

The Theory Behind the Practice

A Brief Introduction to the Adaptive Leadership Framework

Excerpted from

The Practice of Adaptive Leadership:
Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World

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Harvard Business Press
Boston, Massachusetts

ISBN-13: 978-1-4221-3240-1
3241BC

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| CHAPTER 2 |

The Theory Behind the Practice

SINCE 1994, ADAPTIVE leadership has been advanced and explored in a series of other books in addition to *Leadership Without Easy Answers* and *Leadership on the Line*.[1] The burgeoning literature in this emerging field includes the work of our colleagues Sharon Daloz Parks, in *Leadership* Can *Be Taught*, and Dean Williams, in *Real Leadership*.[2] Other books have applied the adaptive leadership framework to the challenges in specific professional contexts. These include Richard Foster and Sarah Kaplan's *Creative Destruction* and Donald L. Laurie's *The Real Work of Leaders* on applications to big businesses; Gary De Carolis's *A View from the Balcony* on systems of care; Stacie Goffin and Valora Washington's *Ready or Not* on early childhood education; Shifra Bronznick, Didi Goldenhar, and Marty Linsky's *Leveling the Playing Field* on women in Jewish organizational life; and Kevin Ford's *Transforming Church: Bringing Out the Good to Get to Great* on the challenges facing American churches.[3]

This work grows from efforts to understand in practical ways the relationship among leadership, adaptation, systems, and change, but also has deep roots in scientific efforts to explain the evolution of human life, and before us, the evolution of all life going back to the beginning of the earth.

For nearly 4 million years, our early ancestors lived in small bands that foraged for food. They developed ever-increasing sophistication

in the design of tools and strategies for hunting and movement; and their physical capacity grew as they developed ways, through evolutionary change, to increase their range. Drawing on what anthropologists and psychologists have identified as our capacity to internalize the wisdom of elders, the first humans went on to form cultures with self-sustaining norms that required minimal reinforcement by authorities. Cultural norms gave human beings remarkable adaptability and scalability when, quite recently, about twelve thousand years ago, people learned to domesticate plants and animals, and their new ability to store food allowed and required sustained settlements. Large numbers of people living together brought new needs for governing large organizations and communities.

Our early ancestors' process of adaptation to new possibilities and challenges has continued over the course of written history with the growth and variation in scope, structure, governance, strategy, and coordination of political and commercial enterprise. So has the evolution in understanding the practice of managing those processes, including in our lifetimes what we call adaptive leadership.

Adaptive leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive. The concept of *thriving* is drawn from evolutionary biology, in which a successful adaptation has three characteristics: (1) it preserves the DNA essential for the species' continued survival; (2) it discards (reregulates or rearranges) the DNA that no longer serves the species' current needs; and (3) it creates DNA arrangements that give the species' the ability to flourish in new ways and in more challenging environments. Successful adaptations enable a living system to take the best from its history into the future.

What does this suggest as an analogy for adaptive leadership?

- *Adaptive leadership is specifically about change that enables the capacity to thrive.* New environments and new dreams demand new strategies and abilities, as well as the leadership to mobilize them. As in evolution, these new combinations and variations help organizations thrive under challenging circumstances rather than perish, regress, or contract. Leadership, then, must wrestle with normative questions of value, purpose, and process. What does *thriving* mean for organizations operating in any particular context?

In biology, thriving means propagating. But in business, for example, signs of thriving include increases in short- and long-term shareholder value, exceptional customer service, high workforce morale, and positive social and environmental impact. Thus adaptive success in an organizational sense requires leadership that can orchestrate multiple stakeholder priorities to define thriving and then realize it.

- *Successful adaptive changes build on the past rather than jettison it*. In biological adaptations, though DNA changes may radically expand the species' capacity to thrive, the actual *amount* of DNA that changes is minuscule. More than 98 percent of our current DNA is the same as that of a chimpanzee: it took less than a 2 percent change of our evolutionary predecessors' genetic blueprint to give humans extraordinary range and ability. A challenge for adaptive leadership, then, is to engage people in distinguishing what is essential to preserve from their organization's heritage from what is expendable. Successful adaptations are thus both conservative *and* progressive. They make the best possible use of previous wisdom and know-how. The most effective leadership anchors change in the values, competencies, and strategic orientations that should endure in the organization.

- *Organizational adaptation occurs through experimentation.* In biology, sexual reproduction is an experiment: it rapidly produces variations—along with high failure rates. As many as one-third of all pregnancies spontaneously miscarry, usually within the first weeks of conception, because the embryo's genetic variation is too radical to support life. In organizations, the process appears similar. Global pharmaceutical giants must be willing to lose money in failures to find the next profitable medicine. Those seeking to lead adaptive change need an experimental mind-set. They must learn to improvise as they go, buying time and resources along the way for the next set of experiments.

- *Adaptation relies on diversity.* In evolutionary biology, nature acts as a fund manager, diversifying risk. Each conception is a variant, a new experiment, producing an organism with capacities somewhat different from the rest of the population.

By diversifying the gene pool, nature markedly increases the odds that *some* members of the species will have the ability to survive in a changing ecosystem. In contrast, cloning, the original mode of reproduction, is extraordinarily efficient in generating high rates of propagation, but the degrees of variation are far less than for those in sexual reproduction. Cloning, therefore, is far less likely to generate innovations for finding and thriving in new environments. The secret of evolution is variation, which in organizational terms could be called distributed or collective intelligence. Likewise, adaptive leadership on economic policy would want to diversify an economy so that people are less dependent on one company or industry for sustenance. For an organization, adaptive leadership would build a culture that values diverse views and relies less on central planning and the genius of the few at the top, where the odds of adaptive success go down. This is especially true for global businesses operating in many local microenvironments.

- *New adaptations significantly displace, reregulate, and rearrange some old DNA*. By analogy, leadership on adaptive challenges generates loss. Learning is often painful. One person's innovation can cause another person to feel incompetent, betrayed, or irrelevant. Not many people like to be "rearranged." Leadership therefore requires the diagnostic ability to recognize those losses and the predictable defensive patterns of response that operate at the individual and systemic level. It also requires knowing how to counteract these patterns.

- *Adaptation takes time.* Most biological adaptations that greatly enhance a species' capacity to thrive unfold over thousands, even millions, of years. Progress is radical over time yet incremental in time. It seems to work this way: a variant in the current population has the adaptive capacity in its time to venture a bit beyond the normal ecological niche for its kind, stressing itself near the margins of the range that it and its offspring can tolerate. For example, an unusual human being moves to colder or higher terrain and finds it can live there. By doing so, it "invites" the environment to place selective pressure over the next generations, favoring variants among its offspring that are stronger in that

> new environment. In that way, over time, new adaptive capacity consolidates; the progeny are no longer operating at the margins of their capacity, but in the midrange. Among their adaptations, the distribution of insulating fat and warming capillaries has changed. The process of evolution continues as some of their offspring venture forth. Although organizational and political adaptations seem lightning fast by comparison, they also take time to consolidate into new sets of norms and processes. Adaptive leadership thus requires persistence. Significant change is the product of incremental experiments that build up over time. And cultures change slowly. Those who practice this form of leadership need to stay in the game, even while taking the heat along the way.

Mobilizing people to meet their immediate adaptive challenges lies at the heart of leadership in the short term. Over time, these and other culture-shaping efforts build an organization's adaptive capacity, fostering processes that will generate new norms that enable the organization to meet the ongoing stream of adaptive challenges posed by a world ever ready to offer new realities, opportunities, and pressures.

The Illusion of the Broken System

There is a myth that drives many change initiatives into the ground: that the organization needs to change because it is broken. The reality is that any social system (including an organization or a country or a family) is the way it is because the people in that system (at least those individuals and factions with the most leverage) want it that way. In that sense, on the whole, on balance, the system is working fine, even though it may appear to be "dysfunctional" in some respects to some members and outside observers, and even though it faces danger just over the horizon. As our colleague Jeff Lawrence poignantly says, "There is no such thing as a dysfunctional organization, because every organization is perfectly aligned to achieve the results it currently gets."

No one who tries to name or address the dysfunction in an organization will be popular. Enough important people like the situation exactly as it is, whatever they may say about it, or it would not be the way it is.

Suppose you take it upon yourself to regularly point out the gap between the company's stated value of transparency and the reality that most people in the organization tightly control the flow of information. You are not likely to be rewarded or greeted with applause for identifying this disconnect, particularly by those who benefit from controlling information. Clearly, the system as a whole has decided to live with the gap between the espoused value and the current reality, the value-in-practice. Closing that gap would be more painful to the dominant coalition than living with it.

The importance of this idea lies in the impact it has on the techniques for trying to address the problem. Embarrassing or not, the organization prefers the current situation to trying something new where the consequences are unpredictable and likely to involve losses for key parties. Taking that into account will lead to different strategic options for closing the gap. When you realize that what you see as dysfunctional works for others in the system, you begin focusing on how to mobilize and sustain people through the period of risk that often comes with adaptive change, rather trying to convince them of the rightness of your cause.

Here is an example. We have worked with a large U.S. not-for-profit organization struggling with high turnover in its workforce. Talented young people are coming to work there, staying a few years, and then leaving for a job in a similar field. Nearly everyone in the organization pays lip service to the idea that, owing to high turnover, the talent pipeline is too narrow to ensure that the organization will have enough strong, qualified, experienced senior managers in the future. Panel discussions on retention have abounded. Task forces on retention have proliferated. New incentive programs have emerged. But nothing much has changed. Why? Middle and senior managers do not want talented young people to stick around for a long time, nipping at their heels, pushing them up or out, or questioning and changing the organization's orientation and purpose. The organization is the way it is because the people in authority and longtime employees want it that way. They prefer a world where they can perpetuate the revolving door *and* wring their hands about it.

The American automobile industry is perhaps the most dramatic example of an extremely well-functioning, highly complex set of organizations "aligned perfectly to get the results it currently gets" as it

crashed headlong into adaptive pressures about which it had been warned for decades, since the first oil shocks in the late 1970s and the growing awareness of global warming in the 1980s and 1990s. The adaptive failures, resplendent by late 2008, can only be diagnosed in the context of the highly distributed, entrenched stakes of so many: from boards of directors, executives, middle managers, union members, to vendors and their organizations, a wide swath of investors, and millions of buyers with a taste for big and powerful cars, trucks, and SUVs "way more cool" than minivans.

Distinguishing Technical Problems from Adaptive Challenges

The most common cause of failure in leadership is produced by treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems. What's the difference? While technical problems may be very complex and critically important (like replacing a faulty heart valve during cardiac surgery), they have known solutions that can be implemented by current know-how. They can be resolved through the application of authoritative expertise and through the organization's current structures, procedures, and ways of doing things. 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. Figure 2-1, adapted from *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, lays out some distinctions between technical problems and adaptive challenges.

As figure 2-1 implies, problems do not always come neatly packaged as either "technical" or "adaptive." When you take on a new challenge at work, it does not arrive with a big *T* or *A* stamped on it. Most problems come mixed, with the technical and adaptive elements intertwined.

Here's a homey example. As of this writing, Marty's mother, Ruth, is in good health at age ninety-five. Not a gray hair on her head (although she has dyed a highlight in her hair so that people will know that the black is natural). She lives alone and still drives, even at night. When Marty goes from his home in New York City up to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to do his teaching at the Kennedy School at Harvard, Ruth

FIGURE 2-1

Distinguishing technical problems and adaptive challenges

Kind of challenge	Problem definition	Solution	Locus of work
Technical	Clear	Clear	Authority
Technical and adaptive	Clear	Requires learning	Authority and stakeholders
Adaptive	Requires learning	Requires learning	Stakeholders

often drives from her apartment in nearby Chestnut Hill to have dinner with him.

Some time ago, Marty began noticing new scrapes on her car each time she arrived for their dinner date. Now one way to look at the issue is: the car should be taken to the body shop for repair. In that sense, this situation has a technical component: the scrapes can be solved by the application of the authoritative expertise found at the body shop. But an adaptive challenge is also lurking below the surface. Ruth is the only one of her contemporaries who still drives at all, never mind at night. Doing so is a source of enormous pride (and convenience) for her, as is living alone, not being in a retirement community, and still functioning more or less as an independent person. To stop driving, even just to stop driving at night, would require a momentous adjustment from her, an adaptation. The technical part is that she would have to pay for cabs, ask friends to drive her places, and so forth. The adaptive part can been found in the loss this change would represent, a loss of an important part of the story she tells herself about who she is as a human being, namely, that she is the only ninety-five-year-old person she knows who still drives at night. It would rip out a part of her heart, and take away a central element of her identity as an independent woman. Addressing the issue solely as a technical problem would fix the car (although only temporarily, since the trips to the body shop would likely come with increasing frequency), but it would not get at the underlying adaptive challenge: refashioning an identity and finding ways to thrive within new constraints.

In the corporate world, we have seen adaptive challenges that have significant technical aspects when companies merge or make significant acquisitions. There are huge technical issues, such as merging IT systems and offices. But it is the adaptive elements that threaten success. Each of the previously independent entities must give up some elements of their own cultural DNA, their dearly held habits, jobs, and values, in order to create a single firm and enable the new arrangement to survive and thrive. We were called in to help address that phenomenon in an international financial services firm where, several years after the merger, the remnants of each of the legacy companies are still doing business their own way, creating barriers to collaboration, global client servicing, and cost efficiencies. Whenever they get close to changing something important to reflect their one-firmness, the side that feels it is losing something precious in the bargain successfully resists. The implicit deal is pretty clear: you let us keep our entire DNA, and we will let you keep all of yours. They have been able to merge only some of the basic technology and communications systems, which made life easier for everyone without threatening any dearly held values or ways of doing business. In a similar client case, a large U.S. engineering firm functions like a franchise operation. Each of its offices, most of which were acquired, not homegrown, goes its own way, although the firm's primary product line has become commoditized, and the autonomy that has worked for these smaller offices in the past, and is very much at the heart of how they see themselves, will not enable them to compete on price for large contracts going forward.

We have seen the same commoditization of previously highly profitable distinctive services also affecting segments of the professional services world such as law firms, where relationship building has been an orienting value and core strategy and where competing primarily on price is a gut-wrenching reworking of how they see themselves. Yet as previously relationship-based professions are coping with the adaptive challenge of commoditization of some of their work, the reverse process is simultaneously going on in many businesses that have been built on a product sales model and mentality.

In an increasingly flat, globalized third-millenium world, where innovation occurs so quickly, just having the best product at any moment in time is not a sustainable plan. So, like one of our clients, a leading global technology products company, these companies are trying to adapt, as

they struggle to move from a transaction-based environment, where products are sold, to a relationship-based environment, where solutions are offered based on trust and mutual understanding.

The need to make this transformation is stressing many firms, from professional services to insurance to digital hardware. These companies have had great success with an evolving product line, talented salespeople, and brilliant marketing strategies. Now they are finding that the skills required are more interpersonal than technical, both in their relationship with each other within the organization and in connecting with their customers. A workforce that has been trained and has succeeded in a sales framework is not prepared by experience or skill set to succeed when relationship building and response is the primary lever for growth. Successful people in the middle third or latter half of their careers are being asked to move away from what they know how to do well and risk moving beyond their frontier of competence as they try to respond adaptively to new demands from the client environment.

Like Marty and his mother, systems, organizations, families, and communities resist dealing with adaptive challenges because doing so requires changes that partly involve an experience of loss. Ruth is no different in principle from the legacy elements of the newly merged company that do not want to give up what they each experience as their distinctiveness.

Sometimes, of course, an adaptive challenge is way beyond our capacity, and we simply cannot do anything about it, hard as we might try. Vesuvius erupts. But even when we might have it within our capacity to respond successfully, we often squander the opportunity, as with the American automobile industry in the past decades.

You know the adage "People resist change." It is not really true. People are not stupid. People love change when they know it is a good thing. No one gives back a winning lottery ticket. What people resist is not change per se, but loss. When change involves real or potential loss, people hold on to what they have and resist the change. We suggest that the common factor generating adaptive failure is resistance to loss. A key to leadership, then, is the diagnostic capacity to find out the kinds of losses at stake in a changing situation, from life and loved ones to jobs, wealth, status, relevance, community, loyalty, identity, and competence. Adaptive leadership almost always puts you in the business of

assessing, managing, distributing, and providing contexts for losses that move people through those losses to a new place.

At the same time, adaptation is a process of conservation as well as loss. Although the losses of change are the hard part, adaptive change is mostly not about change at all. The question is not only, "Of all that we care about, what must be given up to survive and thrive going forward?" but also, "Of all that we care about, what elements are essential and must be preserved into the future, or we will lose precious values, core competencies, and lose who we are?" As in nature, a successful adaptation enables an organization or community to take the best from its traditions, identity, and history into the future.

However you ask the questions about adaptive change and the losses they involve, answering them is difficult because the answers require tough choices, trade-offs, and the uncertainty of ongoing, experimental trial and error. That is hard work not only because it is intellectually difficult, but also because it challenges individuals' and organizations' investments in relationships, competence, and identity. It requires a modification of the stories they have been telling themselves and the rest of the world about what they believe in, stand for, and represent.

Helping individuals, organizations, and communities deal with those tough questions, distinguishing the DNA that is essential to conserve from the DNA that must be discarded, and then innovating to create the organizational adaptability to thrive in changing environments is the work of adaptive leadership.

Distinguishing Leadership from Authority

Exercising adaptive leadership is radically different from doing your job really, really well. It is different from authoritative expertise, and different from holding a high position in a political or organizational hierarchy. It is also different from having enormous informal power in the forms of credibility, trust, respect, admiration, and moral authority. As you have undoubtedly seen, many people occupy positions of senior authority without ever leading their organizations through difficult but needed adaptive change. Others with or without significant formal authority but with a large admiring group of "followers" also frequently

fail to mobilize those followers to address their toughest challenges. To protect and increase their informal authority, they often pander to their constituents, minimizing the costly adjustments the followers will need to make and pointing elsewhere at "the others who must change, or be changed," as they deny and delay the days of reckoning.

People have long confused the notion of leadership with authority, power, and influence. We find it extremely useful to see leadership as a practice, an activity that some people do some of the time. We view leadership as a verb, not a job. Authority, power, and influence are critical tools, but they do not define leadership. That is because the resources of authority, power, and influence can be used for all sorts of purposes and tasks that have little or nothing to do with leadership, like performing surgery or running an organization that has long been successful in a stable market.

The powers and influence that come from formal and informal authority relationships have the same basic structure. The social contract is identical: Party A entrusts Party B with power in exchange for services. Sometimes this contract is formalized in a job description or an authorization establishing a task force, organizational unit, government agency, or organizational mission. Sometimes the contract is left implicit, as it is with charismatic authorities and their constituents, or with your subordinates and lateral colleagues, who may to varying degrees trust, respect, and admire you, and therefore give you the key power resource of their attention. However, all authority relationships, both formal and informal, appear to fit the same basic definitional pattern: power entrusted for service—"I look to you to serve a set of goals I hold dear."

Authority, then, is granted by one or more people on the assumption that you will then do what they want you to do: centrally in organizational life to promptly provide solutions to problems. People will confer authority or volunteer to follow you because they are looking to you to provide a service, to be a champion, a representative, an expert, a doer who can provide solutions *within the terms that they understand the situation*. And if life presented exclusively technical problems, people would get what they need looking routinely to authorities for solutions to problems.

Take a closer look at the difference between authority and adaptive leadership. In your organizational life, your authorizers (those who grant you authority) include bosses, peers, subordinates, and even

people outside your organization, such as clients or customers and possibly the media. An authorizer is anyone who gives you attention and support to do your job of providing solutions to problems.

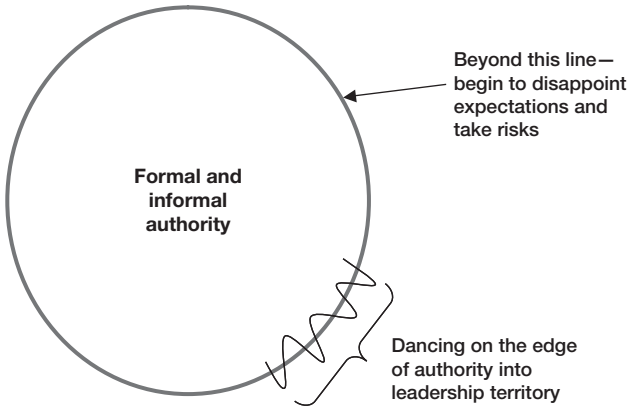
In any of your roles, whether parent or CEO or doctor or consultant, you have a specific *scope* of authority (see figure 2-2) that derives from your authorizers' expectations and that defines the limits of what you are expected to do. As long as you do what is expected of you, your authorizers are happy. If you do what you are supposed to do *really* well, you will be rewarded in the coin of the realm, whatever it is: a pay raise, a bonus, a bigger job, a plaque, a more impressive title, a better office.

And one of the most seductive ways your organization rewards you for doing exactly what it wants—to provide operational excellence in executing directions set by others—is to call you a "leader." Because you, like most people, aspire to have that label, conferring it on you is a brilliant way of keeping you right where the organization wants you, in the middle of your scope of authority and far away from taking on adaptive leadership work.

Twenty years ago, Ron taught in a Harvard executive program for senior officers in the U.S. military. Six weeks into the program, an Air Force colonel came into the seminar room looking crestfallen. Ron asked him, "What happened?" The colonel responded, "When I was commissioned an officer many years ago, they told me that I was a leader. Now I

FIGURE 2-2

Formal and informal authority



realize I've been an authority figure, and I'm not sure I've exercised any leadership at all." The following week, he came to the same seminar room having reflected on this disturbing idea, but he looked energetic. "Now I see options for leadership that I never saw before."

When your organization calls you a leader, it is rewarding you for doing what your authorizers want you to do. Of course, meeting authorizers' expectations is important. In medicine, doctors and nurses save lives every day fulfilling the hopes of patients who entrust them to provide trustworthy service. But doing an excellent job usually has nothing to do with helping your organization deal with adaptive challenges. To do that, you have to possess the will and skill to dance on the edges of that circle shown in figure 2-2, on behalf of a purpose you care deeply about. Adaptive leadership is not about meeting or exceeding your authorizers' expectations; it is about *challenging* some of those expectations, finding a way to disappoint people without pushing them completely over the edge. And it requires managing the resistance you will inevitably trigger. When you exercise adaptive leadership, your authorizers will push back, understandably. They hired you, or voted for you, or authorized you to do one thing, and now you are doing something else: you are challenging the status quo, raising a taboo issue, pointing out contradictions between what people *say* they value and what they *actually* value. You are scaring people. They may want to get rid of you and find someone else who will do their bidding.

Imagine a cardiac surgeon, for example, telling patients that he will refuse to do the operation unless the patients do their part of the work: quit smoking and put an exercise regime and a healthy diet into their daily routines after the surgery. Moreover, to ensure compliance, the surgeon insists that patients place 50 percent of all their assets in an escrow account controlled by a third party for six months. It's likely that most patients will find another surgeon, someone who will do the operation and let them off the hook. And the cardiac surgeon who was eager to mobilize adaptive work among his patients will lose his business.

No wonder there is so little adaptive leadership going on in daily organizational life. Exercising adaptive leadership is dangerous. The word *leader* comes from the Indo-European root word *leit*, the name for the person who carried the flag in front of an army going into battle and usually died in the first enemy attack. His sacrifice would alert the rest of the army to the location of the danger ahead.

The dangers reside in the need to challenge the expectations of the very people who give you formal and informal authority. Yet very often, leadership challenges are about managing conflicts within your authorizing environment. For example, elements of the multiple-faction and overlapping-faction authorizing environments that politicians cobble together to win elections are sometimes not only conflicting but mutually exclusive. That may be true for you at times as well. If you have been or are now a middle manager, you probably have had moments when you were squeezed between the expectations of your subordinates that you would protect them and advocate for them, and those of your senior authorities that you would control costs on salaries, expenses, and year-end bonuses, or even fire some of your subordinates. As a parent, you might have been caught between your spouse or partner and your children, or worse, between your spouse or partner and your own mother!

A friend of ours was recently hired by a large Web design firm to be the first manager of its design studio. She was hired by the executive team to bring discipline, professionalism, and a business orientation to the group of young, talented Web designers. But the Web designers, whose confidence she needed in order to accomplish the task, saw her coming as their opportunity to have an advocate in the upper reaches of the company. She could not satisfy both groups. Then the question became, which people in her authorizing environment was she going to disappoint, and how could she do that at a rate they could absorb? Timing and sequencing become critical to success and survival. For example, it is easier generally for you initially to honor your authorization from the senior authority than to challenge it on behalf of subordinates.

Conflating leadership and authority is an old and understandable habit. We all want to believe that we can exercise leadership just by doing really, really well at the job we are expected to carry out. But the distinction between exercising leadership and exercising authority is crucial. By practicing adaptive leadership beyond authoritative management, you risk telling people what they need to hear rather than what they want to hear, but you can also help your organization, community, or society make progress on its most difficult challenges.

Whether you are the president of a country or company, a hospital administrator or the head of an advocacy organization, or simply (simply?) a parent, your functions in your authority role are largely the

FIGURE 2-3

Leadership from a position of authority

Task	Technical	Adaptive
Direction	Provide problem definition & solution	Identify the adaptive challenge; frame key questions & issues
Protection	Protect from external threats	Disclose external threats
Order		
Orientation	Orient people to current roles	Disorient current roles; resist orienting poeple to new roles too quickly
Conflict	Restore order	Expose conflict or let it emerge
Norms	Maintain norms	Challenge norms or let them be challenged

same. You have three core responsibilities, to provide: (1) direction, (2) protection, and (3) order. That is, you are expected to clarify roles and offer a vision (direction), make sure that the group, organization, or society is not vulnerable and can survive external threat (protection), and maintain stability (order). Because addressing adaptive challenges requires stepping into unknown space and disturbing the equilibrium, it is an activity that is inherently uncertain, risky for the organization as well as for the individual, and, for these reasons, often disruptive and disorienting. (See figure 2-3.)

Living in the Disequilibrium

To practice adaptive leadership, you have to help people navigate through a period of disturbance as they sift through what is essential and what is expendable, and as they experiment with solutions to the adaptive challenges at hand. This disequilibrium can catalyze everything from conflict, frustration, and panic to confusion, disorientation, and fear of losing something dear. That is not what you are paid to do

and will certainly not be as well received as when you are mobilizing people to address a technical issue that is within their competence or requires expertise that can be readily obtained. Consequently, when you are practicing adaptive leadership, distinctive skills and insights are necessary to deal with this swirling mass of energies. You need to be able to do two things: (1) manage yourself in that environment and (2) help people tolerate the discomfort they are experiencing. You need to live into the disequilibrium.

Honoring the reality that adaptive processes will be accompanied by distress means having compassion for the pain that comes with deep change. Distress may come with the territory of change, but from a strategic perspective, disturbing people is not the point or the purpose, but a consequence. The purpose is to make progress on a tough collective challenge. When you drive a car, heat is a natural byproduct of the engine, which then needs to be managed and kept within a productive temperature range. You do not drive a car to generate heat (except sometimes to get warm in winter); you drive a car to get somewhere. But every so often you have to look at the temperature gauge to make sure that the engine cooling systems are working properly.

Collective and individual disequilibrium is a byproduct generated when you call attention to tough questions and draw people's sense of responsibility beyond current norms and job descriptions. Of course, organizations and individuals like to stay in their comfort zone. When you raise a difficult issue or surface a deep value conflict, you take people out of their comfort zone and raise a lot of heat. That is tricky business. You have to continually fiddle with the flame to see how much heat the system can tolerate. Your goal should be to keep the temperature within what we call the *productive zone of disequilibrium* (PZD): enough heat generated by your intervention to gain attention, engagement, and forward motion, but not so much that the organization (or your part of it) explodes. (See figure 2-4.)

It is like a pressure cooker: set the temperature and pressure too low, and you stand no chance of transforming the ingredients in the cooker into a good meal. Set the temperature and pressure too high, and the cover will blow off the cooker's top, releasing the ingredients of your meal across the room. It helps to think of yourself as keeping your hand on the thermostat, carefully controlling how much heat and pressure is applied. This is much easier to do if you hold a senior authority position

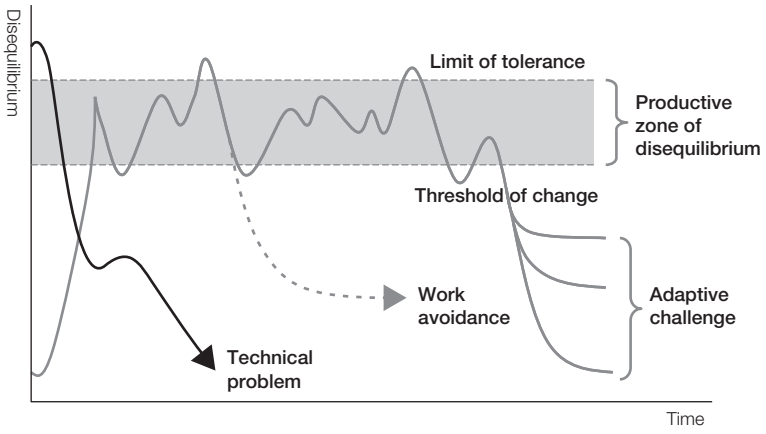
than if you are a junior person in the organization. People in authority are expected to have a hand on the thermostat (although they are usually expected to lower the temperature rather than raise it).

Examine figure 2-4 more closely. The technical problem line represents the changes in disequilibrium as an organization deals with a technical problem. The adaptive challenge line shows changes in disequilibrium as the organization deals with an adaptive challenge. The horizontal bar constitutes the productive zone of disequilibrium. Below the PZD, people are comfortable and satisfied. Above the PZD, the disequilibrium is so high, things are so hot, that tensions within the organization reach disabling proportions. Within the productive zone, the stress level is high enough that people can be mobilized to focus on and engage with the problem they would rather avoid. The dotted work avoidance line represents the easing of disequilibrium as the organization avoids dealing with hard issues.

Look again at the technical problem line. To illustrate how disequilibrium changes with a technical problem, say you break your leg skiing. At that moment, the disequilibrium is at its peak, virtually intolerable. You

FIGURE 2-4

The productive zone of disequilibrium



Source: Adapted from Ronald A. Heifetz and Donald L. Laurie, "Mobilizing Adaptive Work: Beyond Visionary Leadership," in *The Leader's Change Handbook,* eds. Jay A. Conger, Gretchen M. Spreitzer, and Edward E. Lawler III (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

are lying in the snow, freezing and in awful pain, and people are skiing by you. Then those nice folks from the ski patrol come by with a stretcher, a blanket, sympathy, and even a shot of whiskey if you want it. The disequilibrium lessens to a more tolerable level. It may go up again while you're waiting for the doctor in the emergency room, and again when you have to endure a few months of painful rehabilitation exercises. But overall, it decreases, finally disappearing once you are healed.

The disequilibrium pattern for an adaptive challenge is very different. At the beginning, disequilibrium is low. You have identified an adaptive problem that you know the company should address, but most people around you either do not see it or see it but do not want to deal with it. You need to raise the heat to the point where the discomfort of not dealing with the problem is the same as or more than the discomfort that would come from any nasty consequences of not addressing the problem. That is, you need to get the group into the PZD.

Things soon become a lot less linear when you are dealing with an adaptive challenge. The intensity of the disequilibrium rises and falls as you push your intervention forward. Sometimes it will seem that you are taking one step back for every two steps forward. Clearly, you need patience and persistence to lead adaptive change. You also have to anticipate and counteract tactics that people will use to lower the heat to more comfortable levels. This work avoidance can take numerous forms, such as creating a new committee with no authority or finding a scapegoat. Unlike with a technical problem, there is no clear, linear path to the resolution of an adaptive challenge. You need a plan, but you also need freedom to deviate from the plan as new discoveries emerge, as conditions change, and as new forms of resistance arise. Once you help unleash the energy to deal with an adaptive issue, you cannot control the outcome. That is why there are several possible outcomes at the end of the adaptive challenge line. Doing this work requires flexibility and openness even in defining success. The pathway is not a straight line, and because working through an adaptive challenge will always involve distributing some losses, albeit in the service of an important purpose, the systemic dynamics that ensue, the politics of change, will have many unpredictable elements. The pathway for getting to an adaptive resolution will look a bit like the flight of a bumblebee, so that at times you will feel as if you are not even heading in the right direction. And the resolution might be quite different from what you first imagined.

Observe, Interpret, Intervene

Adaptive leadership is an iterative process involving three key activities: (1) observing events and patterns around you; (2) interpreting what you are observing (developing multiple hypotheses about what is really going on); and (3) designing interventions based on the observations and interpretations to address the adaptive challenge you have identified. Each of these activities builds on the ones that come before it; and the process overall is iterative: you repeatedly refine your observations, interpretations, and interventions. (See figure 2-5.) Take a closer look at each of these activities.

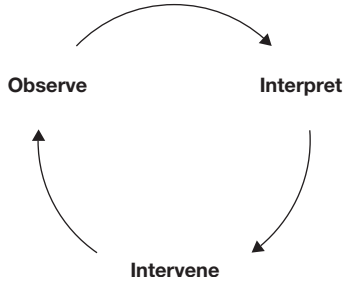
Observations

Marty's wife, Lynn, has an art background. When she brings (uh, drags) him to a museum and they gaze at a painting on the wall, Marty sees about 25 percent of what Lynn sees. She urges him closer to the masterpiece, points out some elements, and, on a good day, she might get him up to 50 percent.

Two people observing the same event or situation see different things, depending on their previous experiences and unique perspectives. Observing is a highly subjective activity. But in exercising adaptive leadership, the goal is to make observing as objective as possible. Getting off the dance floor and onto the balcony is a powerful way to do this. It

FIGURE 2-5

The adaptive leadership process



enables you to gain some distance, to watch yourself as well as others while you are in the action, and to see patterns in what is happening that are hard to observe if you are stuck at the ground-floor level.

Bill Russell, a member of the professional basketball Hall of Fame and star player and then player-coach for the Boston Celtics during their great championship runs of the late 1950s and 1960s, wrote a book called *Second Wind: The Memoirs of an Opinionated Man* and described how he was somehow able to see the whole court, the patterns and relationships among all ten players, including himself, and anticipate where people were going to be, in deciding where to make the next pass or cut.[4] He won two NBA championships as a player-coach, where the capacity to be in and out of the game at the same time was invaluable.

Collecting all the data that is out there to see, find, and discover is a critical first step. It is not that easy to watch what is going on. It is hard to observe objectively while you are in the middle of the action in an organization. The questions are endless: "Who's talking with whom? Who responds to whom? What are the alliances and relationships beyond the organizational chart? What is the history of the problem we're facing? What are the different views of it? What are the patterns of behavior relevant to the problem that are not visible unless you're looking for them? How are the organization's culture and structure affecting people's behavior?"

In our client work, we often ask someone to act as a "balcony person" in a meeting or workshop. This person's role is to sit in the back of the room and take notes on what happens, recapitulating participants' various comments and behaviors. It is remarkable how much more you can see when you momentarily take yourself out of the action and simply watch and record. We typically ask the balcony person to tell the group initially what he or she observed, just the facts, without any interpretation, as if the group were watching a videotape of a soccer game without any commentary.

Interpretations

Interpreting is more challenging than observing. When you hypothesize out loud and disclose the sense you are getting from your observations, you risk raising the ire of people who have formed different interpretations. They will want you to embrace whatever "truth" they

favor. For example, suppose you and a peer manager both saw the same thing happen during a meeting: a soft-spoken member of the group, the only African American woman, was repeatedly interrupted when she spoke. You interpret what you saw as the group marginalizing the substance of her viewpoint on the tasks at hand, done more easily because the group's prejudices diminish her credibility. But your colleague interprets it as a consequence of her speaking softly. Owing to these clashing interpretations, your peer suggests hiring a performance coach for her, while you suggest that the team needs to focus on her perspectives on the work issues, however difficult they might be, and perhaps engage in some diversity counseling, too.

However provocative the practice may be, you cannot avoid making interpretations. Your brain is designed to make meaning out of what you see, and will look for patterns out of whatever information you take in through your senses. Most interpretative patterns are fashioned unconsciously and with lightning speed, throwing us into immediate action before we can ask ourselves, "Is my explanation for what is happening correct? What are some alternative hypotheses?" To practice adaptive leadership, you have to take time to think through your interpretation of what you observe, *before* jumping into action.

The activity of interpreting might be understood as listening for the "song beneath the words." The idea is to make your interpretations as accurate as possible by considering the widest possible array of sensory information. In addition to noticing what people are saying and doing explicitly, watch for body language and emotion, and notice what is *not* being said. Ask yourself, "What underlying values and loyalties are at stake?" "To what extent are people around me interpreting our situation as a technical problem rather than an adaptive challenge?" If you do not question your own and the group's preferred interpretation, you and your organization may end up colluding in avoiding the difficult work of addressing the more important issues.

That said, even the most carefully thought out interpretation will still be no more than a good guess. You can never have all the data needed to form a complete picture. And no one has the mental capacity to form and evaluate all the *possible* interpretations that could be made from a single set of observations.

However, if you are skilled at adaptive leadership, you might find yourself actively holding more than one interpretation about a particular observation open at any moment, even mutually exclusive ones, like your and your colleague's interpretation of the soft-spoken woman's difficulty getting heard in the conversation in the example above. Holding multiple interpretations in your head simultaneously is taxing, because our natural tendency is to always search for the one "right" answer. This mental balancing act requires the ability to view the same set of data from several different perspectives.

An interpretation is only a guess, although the more you practice this activity, the better your guesses will be. Making your interpretation public is itself an intervention and often a provocative one. Making it tentatively, experimentally, and then watching (and then interpreting) the reaction can help you gauge how close to the mark you came.

Interventions

Once you have made an interpretation of the problem-solving dynamics you have observed, what are you going to do about it? Will you hire the performance coach or the diversity trainer? Or both? Will you share your interpretation at that meeting, try it out with a smaller group, or wait until the next meeting? Your next move, your intervention, should reflect your hypothesis about the problem, be considered an experiment (by yourself and maybe others), and be in the service of a shared purpose. Well-designed interventions provide context; they connect your interpretation to the purpose or task on the table so people can see that your perspective is relevant to their collective efforts. If they cannot see the relevance, they might write you off as if you were riding a personal hobbyhorse ("That's Jack's issue"). Good interventions also take into account the resources available in your organization. For example, you probably would not propose an intervention consisting of a massive top-to-bottom diversity or performance coach program if you had just cut bonuses by 50 percent. Moreover, in crafting an intervention, you should consider where you "sit" in the organization and what that implies for your chances of success. What you should do might be different if you were the CEO, the only other woman in the group, or the newest member of the team. Finally, in designing an

intervention, consider the skills and resources in your own tool kit. What are you really good at doing? And what kind of interventions are at the edge of your competence? Some people, for example, are much better at managing a group of ten people in a meeting than they are at managing a more intimate one-on-one conversation. The more you have in your tool kit, the greater the range of interventions you will be willing and able to launch, and the more likely they will generate the desired results.

At the same time, practice designing interventions that are outside your comfort zone. Everyone has their own repertoire of options that they draw on when they take action to address a challenge. People become used to (and good at) intervening in a specific and narrow set of ways. They become familiar. Regrettably, they become familiar to the organization, too. This predictability can limit your effectiveness. Other people will know what is coming from you, and they will know how to deflect it. For example, if you are really good at engaging in emotional persuasion, they will know to stay calm and take you out of your best format.

Strengthening your ability to design interventions that lie outside your comfort zone takes practice. But it is a vital component of effective leadership. It will help you tailor your interventions to each unique situation and make you less predictable. And that makes it harder for others to neutralize you.

Experiment and Take Smart Risks Smartly

When you are dealing with adaptive challenges, there is no obvious answer to the question "What is going on here?" Trying to define the problem at hand is a contentious act in itself. Managing this ambiguity requires courage, tenacity, and an experimental mind-set: you try things out, see what happens, and make changes accordingly.

When you adopt an experimental mind-set, you actively commit to an intervention you have designed while also not letting yourself become wedded to it. That way, if it misses the mark, you do not feel compelled to defend it. This mind-set also opens you to other, unanticipated possibilities. (You are undoubtedly familiar with the stories about the ways Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Edison produced

their great inventions by accident, while pursuing some other purposes entirely.) Thinking experimentally also opens you to learning: you stay open to the possibility that you might be wrong. Finally, an experimental mind-set facilitates the iterative nature of the adaptive leadership process: you make an intervention based on your interpretation of the situation, and you see what happens. You use the results of your experiment to take the next step or to make a midcourse correction.

Holding incompatible ideas in your head at the same time is a little like deciding to get married. At the moment you decide that this is the person you want to spend the rest of your life with, you have to fully embrace your choice; you have to believe wholeheartedly that it is the right decision. But your practical self also knows that you probably would have fallen in love with someone else under different circumstances. So how can your intended be the only "right" one for you? If you treated the decision to marry this particular person at this particular moment as a 51–49 question rather than a 90–10 question, you would never take the leap. The same paradox applies to adaptive leadership interventions. You have to run the experiment with full and hopeful conviction.

F. Scott Fitzgerald once said that "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function."[5] In the realm of adaptive leadership, you have to believe that your intervention is absolutely the right thing to do at the moment you commit to it. But at the same time, you need to remain open to the possibility that you are dead wrong.

Still, adaptive leadership is about will *plus* skill. Effective interventions can torque the odds of both survival and success more in your favor. An intervention that has only, say, a 50–50 chance of success might have a 60–40 chance if you design it skillfully. The tools and resources in this book will help you do that.

Engage Above and Below the Neck

If leadership involves will and skill, then leadership requires the engagement of what goes on both above and below the neck. Courage requires all of you: heart, mind, spirit, and guts. And skill requires

learning new competencies, with your brain training your body to become proficient at new techniques of diagnosis and action.

You might think about this idea as the convergence of multiple intelligences (intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and physical) or the collaboration among physical centers (mind, heart, and body). But the central notion is the same. Your whole self constitutes a resource for exercising leadership.

One distinctive aspect of leading adaptive change is that you must connect with the values, beliefs, and anxieties of the people you are trying to move. Being present in that way is tough to do unless your heart is part of the mix as well. Acts of leadership not only require access to all parts of yourself so that you can draw upon all of your own resources for will, skill, and wisdom; but to be successful, you also need to fully engage people with all these parts of yourself as well.

Leadership is necessary when logic is not the answer. Leading adaptive change is not about making a better argument or about loading people up with more facts. Take cigarette smoking. Suppose you have a friend, Ian, who smokes. If Ian is like most smokers, he knows full well that the habit is bad for his health. More white papers on the dangers of tobacco and more pictures of diseased lungs are not going to change his behavior. Whatever is keeping him stuck in the habit is going on below the neck. To "move" him off of tobacco, you would have to understand and address the needs that are making him smoke, such as, it gives him pleasure, reduces his anxiety, or reminds him of his beloved dad.

The same is true for exercising leadership. You are trying to move people who have not been convinced by logic and facts. They prefer the status quo to the risks of doing things differently. They are stuck in their hearts and stomachs, not in their heads. To move them, you need to reach them there. If you are not engaged with your own heart, you will find it virtually impossible to connect with theirs.

Connect to Purpose

It makes little sense to practice leadership and put your own professional success and material gain at risk unless it is on behalf of some larger purpose that you find compelling. What might such a purpose look like? How can you tell whether a particular purpose is worth the

risks involved in leading adaptive change in your organization? If you try to achieve this purpose, will you produce results valued in your organization? These are tough questions that you can answer only by articulating your own personal values.

Clarifying the values that orient your life and work and identifying larger purposes to which you might commit are courageous acts. You have to choose among competing, legitimate purposes, sacrificing many in the service of one or a few. In doing so, you make a statement about what you are willing to die for, and, therefore, what you are willing to live for.

We work with a lot of people in public K–12 education. Teachers, superintendents, parents, principals, central office administrators, and elected school committee members have a range of personal, professional, and sometimes ideological commitments that frequently stand in the way of collective action to address their adaptive challenges. In the heat of difficult conversations and tough choices, they often become distracted from their shared purpose: education of young people. Simply asking, "How does this new policy connect to our purpose? How does it help us educate kids?" can help people focus on finding ways to compromise some of their vested interests.

For example, teachers may have to give up a measure of autonomy by sitting in each other's classrooms to help each other improve. They might have to find ways to better engage parents and families in young students' education, even though they have never taken a course in parent engagement and they get almost no encouragement or help from the education system to do so.

The notion of purpose plays just as powerful a role in corporate life. One of our clients, a fast-growing marketing firm, had come to a crossroads. It had risen quickly to become the number two firm in its industry. But growing quickly was no longer an adequate beacon to guide the company into the future. Questions had begun cropping up: Who benefited from the growth? Was further growth possible or even desirable? From where was that growth likely to come? Tensions had arisen between the creative people and the sales staff over who deserved credit for the company's rapid expansion and therefore whose values would drive the future. The firm, while enormously successful, had lost its way. Members of the top team initiated a conversation about purpose. The discussion was uncomfortable for all of them, but it

eventually helped them clarify what the next stage in the company's life might look like and what its new orienting principles might be.

Defining a shared purpose is often a challenging and painful exercise because some narrower interests will have to be sacrificed in the interests of the whole. But it is also a valuable corrective. When you face a tough decision, or when prospects for success look bleak, reminding one another what you are trying to do provides guidance, sustenance, and inspiration.

GLOSSARY

The definitions in this glossary have been developed and refined over twenty-five years, primarily by Riley Sinder, Dean Williams, and the authors. They are not definitive statements. They are meant to be useful, first-approximation concepts that serve as a resource for thinking more deeply and broadly about the subject and practice of leadership.

act politically Incorporate the loyalties and values of the other parties into your mobilization strategy. Assume that no one operates solely as an individual but represents, formally or informally, a set of constituent loyalties, expectations, and pressures.

adaptation A successful adaptation enables an organism to thrive in a new or challenging environment. The adaptive process is both conservative and progressive in that it enables the living system to take the best from its traditions, identity, and history into the future. See also **thrive**.

adaptive capacity The resilience of people and the capacity of systems to engage in problem-defining and problem-solving work in the midst of adaptive pressures and the resulting disequilibrium.

adaptive challenge The gap between the values people stand for (that constitute thriving) and the reality that they face (their current lack of capacity to realize those values in their environment). See also **technical problem**.

adaptive culture Adaptive cultures engage in at least five practices. They (1) name the elephants in the room, (2) share responsibility for the organization's future, (3) exercise independent judgment, (4) develop leadership capacity, and (5) institutionalize reflection and continuous learning.

adaptive leadership The activity of mobilizing adaptive work.

adaptive work 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. See also **technical work**.

ally A member of the community in alignment on a particular issue.

ancestor A family or community member from an earlier generation who shapes a person's identity.

assassination The killing or neutralizing (through character assassination) of someone who embodies a perspective that another faction in the social system desperately wants to silence.

attention A critical resource for leadership. To make progress on adaptive challenges, those who lead must be able to hold people's engagement with hard questions through a sustained period of disequilibrium.

authority 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. See also **formal authority** and **informal authority**.

bandwidth The range of capacities within which an individual has gained comfort and skill. See also **repertoire**.

below the neck The nonintellectual human faculties: emotional, spiritual, instinctive, kinetic.

carrying water Doing the work of others that they should be doing for themselves.

casualty A person, competency, or role that is lost as a by-product of adaptive change.

classic error Treating an adaptive challenge as a technical problem.

confidant A person invested in the success and happiness of another person, rather than in the other person's perspective or agenda.

courageous conversation A dialogue designed to resolve competing priorities and beliefs while preserving relationships. See also **orchestrating the conflict**.

dance floor Where the action is. Where the friction, noise, tension, and systemic activity are occurring. Ultimately, the place where the work gets done.

dancing on the edge of your scope of authority Taking action near or beyond the formal or informal limits of what you are expected to do.

default A routine and habitual response to recurring stimuli. See also **tuning**.

deploying yourself Deliberately managing your roles, skills, and identity.

disequilibrium The absence of a steady state, typically characterized in a social system by increasing levels of urgency, conflict, dissonance, and tension generated by adaptive challenges.

elephant in the room A difficult issue that is commonly known to exist in an organization or community but is not discussed openly. See also **naming the elephant in the room**.

engaging above and below the neck Connecting with all the dimensions of the people you lead. Also, bringing all of yourself to the practice of leadership. *Above the neck* speaks to intellectual faculties, the home of logic and facts; *below the neck* speaks to emotional faculties, the home of values, beliefs, habits of behavior, and patterns of reaction. See also **below the neck**.

experimental mind-set An attitude that treats any approach to an adaptive issue not as a solution, but as the beginning of an iterative process of testing a hypothesis, observing what happens, learning, making midcourse corrections, and then, if necessary, trying something else.

faction A group with (1) a shared perspective that has been shaped by tradition, power relationships, loyalties, and interests and (2) its own grammar for analyzing a situation and its own system of internal logic that defines the stakes, terms of problems, and solutions in ways that make sense to its own members.

faction map A diagram that depicts the groups relevant to an adaptive challenge, and includes the loyalties, values, and losses at risk that keep each faction invested in its position.

finding your voice The process of discovering how to best use yourself as an instrument to frame issues effectively, shape and tell stories purposefully, and inspire others.

formal authority Explicit power granted to meet an explicit set of service expectations, such as those in job descriptions or legislative mandates.

getting on the balcony Taking a distanced view. The mental act of disengaging from the dance floor, the current swirl of activity, in order to observe and gain perspective on yourself and on the larger system. Enables you to see patterns that are not visible from the ground. See also **observation**.

giving the work back The action of an authority figure in resisting the pressure to take the responsibility for solving problems off of other people's shoulders, and instead mobilizing the responsibility of the primary stakeholders in doing their share of the adaptive work.

holding environment The cohesive properties of a relationship or social system that serve to keep people engaged with one another in spite of the divisive forces generated by adaptive work. May include, for example, bonds of affiliation and love; agreed-upon rules, procedures, and norms; shared purposes and common values; traditions, language, and rituals; familiarity with adaptive work; and trust in authority. Holding environments give a group identity and contain the conflict, chaos, and confusion often produced when struggling with complex problematic realities. See also **pressure cooker** and **resilience**.

holding steady Withholding your perspective, not primarily for self-protecting, but to wait for the right moment to act, or act again. Also, remaining steadfast, tolerating the heat and pushback of people who resist dealing with the issue.

hunger A normal human need that each person seeks to fulfill, such as (1) power and control, (2) affirmation and importance, and (3) intimacy and delight.

illusion of the broken system Every group of human beings is aligned to achieve the results it currently gets. The current reality is the product of the implicit and explicit decisions of people in the system, at least of the dominant stakeholders. In that sense, no system is broken, although change processes are often driven by the idea that an organization is broken. That view discounts the accumulated functionality for many people of the system's current way of operating.

informal authority Power granted implicitly to meet a set of service expectations, such as representing cultural norms like civility or being given moral authority to champion the aspirations of a movement.

interpretation Identifying patterns of behavior that help make sense of a situation. Interpretation is the process of explaining raw data through digestible understandings and narratives. Most situations have multiple possible interpretations.

intervention Any series of actions or a particular action, including intentional inaction, aimed at mobilizing progress on adaptive challenges.

leadership with authority Mobilizing people to address an adaptive challenge from a position of authority. The authority role brings with it resources and constraints for exercising leadership.

leadership without authority Mobilizing people to address an adaptive challenge by taking action beyond the formal and informal expectations that define your scope of power, such as raising unexpected questions upward from the middle of the organization, challenging the expectations of your constituents, or engaging people across boundaries from outside the organization. Lacking authority also brings with it resources and constraints.

leap to action The default behavior of reacting prematurely to disequilibrium with a habituated set of responses.

lightning rod A person who is the recipient of a group's anger or frustration, often expressed as a personal attack and typically intended to deflect attention from a disturbing issue and displace responsibility for it to someone else.

living into the disequilibrium The gradual process of easing people into an uncomfortable state of uncertainty, disorder, conflict, or chaos at a pace and level that does not overwhelm them yet takes them out of their comfort zones and mobilizes them to engage in addressing an adaptive challenge.

naming the elephant in the room The act of addressing an issue that may be central to making progress on an adaptive challenge but that has been ignored in the interest of maintaining equilibrium. Discussing the undiscussable. See also **elephant in the room**.

observation Collection of relevant data from a detached perspective and from as many sources as possible. See also **getting on the balcony**.

opposition Those parties or factions that feel threatened or at risk of loss if your perspective is accepted.

orchestrating the conflict Designing and leading the process of getting parties with differences to work them through productively, as distinguished from resolving the differences for them. See also **courageous conversation**.

pacing the work Gauging how much disturbance the social system can withstand and then breaking down a complex challenge into small elements, sequencing them at a rate that people can absorb.

partners Individuals or factions that are collaborators, including allies and confidants. See also **ally**, **confidant**, and the distinction between the two.

personal leadership work Learning about and managing yourself to be more effective in mobilizing adaptive work.

pressure cooker A holding environment strong enough to contain the disequilibrium of adaptive processes. See also **holding environment** and **resilience**.

productive zone of disequilibrium The optimal range of distress within which the urgency in the system motivates people to engage in adaptive work. If the level is too low, people will be inclined to complacently maintain their current way of working, but if it is too high, people are likely to be overwhelmed

and may start to panic or engage in severe forms of work avoidance, like scapegoating or assassination. See also **work avoidance**.

progress The development of new capacity that enables the social system to thrive in new and challenging environments. The process of social and political learning that leads to improvement in the condition of the group, community, organization, nation, or world. See also **thrive**.

purpose The overarching sense of direction and contribution that provides meaningful orientation to a set of activities in organizational and political life.

reality testing The process of comparing data and interpretations of a situation to discern which one, or which new synthesis of competing interpretations, captures the most information and best explains the situation.

regulating the heat Raising or lowering the distress in the system to stay within the productive zone of disequilibrium.

repertoire The range of capacities within which an individual has gained comfort and skill. See also **bandwidth**.

resilience The capacity of individuals and the holding environment to contain disequilibrium over time. See also **holding environment** and **pressure cooker**.

ripeness of an issue The readiness of a dominant coalition of stakeholders to tackle an issue because of a generalized sense of urgency across stakeholding groups.

ritual A practice with symbolic import that helps to create a shared sense of community.

role The set of expectations in a social system that define the services individuals or groups are supposed to provide.

sanctuary A place or set of practices for personal renewal.

scope of authority The set of services for which a person is entrusted by others with circumscribed power.

social system Any collective enterprise (small group, organization, network of organizations, nation, or the world) with shared challenges that has interdependent and therefore interactive dynamics and features.

song beneath the words The underlying meaning or unspoken subtext in someone's comment, often identified by body language, tone, intensity of voice, and the choice of language.

taking the temperature Assessing the level of disequilibrium currently in the system.

technical problem Problems that can be diagnosed and solved, 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.

technical work Problem defining and problem solving that effectively mobilizes, coordinates, and applies currently sufficient expertise, processes, and cultural norms.

thrive To live up to people's highest values. Requires adaptive responses that distinguish what's essential from what's expendable, and innovates so that the social system can bring the best of its past into the future.

tuning An individual's personal psychology, including the set of loyalties, values, and perspectives that have shaped his worldview and identity, and cause the individual to resonate consciously and unconsciously, productively and unproductively, to external stimuli. See also **default**.

work avoidance The conscious or unconscious patterns in a social system that distract people's attention or displace responsibility in order to restore social equilibrium at the cost of progress in meeting an adaptive challenge.

| NOTES |

Chapter 2

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