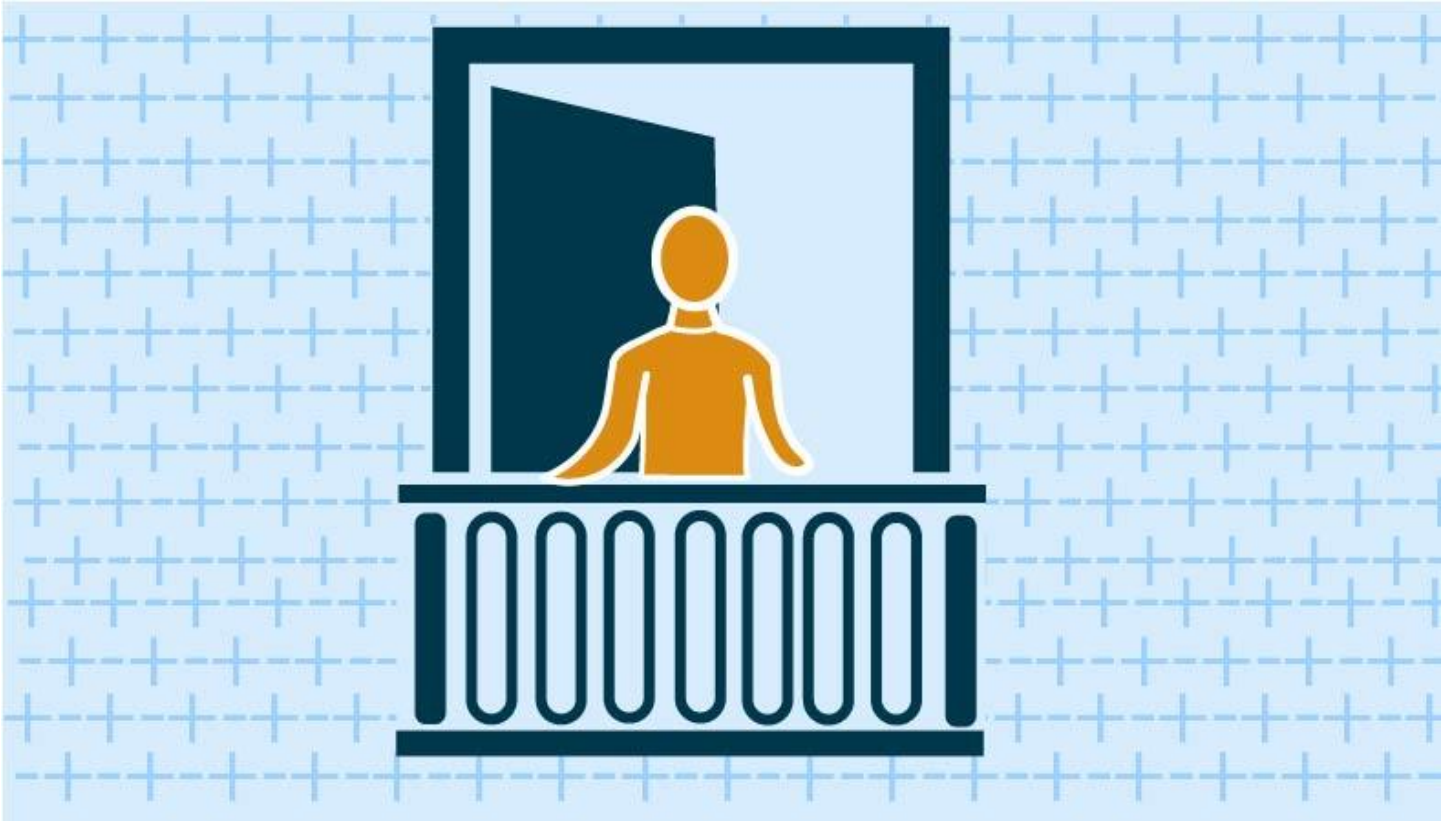
One of the quick ways to know of adaptive challenge is the fact that the problem persists even after a series of attempted technical fixes.

Now, identify a major challenge you face either being in school if you are student, or in the workplace. Which elements of the challenges are technical, and which are adaptive? Consider the relative degree of difficulty in trying to manage the technical versus the adaptive elements of the challenge.

Many people apply solutions that have worked in other situations in the past but fail to take sufficiently into account the complexity of the new problem situation and end up applying technical fixes.

The failure to take into account the complexity of the problem and treating it like any other analytical, expert task that can be separated from the cultural and political human dimensions of the situation, is a primary cause of low implementation rates

PRINCIPLE THAT GUIDE ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP



GET ON THE BALCONY

Are you good at telling what people want? Where they are emotionally? Whether they are angry, frustrated, happy? Who is saying what and to whom? Who is not saying much and why? What do they actually mean?

SCENARIO

Jane and her employees held weekly meetings in her company. However, these meetings seemed to take longer each time they meet. On one particular occasion, the meeting turned out to be very unproductive as the conversation kept on going round and round without a consensus.

Jane decided to take a moment and try to understand why these meeting so unproductive. After going through minutes of the previously held meetings, she discovered that these meetings were usually dominated by at most four people, herself and a few others. Any comments from other employees was often brief, or dismissed by dominant members. This was really slowing down progress as employees were not comfortable, or confident enough to air their views on issues.

Jane decided that something had to be done about it. In the next meeting, she started by observing the meeting at a distance, seeing herself as well as other members in the meeting and maintaining neutrality. She started observing the more silent employees, interpreting their silent cues, and how the dominant employees delivered their views. Soon afterwards, she shared her views on how the meetings were often unproductive and did not have any meaningful closures. Not surprising, the other employees felt the same and decided that the approach to holding long running meetings should be revised.

In the exercise leadership, you must practice and master the art of first getting off the 'dance floor' of the adaptive challenge and getting onto the balcony in order to get a clear picture of what is happening.

Taking a look from the balcony will enable you to provide language of a situation your group may find itself in and facilitate movement towards a solution. Authority figures help the group identify struggles over values and power, patterns of work avoidance, and the many other reactions to change.

From this case scenario, we can see Jane took four steps while at the Balcony:

STEP 1. OBSERVE – Ask yourself, what am I seeing or hearing right now? What do I notice?

STEP 2. ASK QUESTIONS – Ask yourself, what is REALLY going on here? What am I doing to cause it?

STEP 3. INTERPRET – This is where you truly understand what is happening. Lift up your voice with others and state what you believe is happening. After you share your perspective, hold steady and listen for the way others treat your perspective. Don't defend or attack others, truly listen.

STEP 4. TAKE MEANINGFUL ACTION – What will you do or commit to do to move things forward?

IDENTIFY THE ADAPTIVE CHALLENGE



People face complex challenges most of the time. Complex challenges are likely to have both a technical and an adaptive element. It is critical to identify what requires technical solutions and what requires adaptive work. This will assist in distinguishing between superficial symptom and the root cause of the challenge.

Adaptive challenges tend to have the following characteristics:

- 1) ***A cycle of failure***
- 2) ***A dependence on leadership with authority***

SCENARIO

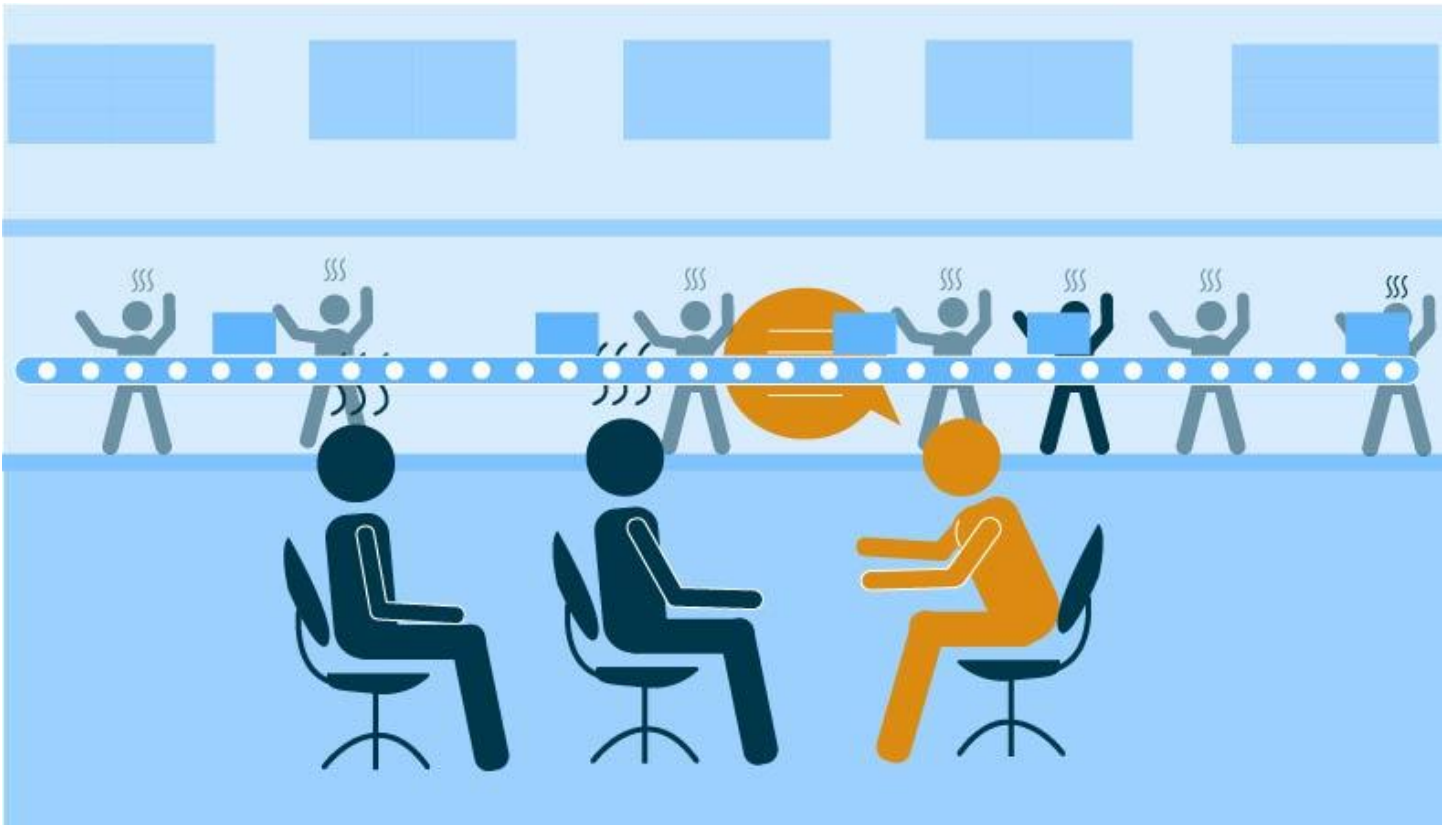
Jane, the CEO of Fashionista Inc, realized that her staff were consistently not attending the company events. Staff were declining attendance request just a day before the event.

The company had planned for the end-year party and it was a week to the event. Jane decided to communicate to all staff clearly stating that the end year party was compulsory to all staff and attendance register will be taken.

On that day, all staff reported to the event on time and registered themselves. The room was packed and Jane was very happy that her decision to communicate in advance had paid off. However, she later realized that only about 60% of the staff were in attendance in the afternoon session; which was the main part of the event.

In many cases, people, just like Jane treat adaptive challenges like technical problems that can be solved by quick technical fixes. The authority figure is supposed to define where the company is going, and people are supposed to follow. Leadership is reduced to a combination of grand knowing and salesmanship. Adaptive situations are hard to define and resolve precisely because they demand the work and responsibility of all members. They are not amenable to solutions provided by leaders; adaptive solutions require members to take responsibility for the problems that face them.

REGULATE THE DISTRESS CAUSED BY THE ADAPTIVE CHALLENGE



Adaptive challenges do not have straightforward forward solutions. To be able to solve an adaptive challenge there will be a need to work with different people from different backgrounds and beliefs. In exercising leadership, one must attend to three fundamental tasks:

Create an environment *where people can spend time exploring the new learning;*

Provide a safe environment *(direction, protection, orientation, managed conflict and the shaping of norms); and*

Demonstrate personal presence and poise *(model the emotional capacity to tolerate uncertainty, frustration, and pain)*

Adaptive work generates distress. Before putting people to work on challenges for which there are no ready solutions, an authority figure must realize that people can learn only so much so fast, and maintain a productive level of tension and motivate people without disabling them.

Although exercising leadership demands a deep understanding of the pain of change-the fears and sacrifices associated with major readjustment-it also requires the ability to hold steady and maintain the tension.

In exercising leadership, one has to have the emotional capacity to tolerate uncertainty, frustration and pain. One has to raise tough questions without getting too anxious. People around you will carefully observe verbal and nonverbal cues to a leader's ability to hold steady and tackle tasks ahead.

SCENARIO

Daniel, the Operations Manager of Hoops company had noticed the frequent machine breakdown despite regular maintenance. This had increased maintenance cost resulting to reduce profit.

Daniel decided to find out the root cause and possible remedies. He organized for a meeting which was composed of members of the operating team, the mechanic and the procurement team who were responsible for purchasing of the spare parts. After his opening remarks and introductions, he asked members to give their opinion on the benefits of the production machine in the daily operations of the business. After members had given their opinions, he asked, "What impact does it bring to the business if the production machine is not working properly?" and before they started giving their opinions,

he proceeded to ask “What needs to be done by all of us to ensure the machine remains up and running without breakdowns?”

Susan, the procurement officer proposed the acquisition of the new machine. Daniel was happy with her view. He asked Susan of the cost involved with the purchase of the new machinery and whether the business was in a position to incur the cost. Joseph, the head of operations team, admitted how powerful the machine is despite of breakdowns. Joseph also mentioned how he has trained his operations team and equip them with the relevant system manual. “What causes the breakdown?” Daniel asked. Joseph explained the controls that have been put in place from the time the machine is powered until the time it is powered off.

“What happens when it breaks down?” Daniel asked. Joseph explained the troubleshooting process which happens before the mechanic is contacted. “How are the spare parts obtained?”, Susan explained how the procurement officers purchases the spare parts from the all-time spare parts vendor. Once spare parts have been delivered, they proceed to contact the mechanic to come and fix the machine.

The mechanic provided details of the set of activities involved during fixing. He commented about the quality of spare parts he has been receiving and gave reasons that are resulting to failure.

This principle requires that a person exercising leadership must control the environment in order to make it constructive and creative.

MAINTAIN DISCIPLINED ATTENTION



Different people within the same organization bring different experiences, assumptions, values, beliefs, and habits to their work. This diversity is valuable because innovation and learning are the products of differences.

No one learns anything without being to contrasting points of view. Yet managers at all levels are often unwilling or unable to address their competing perspectives collectively. They frequently avoid paying attention to issues that disturb them. They restore equilibrium quickly, often with work avoidance maneuvers. A person who exercises leadership must get people to confront tough tradeoffs in values, procedures, operating styles, and power.

That is as true at the top of the organization as it is in the middle or on the front line. Indeed, if the executive team cannot model adaptive work, the organization will languish. If senior managers can't draw out and deal with divisive issues, how will people elsewhere in the organization change their behaviors and rework their relationships?

One of the most interesting missions of exercising leadership is getting people on the executive team to listen to and learn from one another. Held in debate, people can learn their way to collective solutions when they understand one another's assumptions. The work of the authority figure is to get conflict out into the open and use it as a source of creativity.

Because work avoidance is rampant in organizations, a leader has to counteract distractions that prevent people from dealing with adaptive issues. Scape-goating denial focusing only on today's technical issues, or attacking individuals rather than the perspectives they represent – all forms of work avoidance are to be expected when an organization undertakes adaptive work. Distraction has to be identified when they occur so that people will regain focus.

Diversity is treasured as is the avenue for innovation and learning. In conflicting situation, a leader is expected to step in and put the team to work on reframing the issues, deepening the debate with questions, and unbundling the issues in a manner that the conflicting parties can handle. This prevents the conflict from remaining polarized and superficial. Diversity is critical in bringing different experiences, assumptions, values, beliefs and habits to their work.

SCENARIO

Daniel, the Operations Manager of Hoops company noticed that the relationship between Nancy; the procurement office and that of the mechanic had deteriorated. Nancy had established a control process during the repair process which required the mechanic to record repairs he had done and the materials used. This had affected the attitude of the mechanic. The mechanic started taking longer after being contacted to get to the office.

The mechanic had just finished his task and Daniel wanted to discuss with him and Nancy. Daniel went to the office where the mechanic was populating the schedule. He asked Nancy to join them. Daniel thanked the mechanic for fixing the machine. He went ahead and explained the recent behavior change by the mechanic and wanted to know the cause. The mechanic started blaming Nancy; explaining the dissatisfaction. After which Daniel asked Nancy to give her view. Nancy explained the reasons behind the additional controls with some being in line with the business requirements.

The mechanic noted that it was not the decision of Nancy to add some controls. The controls were meant to improve service delivery. Nancy admitted that she had no chance to explain to the mechanic of the recent developments.

A person exercising leadership is also expected to identify and handle work avoidance and maintain focus on tough issues and disciplined attention to make progress in learning.

GIVE THE WORK BACK TO THE PEOPLE



Everyone has special access to information that comes from his or her particular vantage point. Everyone may see different needs and opportunities. People who sense early changes in the marketplace are often at the periphery, but the organization will thrive if it can bring that information to bear on tactical and strategic decisions. When people do not act their special knowledge, businesses fail to adapt.

All too often, people look up the chain of command, expecting senior management to meet market challenges for which they themselves are responsible. Indeed, the greater and more persistent distresses that accompany adaptive work, make such dependence worse. People tend to become passive, and senior managers who pride themselves on

being problem solvers take decisive action. That behavior restores equilibrium in the short term but ultimately leads to complacency and habits of work avoidance that shield people from responsibility, pain and need to change.

SCENARIO

Jane, the CEO of fashionista Inc., realized that there were leadership blind spots in the company. The company requires to know what to improve on and initiatives had been put in place for the company to be “in the know”: employee surveys, suggestion boxes, one-on-ones, town hall meetings... the open door policy was implemented and the company was ready to hear the honest feedback from staff and as the CEO, Jane was ready to handle the truth. Staff did not provide their candid feedback.

On inquiry, Jane found out that the staff feared to give candid feedback and they believed even if they were to say something, nothing would change. They don't think their opinion or idea will have an effect on the outcome. Jane decided to have a meeting with staff to find out some of the raised feedbacks that were yet to be addressed. To start the meeting off, Jane recognized a number of staff members who were taking the lead in addressing some of the issues that were raised through the suggestion boxes and admitted that she was not aware of any other issue that staff were facing. Jane mentioned how important feedback is to her and to the company in ensuring the well-being of everyone in the company.

Staff gave their candid feedback after which Jane asked the staff to have representatives who will take charge of ensuring the feedback provided are implemented and monitored. Getting people to assume greater responsibility is not easy. Not only are many lower level employees comfortable being told what to do, but many managers are accustomed to

treating subordinates like machinery requiring control. Letting people take the initiative in defining and solving problems means that management needs to learn to support rather than control. Workers, for their part, need to learn to take responsibility.

PROTECT VOICES OF LEADERSHIP FROM BELOW



Giving a voice to all people is the foundation of an organization that is willing to experiment and learn. But, in fact, whistle-blowers, creative deviants, and other such original voices routinely get smashed and silenced in organizational life. They generate disequilibrium, and the easiest way for an organization to restore equilibrium is to neutralize those voices, sometimes in the name of teamwork and alignment.

Key points to consider:

- 1) Resist your urge to silence them – what might you be missing?**
- 2) Examine your own reaction.**
- 3) Protect those who raise hard questions, generate distress, and challenge people to rethink the issues at stake**

The voices from below are usually not as articulate as one would wish. People speaking beyond their authority usually feel self-conscious and sometimes have to generate too much passion to get themselves geared up for speaking out. Of course, that often makes it harder for them to communicate effectively. They pick the wrong time and place, and often bypass proper channels of communication and lines of authority. But hurried inside a poorly packaged interjection may lie an important intuition that needs to be teased out and considered. To toss it out for its bad timing, lack of clarity or seeming unreasonableness is to lose potentially valuable information and discourage people with different views in the organization.

SCENARIO

David, a manager in a large manufacturing company had listened when his superiors encouraged people to look for problems, speak openly, and take responsibility. So, he raised an issue about one of the CEO's pet projects an issue that was too hot to handle and had been swept under the carpet for years. Everyone understood that it was not open to discussion, but David knew that proceeding with the project could damage or derail key elements of the company's overall strategy. He raised the issue directly in a meeting with his boss and the CEO. He provided a clear description of the problem, a rundown of competing perspectives, and a summary of the consequences of continuing to pursue the project.

The CEO angrily squelched the discussions and reinforced the positive aspects of his pet project. When David and his boss left the room, his boss exploded: who do you think you are, with your holier-than-thou attitude? He insinuated that David had never liked the CEO's pet project because David hadn't come up with the idea himself. The subject was closed.

David had greater expertise in the area of the project than either his boss or the CEO. But his two superiors showed no curiosity no effort to investigate David's, no awareness that he was reasoning, no awareness that he was behaving responsibly with the interests of the company at heart. It rapidly became clear to David that it was more important to understand what mattered to the boss than to real issues. The CEO and David's boss together squashed the viewpoint of a leader from leader and thereby killed his potential for leadership in the organization. He would either leave the company or never go against the grain again.

Leaders must rely on others within the business to raise questions that may indicate an impending adaptive challenge. They have to provide cover to people who point to the internal contradictions of the enterprise. Those individuals often have the perspective to provoke rethinking that people in authority do not. Thus, as a rule of thumb, when authority figures feel the reflexive urge to glare at or otherwise silence someone, they should resist. The urge to restore social equilibrium is quite powerful, and it comes on fast. One has to get accustomed to getting on the balcony, delaying the impulse and asking what really is the guy talking about? Is there something we're missing?

RECAP

In a nutshell, this book introduced adaptive leadership. Then went on ahead to outline and describe the differences between adaptive and technical challenges. We identified the six principles of adaptive leadership and using scenarios, described each principle and how you can apply it in your personal adaptive leadership journey.

Feel free to reread any section in this book to gain a deeper understanding of the concept. We encourage you to take on the personal adaptive leadership challenge and apply the principles of adaptive leadership when faced with adaptive challenges, ask yourself the right questions, identify and involve the stakeholders, manage expectations, create a holding environment and guide people as they sift through the obstacles caused by the adaptive challenge.