The Practice of Adaptive Leadership

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Creating a Culture of Impact

Instruction By

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Purpose Statements and Understandings

*Purpose Statements*

The *purpose of this overview*—is to introduce some key adaptive leadership concepts, tools and tactics to employ when exercising leadership.

*Understandings*

- The subject is leadership but the unit of analysis is you and your abilities to take a risk to lead change and exercise leadership.
- The difference between authority (a position) and leadership and that leadership is an activity (it is something you do).
- The difference between technical (above-the-neck) and adaptive (below-the-neck) work.
- The learning processes through which people in a system achieve a successful adaptation.
- Leadership is mobilizing others to make progress on deep, daunting ‘adaptive’ challenges.

*Purpose statements and understandings notes:*
Beginnings

Ron Heifetz—a psychiatrist and graduate of Harvard Medical School—first mapped the theory of adaptive leadership in his book Leadership Without Easy Answers. This was followed by Leadership on the Line in which Ron and Harvard colleague Marty Linsky offered a compelling set of arguments and stories showing how to lead and stay alive through the dangers of change. Their latest work is published in the The Practice of Adaptive Leadership, Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World. This work is the subject of many articles and the book by Sharon Parks, Leadership Can Be Taught.

Currently, Heifetz and Linsky serve on the faculty of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. They are principals of Cambridge Leadership Associates. Heifetz is a Cofounder of the school’s Center for Public Leadership.

An important “player” in this work is Ed O’Malley, the President and CEO of the Kansas Leadership Center (KLC) and coauthor of the book, For the Common Good, Redefining Civic Leadership.

The KLC equips people with the ability to make lasting change for the common good. KLC is different in the field of leadership development with its focus on leadership being an activity, not a role or position. Open to anyone seeking to move the needle of tough challenges in the civic arena, KLC envisions more Kansans sharing responsibility for acting together in pursuit of the common good.

Beginnings notes:
Leading Change is a Risky Activity!

- Think about some aspiration you have for your family, community, organization. Think about the current reality you face and about the gap between your aspiration and reality. The gap represents an opportunity to lead change and exercise leadership.

- “Our work begins with the assumption that there is no reason to exercise leadership, to have a courageous conversation with a boss or a spouse, for example, or to take a risk on a new idea, unless you care about something deeply. What outcome [measure(s) of success] would make the effort and the risk worthwhile? What purpose would sustain you to stay in the game when it gets rough?”

- Why is leadership elusive (why do we fail to lead change and exercise leadership?)
  - It’s hard to define the problem, let alone discover a solution.
  - People would rather not be bothered by daunting challenges.
  - It’s risky.
  - We mesh leadership and management/authority into the same thing, thus placing too much burden on those with authority and too little expectation on those without.
  - It requires engaging lots of people
  - You really have to care.
  - The illusion of the Broken System.

- The dominate view of leadership (authority) is for the leader to provide direction, protection and order. This expected work of the authority figure is very important—but—it has nothing to do with leadership. A decision to explore something different than current expectations begins to tell us why people frequently fail to lead change and exercise leadership—the reason, leading change or exercising leadership is a risky activity.

Exercise 1—Leading Change is a Risky Activity! Exercise Appendix, page 11.

Understandings: The subject is leadership but the unit of analysis is you and your abilities to take a risk to lead change and exercise leadership.

Leading change is a risky activity notes:

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2 For the Common Good, pages 11 and 12.
Authority and Leadership

- **Authority**—is “formal or informal power within a system, entrusted by one party to another in exchange for a service. The basic services, or social functions, provided by authorities are (1) direction; (2) protection; and (3) order.”
  - **Noun**—is a “person, place, thing, state or quality.”
  - This definition considers: position, expertise, charisma, power, attributes, and such. Figure out what is expected—deliver it—and everyone is happy.
  - **Leadership (as a noun)**—is “the position or function of a leader, a person who guides or directs a group.” **Leadership**—is an act or instance of leading; guiding; direction.” A **leader**—is a person or thing that leads.

- **Adaptive leadership**—is “the activity of mobilizing adaptive work.” Adaptive work—is “holding people through a sustained period of disequilibrium during which they identify what cultural DNA to conserve and discard, and invent or discover the new cultural DNA that will enable them to thrive anew; i.e., the learning process through which people in a system achieve a successful adaptation.”
  - **Verb**—“express action, state or relation between two things.” This definition considers behavior...

- **Video**—What is Leadership?

Leading change and exercising leadership has nothing to do with authority. **Leadership is an activity**—behaviors needed to **enable a purpose**—such as **closing a gap between reality and aspiration**.

**Understandings:** The difference between authority (a position) and leadership and that leadership is an activity (it is something you do).

**Authority and leadership notes:**

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4 Dictionary.com
5 Dictionary.com
7 Ibid, page 303
8 Dictionary.com
A Call for Leadership

- **What kinds of problems require leadership? Problems that require adaptation (change)!**

- Think about a problem that requires adaptation (change).
  
  - **Technical work**—is “problem defining and problem solving that effectively mobilizes, coordinates, and applies currently sufficient expertise, processes, and cultural norms.”  
    - This is *above-the-neck* work.
  
  - **Adaptive work**—is “holding people through a sustained period of disequilibrium during which they identify what cultural DNA to conserve and discard, and invent or discover the new cultural DNA that will enable them to thrive anew; (i.e., the learning process through which people in a system achieve a successful adaptation).”
    - This is *below-the-neck* work.

- What makes adaptation so difficult? When you adapt, you lose something! Adaptation and leadership is difficult because it is about the distribution of *loss*. “What people resist is not change per se, but loss.”

- When you try to lead change you will get resistance because people do not like it—change threatens what people like. If you ask people to change (adapt)—you ask people to give up something they value. When the organization changes—people lose something—and when they lose something—they will resist. It’s not that people do not get it—rather—it is that they do get it and they do not like it—change threatens something that is important to them.

- **Video**—Adaptive Vs. Technical, What’s Your Challenge?

**Exercise 2**—is A Call for Leadership. Exercise Appendix, page 12.

**Understandings**: The difference between technical (above-the-neck) and adaptive (below-the-neck) work.

**A call for leadership notes:**

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10 Ibid, page 303

11 Ibid, page 22
The Learning Process

- **The difference between aspiration and reality make the gap** (the gap—and purpose—are the creators of urgency and these call for leading change and exercising leadership). Indicators that help identify gaps are: conflict, crisis, and where people are required to learn new ways.

- **The adaptive challenge**—is “the gap between the values people stand for and the reality that they face.” Adaptive challenges can only be addressed through changes in people’s priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties. Making progress requires going beyond any authoritative expertise to mobilize discovery, shedding certain entrenched ways, tolerating losses, and generating the new capacity to thrive anew.

- **Adaptive leadership**—is the activity of mobilizing adaptive work.

- **Adaptive work**—is “the learning processes through which people in a system achieve a successful adaptation.” Adaptive work is an iterative process.
  - Understand purpose and define the gap (understand the adaptive challenge)
  - Gather facts (observation)
  - Diagnose system and self (interpretation)
  - Action steps (intervention)
  - Reflect

- **Technical work**—is “problem defining and problem solving, generally within a short time frame, by applying established know-how and procedures. Technical problems are amenable to authoritative expertise and management of routine processes.”

- **In order to thrive anew! This work is about leadership as a verb—it is about activities—it is about what you are choosing to do to close a gap.**


**Understandings:** The learning processes through which people in a system achieve a successful adaptation.

**The learning process notes:**

12 Ibid, page 303
13 Ibid, page 303
14 Ibid, page 307
Leadership is Mobilizing Others

“It’s not leadership if it’s not for the common good.

Leadership is mobilizing others to make progress on deep, daunting, ‘adaptive’ challenges. Those adaptive challenges... are crying out for more leadership but seldom get it.

Organizations, communities, companies, governments and families are starving for more leadership; we need more people able to mobilize others to make progress on daunting, adaptive challenges. To that end, the adaptive leadership principles are:

- Leadership is an activity, not a position.
- Anyone can lead, anytime, anywhere.
- It starts with you and must engage others.
- Your purpose (the common good) must be clear.
- It’s risky.

Leadership is heart and soul work. You won’t exercise leadership unless you care for the common good. Only when your heart and soul pull you toward the greater—common—good do the risks of leadership seem worth it.”

Understandings: Leadership is mobilizing others to make progress on deep, daunting ‘adaptive’ challenges.

Leadership is mobilizing others, notes:

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Exercise 1
Leading Change is a Risky Activity!

Directions—are to think about some aspiration you have (anything that deals with change). Think about the current reality you face and about the gap between your aspiration and reality. The gap represents an opportunity to lead change and exercise leadership.

What is the aspiration?

What is the reality you face?

Describe the gap between aspiration and reality (the gap represents an opportunity to lead change and exercise leadership—the gap is an adaptive challenge). What outcome (measure of success) demonstrates progress in reducing the size of the gap?

What is the overriding purpose?

What is the risk?
Exercise 2
A Call for Leadership

Directions—are to consider the gap identified in Exercise 1. First, identify the potential loss, then the applicable technical work and adaptive work.

What is the loss?

What “technical work” needs to take place?

What “adaptive work” needs to take place?
Exercise 3
The Learning Process

Adaptive work—is “the learning processes through which people in a system achieve a successful adaptation.” Directions—are to consider work completed in Exercises 1 and 2 (to include defining the gap)—then:

List the pertinent facts (observation):

Diagnose system and self (interpretation) to identify what is really going on here:

Decide on action steps to take (intervention):

Reflect (an iterative process—so reflect on happenings and begin anew):

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