

## Explainer: The Adaptive Leadership model

### What is it?

Adaptive Leadership is a practical leadership framework that helps individuals and organisations adapt and thrive in challenging environments and make progress on daunting or stuck, complex challenges.

A diagnostic tool originally developed by Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky from Harvard Business School, the Adaptive Leadership model supports those trying to exercise leadership to understand their terrain, the nature of the challenge, appreciate the predictable responses to change and re-conceive a different leadership role which doesn't perpetuate the status quo. It is about being able, both individually and collectively, to take on the gradual but meaningful process of change. It is about diagnosing the essential from the expendable and bringing about real change.

Through the Adaptive Leadership approach individuals and organisations are re-energised and prepared for the challenges they face now and in the future.

### What does it involve?

There are four core concepts in the Adaptive Leadership model which we use:

- 1. Technical vs Adaptive Challenges.** This model highlights the importance of correctly diagnosing the type of challenge we are facing and want to take action on. Most day-to-day challenges are Technical. They can be relatively easily understood and responses are known or knowable. This is the domain of traditional authority and hierarchies. It restores a system back to status quo and provides predictability and consistency. For example, a broken arm in a health system calls forth a straightforward diagnosis and a known response. Adaptive challenges are the ones where the problem definition is not clear and/or where the solutions cannot simply be generated from within existing knowledge and processes. These are challenges which may *continue to continue* even when we mistakenly applying technical solutions to them. They are characterized by being *social* (where people have different beliefs & values), *dynamic* (cause & effect are far away in time and space) and generative (there is uncertainty about impacts). Adaptive challenges require a whole system to learn – including those in roles of authority. In a health system, an adaptive challenge might be a mental health issue: there are no easy technical solutions.
- 2. Authority vs. Leadership.** Authority represents the formal or informal power within a system, entrusted by one party to another in exchange for a service. It usually has a title. Eg. Manager, Coach, etc. The important services, or social functions, provided by authority are: 1) direction; 2) protection; and 3) order. While authority is at the core of both Technical and Adaptive work, it is most comfortable and rewarded to resolve technical problems. **Leadership** on the other hand is about mobilizing a system to tackle adaptive challenges. It is something that is *exercised* rather than something we *have* (unlike the role of Authority). Leadership is more orientated to disrupting the status quo in order to make progress, rather than the stabilizing functions of traditional Authority. Leadership can be exercised with or without formal Authority but does require some kind of power.
- 3. Work Avoidance.** Diagnosing and intervening on Adaptive challenges will challenge the status quo as it requires learning and losses. Work avoidance is the conscious or unconscious patterns in a system that distracts people's attention or displaces responsibility in order to restore the status quo. It can take many forms: denial ("we don't really have a problem"), scapegoating ("its Marketing's fault"), seduction or attack of the person trying to call attention to the challenge, or reverting to Technical solutions which can temporarily make systems feel something is being done ("let's

restructure”). Work avoidance doesn’t mean people are doing nothing – it is usually very busy. Work avoidance is a natural signal that the system is starting to do some work – the point of exercising leadership.

4. **Holding Environment.** Adaptive work generates division and a desire to depart (physically or figuratively). A holding environment is the (created) properties of system that keep people working together in spite of the divisive forces generated by adaptive work. They may include rules, procedures, and norms; shared purposes and common values; and most importantly the role of authority. Holding environments contain the conflict, chaos, and confusion often produced when struggling with complex problematic realities.

## How do I use it?

At SLA we find that both our clients and students get the most from this model:

**In a team setting or from the role of authority:** to more accurately define the kind of problem they face. This can be a relief for a system to see that is not their fault that progress hasn’t been made – it’s adaptive and needs a different response.

**For people in roles of authority:** to see how easy it is to get seduced into technical responses and giving people easy answers, which relieves the tension but doesn’t change anything.

**For teams:** to share a common language and depersonalize some of their challenges and see that it is the systems work – rather than it being Bob’s fault.

**For those in positions of authority:** to see how important it is to actively work on creating and adjusting the holding environment – it doesn’t happen on its own.

## Further reading/resources

Heifetz, Ronald. (2000) *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Chapter 1 – To Lead or Mislead

Aigner, Geoff. (2011) *Leadership Beyond Good Intentions*, Chapter 1 - Leadership Fantasies

Pryor, Melissa. (2015) *So what is ‘Work Avoidance’ anyway?* <http://leadership.benevolent.org.au/blog/so-what-work-avoidance-anyway>