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ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP APPLIED

TRAITS AND PRACTICES

A white paper by
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“We live in a time of danger and opportunity. Individuals, organizations, communities, and countries must continuously adapt to new realities just to survive.”

~ Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky

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2 Introduction

I have been enabling leadership teams and individuals to be more adaptive in an increasingly complex and uncertain world for some time now. I put together my first adaptive leadership model back in 2019. I still stand by that model and its components, but experience has led me to want to put pen to paper once again and describe adaptive leadership through a different lens.

I believe there are some fundamental capacities and competencies that need to be in place to become an adaptive leader such as emotional intelligence and possession of a growth mindset.

For example, adaptive leaders must adopt behaviours, mindsets and techniques that may seem counterintuitive. This cannot be accomplished without a growth mindset. Adaptive leaders understand the difference between leadership and authority which requires them to be self-aware which is a key component of emotional intelligence.

This white paper describes the foundational skills needed to become an adaptive leader and presents the strategic thinking skills to lead effectively in situations characterised by uncertainty and complexity.

The intent is to enable the reader to determine where they may need to grow to become an effective adaptive leader. Is the application a foundational one with the adoption of core principles of adaptive leadership or a more challenging one that requires an improved capacity to understand and diagnose problems, navigate complexity, and face new challenges with confidence?

Adaptive Leadership Applied recognises that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to developing adaptive leaders. We are all starting from different positions of capability.

There are two parts to this paper. The first explores what I believe are the fundamental and foundational traits that leaders need if they are to be adaptive leaders.

The second part then explores what adaptive leadership looks like in practice. The structure is deliberate in allowing you, the reader, to determine which traits you need to develop to be an effective adaptive leader and then how you will apply them in your organisation.

Before we explore the traits and the practice of adaptive leadership, let's define what adaptive leadership is.

3 What is adaptive leadership?

I like to use the analogy of a shepherd when I describe adaptive leadership. “What does a 5,000-year-old Asia Minor profession have to do with adaptive leadership?” I hear you say.

The best description comes from [Pope Francis](#). In an address to his leadership (i.e., his bishops) in November 2013, he described how shepherd leaders look after their followers.

“To do so, he will sometimes go before his people, pointing the way and keeping their hope vibrant. At other times, he will simply be in their midst with his unassuming and merciful presence. At yet other times, he will have to walk after them, helping those who lag behind and -- above all -- allowing the flock to strike out on new paths”.

What this means for adaptive leaders is that they must be able to lead from the front, lead from within the team's core, and lead from behind.

Adaptive leaders are just that – adaptive. They will lead from the front when clear direction is needed, and uncertainty or anxiety may be restricting team performance. They will lead from the core when the team need more detail and they need to check in on how the team and its members are faring. They will lead from the back to support those who may be struggling but also to let those upfront take the lead and explore their leadership capabilities and competencies.

These adaptive leaders are brave enough to lead from the front, especially when faced with a crisis. They are visible and maintain the bigger picture.

Adaptive leaders have the resolution to lead from the centre, intentionally seek feedback from the team and act on what they receive.

Adaptive leaders who lead from behind do not have the insecurity and fear that someone upfront will threaten their position

Adaptive leaders move between these positions in an agile manner in response to the needs of the individual, team, and organisation. They adapt to changes in the environment in which they operate.

The environment in which we operate today is one of increasing complexity and uncertainty. The systems and structures we are attempting to leverage today will be superseded tomorrow. What got us here will not get us there.

The pandemic of 2020 and 2021, fundamentally changed the way we work and disrupted many of the long-held beliefs we had regarding how we organise ourselves. The next major disruption is right around the corner. It may not be another pandemic but whatever it is, the chances are we will not see it coming.

As the cover of the publication “[The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organisation and the World](#)” by whom I call the fathers of adaptive leadership – Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linksy – says:

“We live in a time of danger and opportunity. Individuals, organizations, communities, and countries must continuously adapt to new realities to simply survive. Wanting more, wanting to thrive even under constantly shifting and often perilous conditions, people in

all sectors are called upon to lead with the courage and skill to challenge the status quo, deploy themselves with agility, and mobilize others to step into the unknown."

The publication is one of the most earmarked business books in my collection. It was written in 2009, yet thirteen years later it is still as relevant, if not more so, in our increasingly complex and uncertain world.

In this white paper, I want to explore what I feel are the essential elements of adaptive leadership. I will pull on the expertise of Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, Marty Linksy and others but more so my experience in this space.

The essential elements discussed here are included in my *Adaptive Leadership Applied* program. The program is customised to the needs of the individual, team and organization and the challenges being faced. It considers the prevailing leadership capabilities and competencies within the organisation so that the program has a solid foundation for further learning and development.

Note: All Heifetz, Grashow, and Linksy quotes are from "[The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organisation and the World](#)" unless otherwise specified.

The Traits

4 Self-awareness

Self-awareness is the cornerstone of emotional intelligence. Possessing emotional intelligence means you can understand and manage your own emotions and those of others around you. There are four domains of emotional intelligence – self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management.

Self-awareness is your ability to monitor your inner and external world. It is what Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky refer to as seeing yourself as a system.

“You are a system as complex as the one you are trying to move forward. To understand your personal system, you have to take stock of many different things: your personality, life experiences, cognitive and other skills, and emotional makeup. You also need to appreciate that your behaviors and decisions stem not just from forces within yourself as a system but also from forces acting on you in any given organizational situation.”

Everyone can develop self-awareness, but it requires a higher level of cognitive thinking. You must work on it from a self-distanced perspective and objectively gather information about your feeling, senses, desires, and actions.

When you see yourself as a system or are self-aware, you will recognise that you have more than one you. You are made up of many identities and how you interact and intervene will change depending on the context in which you find yourself. Your ways of being and doing may not always be consistent depending on the situation.

You must understand this complexity, multiplicity, and inconsistency about yourself and how you interact with the larger system of which you are a part. You must recognise how you change over time – who you were yesterday may not be who you are today. As the organisation changes, so do you.

Adaptive leaders can diagnose themselves as well as the situation they find themselves in. When you increase your self-awareness, you can evaluate yourself and manage your emotions.

Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky refer to this as knowing your tuning. You are like a stringed instrument, tuned differently from everyone else and your strings resonate with your environment based on your tuning. Knowing how your strings are being pulled allows you to be responsive rather than reactive.

4.1 Increasing your self-awareness

There are many ways to increase your self-awareness.

4.1.1 Observe

Try and watch yourself as if you were watching a movie. Observe how your behaviours, emotions, thoughts, and decision-making patterns change depending on who you are with and the situation you are in. When you are aware of how your system interacts with the system in which you are operating, you can manage your behaviours, thoughts, and emotions in a conscious and productive manner.

You can control impulsive feelings and behaviours, healthily manage your motions, regulate stress, and adapt to changing circumstances.

4.1.2 Ask “What?” not “Why?”

When we observe our behaviours and emotions we often ask, “Why am I feeling like that?” “Why am I feeling so angry?” “Why did I get that feedback?”

When you ask “Why?” you start to ruminate, and the emotion does not subside – it increases. You are focusing on the symptoms rather than the cause.

Rather than asking “Why?”, self-aware people ask “What?”

‘What’ questions keep us open-minded and curious about solutions.

‘What’ questions are more productive and focus on objectives and future goals rather than past mistakes.

If you say, “Why am I feeling so low?” you will ruminate on the myriad of symptoms and the negatives. You will feel increasingly low.

If you say, “What are the situations at work making me feel so low?” you can think critically, gain insight, and act. You can work to change or remove the situations.

You can keep asking “What?” “What would make me feel better?” “What do I need to achieve that?”

4.1.3 Name it

You can name your emotions. This is referred to as emotional labelling. You can race through your day totally unaware of how you are feeling and never stop to check in with yourself.

If you name the emotion you are feeling, it can make you calmer. Labelling heightened emotions activates our prefrontal cortex (our thinking brain) and reduces the feeling in the amygdala (our feeling brain).

Rather than acknowledge strong emotions, we tend to suppress them rather than express them.

As Susan David says writing for [Harvard Business Review](#):

“Anger and stress are two of the emotions we see most in the workplace — or at least those are the terms we use for them most frequently. Yet they are often masks for deeper feelings that we could and should describe in more nuanced and precise ways so that we develop greater levels of emotional agility, a critical capability that enables us to interact more successfully with ourselves and the world.”

So, when you experience a strong emotion, pause, and consider what you are going to call it. Once you have done that, find two more words that describe how you are feeling. You may be surprised by what you uncover.

Susan David provides this example of what may be underlying the obvious.

A List of Emotions

Go beyond the obvious to identify exactly what you're feeling.

Angry	Sad	Anxious	Hurt	Embarrassed	Happy
Grumpy	Disappointed	Afraid	Jealous	Isolated	Thankful
Frustrated	Mournful	Stressed	Betrayed	Self-conscious	Trusting
Annoyed	Regretful	Vulnerable	Isolated	Lonely	Comfortable
Defensive	Depressed	Confused	Shocked	Inferior	Content
Spiteful	Paralyzed	Bewildered	Deprived	Guilty	Excited
Impatient	Pessimistic	Skeptical	Victimized	Ashamed	Relaxed
Disgusted	Tearful	Worried	Aggrieved	Repugnant	Relieved
Offended	Dismayed	Cautious	Tormented	Pathetic	Elated
Irritated	Disillusioned	Nervous	Abandoned	Confused	Confident

SOURCE SUSAN DAVID

© HBR.ORG

4.1.4 Reflection

We all have busy lives and that means we often do not take time out to reflect. We must take time out to reflect on the past day or week. We must go over our thoughts, feelings and behaviours and see where we would have liked to have felt differently or done things differently.

Some people reflect by writing in a journal while others sit quietly with their thoughts. It is about what works for you.

4.1.5 Feedback

Ask other people for feedback and make sure you listen. You must listen without judgement, bias, or filters. Discover how other people perceive you. You cannot be fully self-aware if you only look inwards. You must gain other perspectives.

5 Growth mindset

Just as you need self-awareness to become an adaptive leader, you also need to possess a growth mindset.

Dr Carol Dweck, an American psychologist and professor at Stanford University, coined the term. She and her colleagues became interested in students' attitudes about failure. They noticed that some students rebounded while other students seemed devastated by even the smallest setbacks. After studying the behaviour of thousands of children, Dr Dweck coined the terms fixed mindset and growth mindset to describe the underlying beliefs people have about learning and intelligence.

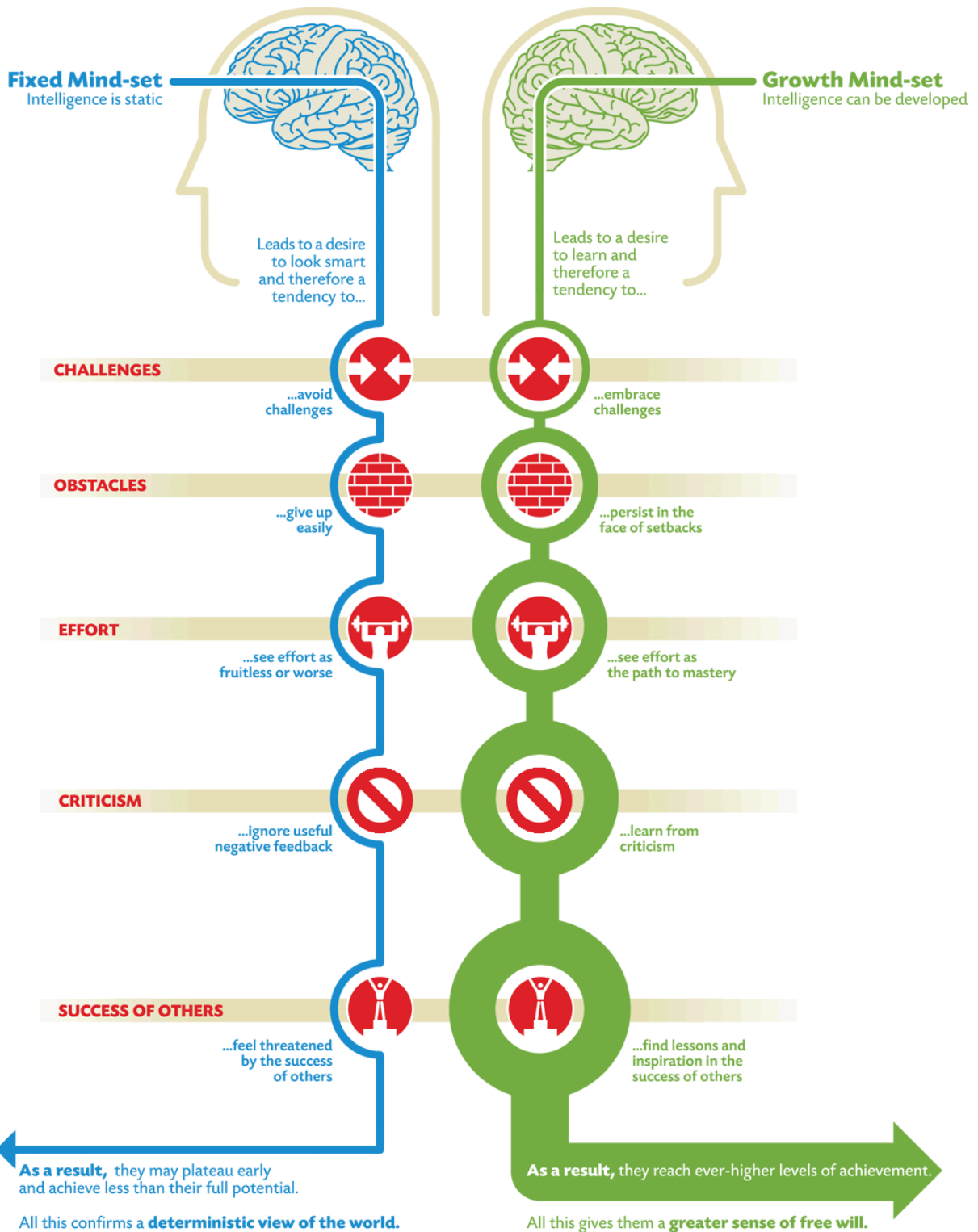
When we believe we can get smarter, we understand that the effort will make us stronger. We then put in the time and effort to achieve our goals. People with a fixed mindset believe that their success is based on their innate ability. People with a growth mindset believe that their success is based on hard work, learning, training, determination, and perseverance.

Fixed-mindset individuals dread failure because it is a negative statement on their basic abilities, while growth mindset individuals don't mind or fear failure as much because they realize their performance can be improved and learning comes from failure. People with a growth mindset can adapt.

The graphic below demonstrates the research carried out by Dr Dweck. It should be apparent that if you are on the left-hand side of the graphic, you are not going to be an adaptive leader.

Adaptive leaders embrace challenges, persist in the face of setbacks, are prepared to put in the hard yards to grow, embrace feedback, and learn from others.

Adaptive leadership will take you out of your daily routine into unknown territory, requiring ways of acting that are outside of your repertoire, with no guarantee of your competence or success. This brings with it a risk, as you cannot rely on what you learned in the past. You have to unlearn and relearn. You cannot take on an adaptive challenge without making adaptations yourself. With a growth mindset you can embrace these challenges and grow.



Source: <https://www.mindsetworks.com/science/Impact>

Adaptive leaders have a continuous learning mindset. This is what continuous learning looks like within the organisation.

- People who make mistakes or experiment with new ways of doing things are not marginalised. They are recognised.
- When strategic decisions need to be made, the perspective of many employees is considered, particularly those closest to the customer, consumer, or constituent.
- Planning and review sessions regularly scheduled and include people from all levels of the organisation in conversation.
- When something goes awry, the news is acknowledged, the event assessed, and celebrated for its learning opportunity.
- Everyone is encouraged to take timeout to refresh and gain new perspectives.
- Cross-functional communication, interaction, and collaboration are not hindered by formal or informal boundaries.
- Reflection is encouraged on an individual and team level.
- Coaching and mentoring, as well as learning and development, are available to all employees.
- Everyone knows that plans reflect a point in time and will change as new information becomes available.

6 Listen and speak from the heart

As an adaptive leader, you must be able to communicate and listen effectively. If you want to motivate people to follow you, you must speak in a language that resonates with them and listen carefully to their responses. Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky call this listening and speaking from the heart.

6.1 Listen

Listen from your heart, take in information beyond what is being said, using as sources of information your own feelings and the nonverbal signals people are giving you.

When you are working with a group of people, the emotions you are feeling are often reflective of what they are feeling. If you are feeling excited, it is likely because they are too. If you are feeling anxious, it is likely reflecting how others are feeling. This is listening from the heart.

You also need to listen for clues beyond just the words that are being said. What does the body language tell you? What does the intonation tell you? If you are not sure what it is telling you, ask questions to find out. Ask open-ended questions that require more than just a yes or no answer. Probe and find out what is causing anxiety or concern. What are people afraid of? What political agenda is at play? What are the conflicts?

You must practice active listening. This means that you are fully present in the conversation. You can concentrate and give the speaker(s) your full attention. You have removed all distractions and are focused. You are watching for those unspoken clues to what the other people are thinking and feeling. Your body language must also show that you are truly listening. Do not fold your arms. Smile and look the other person in the eye. Lean in and acknowledge with a nod of your head that you have heard what they are saying.

You must ensure that what you think you have heard, is what was intended for you to hear. You must playback or paraphrase your understanding so that the other person can correct it if necessary.

Do not interrupt. You must be comfortable with silence. Do not try and fill the space. Silence can have content. The content could be a concern, confusion, relief, or elation. Watching the non-verbal clues during the silence can alert you to the subtext.

You must be patient as the other person thinks about what they wish to say. Do not interrupt. Do not prepare a response as the other person is speaking. Do not try and finish sentences for them as they pause to think.

When you actively listen, you are non-judgemental. You must remove filters, biases, and prejudices, otherwise, you will not hear what is being said. You must listen with empathy. People often say that empathy is walking a mile in another person's shoes. I do not agree. I believe it is understanding how the other person feels walking in their shoes.

You must understand how they are feeling and acknowledge that you understand. You must ensure that the other person knows you understand and that you will do something about it.

6.2 Speak

You need to communicate openly and honestly. When you are leading people through change, it is their hearts that you must win over, not their heads. If you want them to let you into their hearts, you must let them into yours.

You must speak from the heart.

Just as when listening, when communicating you must be fully present. Who will believe what you are conveying about adaptive change when your mind is elsewhere? You must stay anchored and focused. Pause before you speak to connect with yourself.

You must consider your words carefully and never lose sight of what it is you want to say. You must communicate with intention. Be absolutely clear on the message you wish to impart and the outcomes you want to achieve and choose words that directly convey that message. The message must be straight and to the point. There is no room for ambiguity.

Do not fall into the trap of believing you can over-communicate. You can't unless your messages are unclear, vague, and conflicting. No one ever left an organisation because they were told too much!

Know your audience. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to communication. Everyone is different with different needs. You must communicate with others in ways that suit the recipient(s). You must get insight into others' preferred communication styles and adapt your style to that of the recipient(s). Want to know their style? Ask. Want to know if your communication is effective? Ask.

You must check that your message has been heard as you intended it to be heard. Check-in with your audience and ask them to playback or paraphrase what they think you said. If their interpretation of your message is not what you intended, you now have an opportunity to correct it and provide clarification. If you don't check in, you will have no idea what has been heard and that can be very dangerous.

7 Authenticity and trust

People will not follow someone they do not trust. People will not follow someone who is inconsistent. People want to follow “real” people who are honest, courageous, and willing to get into the midst of things when needed. They want leaders who will connect with them and understand them.

When a leader is both authentic and trusted, employees can be inspired and motivated. This is needed when leading people through adaptive change. Adaptive challenges involve values, not simply facts or logic. Resolving them engages people's beliefs and loyalties, which lie in their hearts, not their heads.

7.1 Authenticity

Authentic leaders are genuine, honest, self-aware, and transparent. They are not air-brushed or hiding behind a facade. What you see in an authentic leader is their real self.

There are many definitions of authentic leadership and the traits displayed. These are what I believe are core to authentic leadership.

7.1.1 Aligned with their values

Authentic leaders are clear on their values, and they are true to them. People know that they will do what they say and that their behaviours will not deviate from their expectations. They will not compromise on their values for anything. They possess integrity. Not only do they always behave in a way that is in line with their values, but they expect the same from their employees.

Employees who see a leader who holds themselves true to their values will show them respect and appreciation.

7.1.2 Self-aware

Authentic leaders are aware of their strengths, weaknesses, and values. They have an open mind and intentionally seek feedback from others. They continue to adjust their behaviour to be a better leader.

7.1.3 Transparency

When authentic leaders demonstrate transparency, they openly share their thoughts and beliefs yet do not overly display their emotions to followers; they maintain a good balance.

This is explained in a HBR article by Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones – “[Managing Authenticity: The Paradox of Great Leadership.](#)”

They say that authenticity “accurately reflects aspects of the leader's inner self, so it can't be an act. But great leaders seem to know which personality traits they should reveal to whom and when. They are like chameleons, capable of adapting to the demands of the situations they face and the people they lead, yet they do not lose their identities in the process.”

Therefore, transparency does not mean the authentic leader always wears their heart on their sleeve.

As Kevin Kruse explained in a [Forbes](#) article:

“Authentic leaders lead with their heart, not just their minds. They are not afraid to show their emotions, their vulnerability and to connect with their employees. This does not mean authentic leaders are “soft.” In fact, communicating in a direct manner is critical to successful outcomes, but it’s done with empathy; directness without empathy is cruel.”

They are prepared to admit their mistakes and they build relationships based on honesty and trust. They are open with others about their strengths and weaknesses. They ask others for their opinions, ideas, and expertise. They are prepared to be vulnerable.

7.1.4 Consistent

Authentic leaders do what they say they will do. They say what they mean and do what they say. The authentic leader has credibility because there is consistency.

They are not only consistent between what they say and do but also in their emotions and behaviours. They possess the self-discipline to manage their emotions and to develop and maintain good habits.

An authentic leader does not change with seasons or trends. Their personality and values remain steadfast in the face of change, success, failure, setbacks, or praise.

7.2 Trust

Trust is closely aligned with authenticity and the words are often used interchangeably. However, I believe it needs to be called out on its own as needed to be an adaptive leader.

Adaptive leadership is about leading people through change. This is about leading teams in new and innovative ways which required the leader to build and maintain trust with their team.

Trust in the leader means that there is a foundation upon which individuals, teams, and the organization can adjust, adapt, and thrive, in the face of constant and complex change.

Trust means there is no doubt. There is no doubt about another person's intentions or capabilities. Trust is a two-way street. Leaders must show trust in their team if they expect the team to trust them.

Trust is built over time and must be maintained and sustained. As the saying goes:

“Trust takes years to build, seconds to break, and forever to repair.”

If a leader does not create, maintain, and sustain trust, there is no sense of team. When there is trust in a team, each team member knows they can rely on each other to do the right thing. They believe in each other's integrity and strength and know that they have your back. The team feels safe with each other, they can be open and honest with each other, take appropriate risks and show their vulnerabilities. They share knowledge and communicate openly.

There is a myriad of ways to build trust in your team. I want to explore what I believe are the top 5 elements that must be in place, and I am using the word TRUST as an acronym for the five.

7.2.1 Transparency

No one trusts a leader who hides behind platitudes and untruths. Transparent leaders are open and honest with their people. They involve their team in decision-making and share information widely ensuring everyone, regardless of location, is informed and involved.

Transparent leaders do not treat their employees like children and assume they will not be able to handle the information shared. Your employees are adults and just as mature and capable of handling information as you are. Of course, there may be circumstances when it would not be appropriate to share information with your team but that should be the exception.

Transparent leaders not only give employees feedback but actively seek it out for themselves. They are open about wanting to be better at what they do and ask for honest feedback. Their employees know that there will be no judgement or reprisal if the feedback highlights a weakness in the leader. Employees are asked to provide examples in their feedback and the leader's response is 'thank-you.' These leaders do not get defensive or angry – they embrace the feedback as an opportunity for growth. Most of all, they act upon it.

Transparent leaders are also authentic. As well as being transparent, they are ethical and true to themselves. They do not hide behind a mask. What you see is what you get. The authentic leader is self-aware – they know who they are and how they impact others. They bring their whole self to the leadership role – intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually.

When authentic leaders make a mistake, they are prepared to acknowledge it. They know they are not infallible and do not pretend to have all the answers. This is a leader who is trusted. These leaders are prepared to be vulnerable and share their feeling and concerns. They will ask for help when they need it. When leaders are honest with themselves and their teams, they create trust.

The authentic leader holds themselves accountable for their actions. They do what they said they would do. They follow through. Their words hold weight. If for any reason they cannot deliver, they share the reason why.

Transparent leaders communicate with clarity. They ensure that their employees have heard what they intended them to hear. There is no place for ambiguity

7.2.2 Relationship

The right relationship you create with your team and the relationship you encourage within the team establishes trust. In a distributed team with some employees working remotely, leaders must create a personal, positive, and consistent relationship with each team member.

Leaders that build trust show that they genuinely care for their employees. They show interest in their well-being, their interests, aspirations, and development. They are

invested in their employees' growth and driven to enable them to be the best they can be.

Employees feel valued and know their leader has their back. These leaders lead with empathy and compassion.

A demonstration of leadership trust is empowering employees and giving them the autonomy to deliver outcomes and value in a way they see best. When a leader micromanages, they are shouting "I do not trust you to do the job." Good leaders trust their team to do the right thing but are always there to support, guide and advise as needed. These leaders do not direct – they provide direction. These leaders trust their employees to get the job done and measure performance on outcomes and value delivered not hours spent at the keyboard.

Another demonstration of trust is providing employees with the flexibility to work where they want, when they want and how they want. There are parameters so that team and business objectives can be delivered but this leader provides principles rather than policies. For example, rather than dictating by policy the number of days employees need to be in the office, suggest by principles that the team should get together in the office at least once every two-weeks for activities that are collaborative and social in nature.

Trust is a two-way street so when a leader trusts an employee the reverse happens. Trust is also contagious and as employees watch their leader build trust, they will follow suit with their fellow employees.

7.2.3 Unity

Leaders building trust bring the team together either physically or virtually or a combination of both for team-building activities. These are not the activities that result in eye-rolling but the ones that the team have indicated they are interested in participating in. These team-building exercises should include those focused on building trust.

Trust also comes with unity resulting from team diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I). Adaptive leaders leading distributed teams will find that DE&I takes on a new challenge.

Whilst DEI has focused on identities such as race, gender, colour, sexual orientation, religion and so on, we are now adding two more - those in the office and those who are not.

Leaders must make sure that everyone is on a level playing field and that there is no bias or preferential treatment related to where you work. Leaders must be aware of proximity bias and remove it. Proximity bias refers to a tendency to give preferential treatment to those in our immediate vicinity. In the distributed team, this means giving preferential treatment to those co-located with you.

If an employee working remotely does not feel included and treated equally it will erode not only their trust in their leader but also their team. Leaders must work with every member of the team to ensure they treat everyone fairly and include them in finding ways to achieve it.

Whilst leaders must be available and accessible to support their employee, they also need to encourage every employee to support their colleagues. When an employee knows that their co-workers will willingly help them when needed, this builds trust.

Encouraging team and cross-team collaboration also builds trust. When employees create, share, and utilize knowledge, this demonstrates a climate of trust. Knowledge is not retained because it is perceived as making a person more important, it is shared openly to enhance the performance of the collective, not the individual.

7.2.4 Safety

The foundation of psychological safety is trust. There is also the chicken and egg conundrum. When you create an environment of psychological safety, trust increases.

Psychological safety means employees will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes. Every contribution is welcomed and listened to with respect. Employees trust their leader and each other to hear what they have to say without any fear of repercussion or reprisal. Each time that happens, trust grows stronger.

When there is no trust or psychological safety, there will be silence which could be the worst type of silence – the deadly silence. Employees will not share their thoughts or idea, concerns, or worries. Managers will not receive feedback that an adaptive change in direction may be needed or that an intended change is the wrong thing to do. Employees may even lie to be seen to say the 'right' thing.

Leaders also establish trust by praising publicly and correcting privately. Positively reinforce the behaviours you want to see more of by recognising and commending an employee in the team setting. When something does not go as planned, leaders ask, "What can we do better next time?" There is no blame or finger-pointing. The accountability is with the leader. Accountability generates trust.

7.2.5 Touchpoints

A leader builds trust by checking in, regularly, with every member of their team. There are many touchpoints.

Good leaders have regular one-on-one sessions. They ensure every member of the team feels valued and prioritised. They look out for the physical and mental well-being of team members and show that they care. They enquire about the challenges an employee may be facing.

They actively listen to what employees say and acknowledge they have heard. They are primarily coaches and mentors rather than managers or bosses. They do not reschedule or cancel a one-on-one session unless absolutely necessary. Bosses who do this are sending the message that the employee is not a priority.

There are regular team meetings which are both informal and formal. The Monday morning huddle is a favourite informal session of mine and keeps the team connected and builds relationships. It is not about work, it is about each other.

The key to touchpoints is to keep them regular and consistent.

8 Leadership v. Authority

Many people confuse leadership with authority. You can have a person in your organisation who has a position of authority but has never led the organisation through adaptive change. We may do what they say due to their authority, but we would not follow them as a leader.

You can have people in your organisation who have not been bestowed with any formal authority but demonstrate leadership through their behaviours and actions. They look after their colleagues and peers. You trust them and would follow them.

You do not need a rank or title to be a leader. Leadership is a characteristic, not a role. Authority is a position.

Adaptive leaders must use their leadership skills to effect change instead of authority. When you use your leadership skills, people have a choice as to whether they follow you. When you use your authority, people have little choice. They may carry out your instructions, but they are not following you.

When people follow you, they do so because they feel connected to you and aligned with your goals and objectives. This is followership from the heart, not the mind.

A fundamental to leadership is connection and leaders do this through effective communication and active listening. See 6.

True leaders lead with integrity and humility. They share their knowledge. They intentionally give and take feedback regularly. They create and sustain relationships built on trust and mutual respect. They provide direction but do not direct. They are coaches and mentors.

Adaptive leaders build adaptive leaders. They enable employees to anticipate what is going to happen, prepare for it, adapt to it, recover from any setbacks, and keep going in the face of adversity.

The Practice

9 Technical problems and adaptive challenges

At the core of adaptive leadership is distinguishing adaptive challenges from technical problems.

Technical problems have known solutions that can be implemented with existing knowledge and expertise. They may be complex and critical such as replacing a faulty heart valve during cardiac surgery, but they can be addressed with existing structures, processes, and procedures.

Adaptive challenges require new, creative solutions. Often there is a tendency to treat an adaptive challenge as a technical problem due to the personal risk in implementing new and creative solutions. Adaptive challenges are complex and ambiguous in nature. They may be volatile and unpredictable. Adaptive change usually requires people to learn new ways of doing things and a change in people's priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties.

Solutions to adaptive challenges require experiments and discoveries and they can take a long time to implement. They cannot be implemented by decree i.e., authority. They are implemented through adaptive leadership – i.e., trust, shared responsibility, and continuous learning.

Adaptive challenges depend on dynamic, people-focused solutions.

Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky describe the adaptive challenge as having three tough human tasks.

“Unlike known or routine problem solving for which past ways of thinking, relating, and operating are sufficient for achieving good outcomes, adaptive work demands three, very tough, human tasks: figuring out what to conserve from past practices, figuring out what to discard from past practices, and inventing new ways that build from the best of the past.”

The adaptive challenge is not just one of analytical complexity but also human complexity which is why I was drawn to the concept of adaptive leadership. The problems themselves cannot be separated from the people who are a part of the problem scenario itself.

In true organisational change management fashion, the analysis must consider the human dimensions of the changes required including the human costs, speed of change, conflict, uncertainty, risk, and loss. The organisational culture, the authority network and the relationships across the organisation that must support the changes also have to be analysed.

To determine whether you are facing an adaptive challenge you must look for two characteristic signals: a cycle of failure and a persistent dependency on authority.

A cycle of failure comes from trying to apply technical solutions to adaptive challenges and continuing to do so in the hope that the outcomes will change.

A dependency on authority occurs when we hold authority responsible for causing and/or fixing problems. This may make sense when it is a technical problem, and the authority has the expertise. When it is an adaptive challenge, authority cannot solve it by issuing a directive or bringing experts together. This is because the solution is in new attitudes, competencies, and coordination of people with the problem itself. The work to

address the adaptive challenge must be done by the people connected to the problem. Authority should mobilise these people rather than try to solve the problem on their behalf.

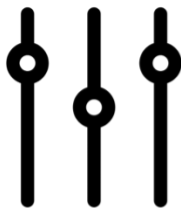
The six steps described in the remainder of this paper form the practice of adaptive leadership.



Get on the balcony



Identify the adaptive challenge



Regulate distress



Maintain disciplined attention



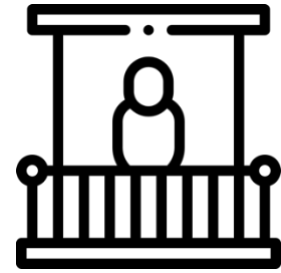
Give the work back to the people



Protect the voices of leadership from below

10 Get on the balcony

It is difficult to diagnose the adaptive challenge whilst amid the action. You need to distance yourself from those 'on-the-ground' events. Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky use the metaphor of "getting on the balcony" above the "dance floor" to illustrate what it means to get a distanced perspective and observe what is really happening.



It is an image that captures the mental activity of stepping back from the action and asking, "What is really going on here?"

This is the first step in tackling an adaptive challenge so that you can see how the organisation is responding to the challenge. You must get out of the fray and see the bigger picture.

If you stay on the dance floor you will just see the people dancing with you, and around you. You may see a very different picture when you get on the balcony.

Imagine being on the dancefloor, swept up in the music and thinking it is a great party. You move to the balcony and note that the DJ is so loud that most people are dancing on the far side of the room. The music is changing from fast to slow and back again so often that people are constantly entering or leaving the dancefloor. There are many people not dancing and just hanging around by the exits. The picture you now have is one of not such a great party.

You must move back and forth from the balcony to the dance floor to continually assess what is happening in the organisation and take mid-course corrective action. What may have seemed like a good plan yesterday, may not look so good today.

Another metaphor is getting off the field of action as one of the players and observing the game from above. When you can see the state of play you can survey an array of interacting factors such as shifting technological capabilities, changing expectations of customers and consumers, and market forces. It also allows you to see the various reactions to change and emerging struggles.

As a leader, you cannot guide your organisation through change without having a balcony perspective.

Now that you have perspective, you can identify the adaptive challenge.

11 Identify the adaptive challenge



We have looked at how to determine the technical problem from the adaptive challenge. We know the characteristics of the adaptive challenge.

Each of the characteristics is a flag or signal for diagnosis.

Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky provide a table that connects the characteristics with a social flag that gives you a starting point for your diagnosis.

Identifying a primarily adaptive challenge

Concept	Identifying flag
Persistent gap between aspirations and reality.	The language of complain is used increasingly to describe the current situation.
Responses within current repertoire inadequate.	Previously successful outside experts and internal authorities unable to solve the problem.
Difficult learning required.	Frustration and stress manifest. Failures more frequent than usual. Traditional problem-solving methods used repeatedly, but without success.
New stakeholders across boundaries need to be engaged.	Rounding up the usual suspects to address the issue has not produced progress.
Longer time frame necessary.	Problem festers or reappears after short-term fix is applied.
Disequilibrium experienced as sense of crisis starting to be felt.	Increasing conflict and frustration generate tension and chaos. Willingness to try something new begins to build as urgency becomes widespread.

It is important when identifying adaptive challenges that you look beyond what people are saying about them.

Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky call this 'listening to the song beneath the words.' There is so much more lurking beneath the words. This involves observing body language, eye contact, emotion, and energy. Pay as much attention to what is not being said, as to what is being said.

They also provide four adaptive challenges archetypes that can help you identify and diagnose the adaptive challenges in your organisation.

11.1 Gap between espoused values and behaviours

Organisations and individuals can have a gap between what they say they value and how they behave. This is often because closing that gap can be painful, traumatic, or disruptive. There can be a gap between the organisation's espoused values and its actual behaviour when authorities advocate collaborative behaviour but reward individual performance. Closing this gap is difficult because people in the organisation have been successful through their patterns of behaviour and will want to continue to

do what has earned them success, especially when they are recognised and rewarded for doing so.

11.2 Competing commitments

Often an organisation's commitments can come into conflict. When competing commitments cause conflict, organisational leaders must make a hard decision that will favour one group of people over another.

When a decision like this is hard, leaders often avoid making them or try and find a compromise that does not serve any group of stakeholders well. The conflict continues.

The bottom line is that the conflict can only be closed when the decision is made that one group of people will gain whilst another group of people will lose.

11.3 Speaking the unspeakable

People must share what seems unspeakable if an organisation is to move forward in the face of changing priorities or external conditions. All perspectives must be surfaced for a group of people to increase their chances of developing adaptive solutions.

We must surface radical ideas, naming of difficult issues, emerging conflicts, and tensions so they can be addressed.

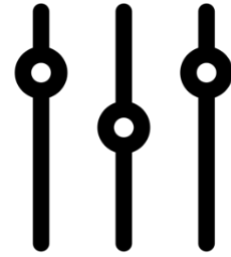
11.4 Work avoidance

There are two common ways in which people try to avoid the potential pain of adaptive change. The first is a diversion of attention and the second is displacing responsibility. Sometimes these may be deliberate protection against change whilst at other times they may be unconscious reactions.

When faced with an adaptive challenge people may initially assess and address it realistically. But if there are no early wins, they may move into a more protective space to endure the prolonged uncertainty that comes with complex change.

Work avoidance tactics can include denying that the problem exists; applying a technical fix only; generating conflict that has no relation to the real problem; finding a scapegoat; attacking authority; or giving the problem to those who cannot do anything about it such as consultants or committees.

12 Regulate distress



While adaptive change may be stressful for people going through it, protecting them from it will not help. Leaders must develop workforce resilience in the face of constant and complex change. Conflict related to adaptive change must be surfaced otherwise the status quo will be maintained.

Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky suggest that to orchestrate conflict effectively you should think about yourself as having your hand on the thermometer and always watching for signals that you need to raise or lower the temperature in the room. The aim is to keep the temperature – the intensity of the disequilibrium created by discussion of the conflict – high enough to motivate people to arrive at creative next steps and potentially useful solutions, but not so high that it drives them away or makes it impossible for them to function.

Leaders must help others recognise the need for change but not be overwhelmed by it. They must create a holding environment that enables people to come together and maintain their collective focus on what they are trying to do. The holding environment provides safety and structure for people to surface and discuss the particular values, perspectives, and creative ideas they have on the challenging situation they face.

The temperature that can be endured by a group will depend on their cohesiveness, shared history and values, and experience with adaptive work. A cohesive group will endure a higher temperature than a less cohesive group without breaking apart. The leader must gauge when the temperature needs to be raised or lowered. The following table from Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, shows examples of how you can raise or lower the temperature in the organisation.

Controlling the temperature	
To raise the temperature ...	To lower the temperature ...
Draw attention to the tough questions.	Address the aspects of the conflict that have the most obvious and technical solutions.
Give people more responsibility than they are comfortable with.	Provide structure by breaking the problem into parts and creating timeframes, decision rules, and role assignments.
Bring conflicts to the surface.	Temporarily reclaim responsibility for the tough issues.
Tolerate provocative comments.	Employ work avoidance mechanisms such as a taking a break, telling a joke or a story, or doing an exercise.
Name and use some of the dynamics in the room at the moment to illustrate some of the issues facing the group e.g., getting the authority figure to do the work; scapegoating an individual; externalising the blame; and tossing technical fixes at the situation.	Slow down the process of challenging norms and expectations.

13 Maintain disciplined attention

Leaders must encourage people to focus on the tough work they need to do.

Individuals and teams within the same organisation are often locked into their way of seeing the world and acting within it.

This divergence of experiences, assumptions, values, beliefs, and habits can make it difficult for people to come together and address their competing perspectives as a collective.

It can be difficult to hold attention to the new realities and the difficulties that they present. People can avoid paying attention to the issues that disturb them. As discussed earlier, they can avoid facing the situation with work avoidance techniques such as diversion of attention and displacing responsibility.

Leaders must get employees to confront the rough trade-offs in values, procedures, operating styles, and power.

This must occur at every level of the organisation. If leaders cannot model adaptive work, the organisation will fail. Leaders must be able to surface and deal with divisive issues. If they can't then they cannot expect others in the organisation to do so.

Distractions must be identified when they occur so that people will regain focus. Leaders must be prepared to step in to help people maintain their focus.

"Disciplined attention is the currency of leadership."



14 Give the work back to the people

Every person in the organisation gains access to important information that comes from their particular vantage point. Every employee needs to act on the special knowledge that they have access to. Employees at the coal face often spot changes in customer expectations, market conditions, and competition, long before their superiors do.



The over-reliance on hierarchy and the expectation that senior management will act can lead to passive behaviour on the part of the employee.

Leaders must learn to support their employees and operate with autonomy and trust rather than command and control. They must let employees take the initiative in defining and solving problems. Employees must learn to take responsibility.

Leaders must foster a responsibility-taking mindset across the entire organisation.

15 Protect the voices of leadership from below

Everyone in the organisation must have a voice if there is to be experimentation and learning.

The voices that routinely get silenced are the deviants, creatives, and whistle-blowers. Even though they may be highlighting a major problem that needs fixing, they go unheard.



Their voices may not be as articulate as others. They may be frustrated. They may be nervous or self-conscious. They may be over-zealous. All these factors contribute to the ineffectiveness of their communication.

They may not pick the best place and time to voice their opinion and they may not use the preferred channels of communication.

But, contained within a poorly packaged injection could be a pearl of information that needs to be considered. Ignoring it means you lose potentially valuable information, and you also discourage a potential leader in the organisation from contributing.

Leaders must create an environment of psychological safety in which every employee feels safe to share ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes, without fear of punishment or humiliation. Leaders must build teams with a shared expectation that team members will not embarrass, reject, or abuse other team members for sharing their ideas, taking risks, or providing feedback.

Everyone must keep an open mind, be aware of their biases, refrain from judgement, and actively listen to what someone has to say.

16 Conclusion

Leaders must possess the traits discussed in this paper to effectively practice adaptive leadership.

I encourage you to develop self-awareness of your competency and capacity to possess a growth mindset, listen and speak from the heart, lead with authenticity and trust, and use your leadership skills – not your authority – to drive adaptive change within your organisation.

