



FROM STATUS QUO TO SUCCESS

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THE PRACTICE OF ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP:

Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World
By Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, Marty Linsky
Harvard Business Press, 2009

**All too often, on the long road up, young leaders become
'servants of what is' rather than 'shapers of what might be.'**

--John Gardner

In a world drowning in literature on leadership, three names rise to surface as ones to be heard and heeded. They are Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky. Heifetz first mapped the bold new theory of “adaptive leadership” in his book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. In this latest work, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, he and his coauthors further develop this revolutionary and helpful concept for anyone called to lead—whether it’s a Boy Scout troop, a Fortune 500 corporation, or something in between.

Leadership and change are conjoined and inseparable twins. To be a leader is to navigate the waters of change that can often be rough and fraught with danger. Even those who successfully navigate these waters often find that the changes fought for often have minimal impact and even, in some cases, only seem to serve to reinforce the status quo. Heifetz says that this is because we often fail to distinguish the difference between “technical changes” and “adaptive changes.”

Technical changes are attempts to fix ordinary problems within a system while essentially keeping the system as-is. Doing so is akin to rearranging the deck chairs on a ship that may be sinking. These technical changes may give the appearance of helping but are ultimately ineffectual on their own. According to the authors, the biggest mistake many organizations make is wrongly diagnosing the kind of change needed, going for the quick or easy fix when something much bigger is necessary.

Adaptive changes are that “something much bigger”, addressing fundamental values and that demand innovation, learning, and changes to the system itself. In other words, adaptive changes dare to mess with the DNA of the system or organization and upset the status quo.

Adaptive change is invariably more difficult than technical change because systems love homeostasis, or keeping things the same. That is why we who live and work within systems, including our congregations, are often quick to embrace technical change, which actually helps maintain the status quo. In contrast, adaptive change addresses the underlying issues by altering the fundamental nature of the system—something the system itself is resistant to.

According to the authors, the practice of leadership involves two processes: diagnosis and action. The process begins with data collection, leading to problem identification, then interpretation and ultimately to the

development of an action plan. It is very similar to visiting the physician. He or she essentially does three things: gathers information, makes a diagnosis and decides what to do about it, whether it's prescribing a pill or schedule surgery. The single most important skill and most undervalued capacity for exercising adaptive leadership is keen diagnosis.

Adaptive leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges. As such, successful adaptive changes build on the past rather than totally discard it. A key challenge for the leader is to help people distinguish what from the past is worthy of preservation and what is expendable. Successful adaptations are thus both conservative and progressive.

Successful adaptive leadership requires patience, persistence, an eye for obstacles and a willingness to overcome them. The last two are of utmost importance because the system will slip back into its old ways without someone to champion the changes and motivate others to fight for them as well. This is a constant battle when undergoing adaptive change because of the tendency toward homeostasis within systems.

The authors remind us that people do not resist change *per se*—no one would reject a promotion or pay raise—but it is *loss* that they resist. Resistance to loss is often what defeats adaptive change. I have a formula that I use to explain this reaction to change: Change = Loss = Grief. The practice of adaptive leadership is to help people navigate through a period of disturbance as they sift through what is expendable, and hopefully eventually come to a place of positive acceptance.

As all of this implies, adaptive change creates heat and pushback. One of the more helpful discussions in the book is the section on “the productive zone of disequilibrium.” This zone is the where there is enough heat generated by the intervention to gain attention, engagement and forward motion, but not so much that the organization explodes. The authors use the example of a pressure cooker: If the heat isn't turned high enough, what's inside won't become dinner. Turned too high, however, your dinner may have to be eaten off the ceiling. The productive zone is that area between too low and too high but just right.

Another helpful concept that Heifetz unpacked in his first book and further develops in this one is the concept of “getting on the balcony.” He likens the organization to a dance on a large dance floor. When engaged in the dance on the dance floor, you will see what is immediately around you, but if you really want to know what is going on, climb to the balcony for a wider vantage point. From the balcony, you get a totally different perspective. You get the bigger picture of what is going on. Every leader should routinely climb to the balcony over their organization to survey, study, and to gain perspective on what is going on and discern the adjustments that need to be made. Not doing so inevitably leads to the most common of leadership failures: applying technical solutions to adaptive challenges.

The authors describe their work as “a field book—written from the field for the field” for those who want to strengthen their leadership skills to help their organization, community and society thrive in a changing world. The principles in this book, when applied, will certainly do just that.