ADAPTIVE WORK

by Ron A. Heifetz

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Our language fails us in many aspects of our lives, entrapping us in a set of cultural assumptions like cattle herded by fences into a corral. Gender pronouns, for example, corral us into teaching children that God is a he, distancing girls and women every day from the experience of the divine in themselves.

Our language fails us, too, when we discuss, analyze and practice leadership. We commonly talk about 'leaders' in organizations or politics when we actually mean people in positions of managerial or political authority. Although we have confounded leadership with authority in nearly every journalistic and scholarly article written on 'leadership' during the last one hundred years, we know intuitively that these two phenomena are distinct when we complain all too frequently in politics and business that "the leadership isn't exercising any leadership," by which we actually mean to say that "people in authority aren't exercising any leadership."

Whether people with formal, charismatic or otherwise informal authority actually practice leadership on any given issue at any moment in time ought to remain a separate question answered with wholly different criteria from those used to define a relationship of formal or informal authority.

As we know, all too many people are skilled at gaining authority, and thus a following, but do not then lead.

Moreover, we assume a logical connection between the words "leader" and "follower," as if this dyad were an absolute and inherently logical structure. It is not. The most interesting leadership operates without anyone experiencing anything remotely similar to the experience of "following." Indeed, most leadership mobilizes those who are opposed or who sit on the fence, in addition to allies and friends. Allies and friends come relatively cheap; it's the people in opposition who have the most to lose in any significant process of change.

When mobilized, allies and friends become not followers but active participants —employees or citizens who themselves often lead in turn by taking responsibility for tackling tough challenges, often beyond expectations and often beyond their authority. They become partners. And when mobilized, opposition and fence-sitters become engaged with the issues, provoked to work through the problems of loss, loyalty and competence embedded in the change they are challenged to make. Indeed, they may continue to fight, providing an ongoing source of diverse views necessary for the adaptive success of the business or community. Far from becoming 'aligned' and far from any experience of 'following,' they are mobilized by leadership to wrestle with new complexities that demand tough trade-offs in their ways of working or living. Of course, in time they may begin to trust, admire and appreciate the person or group that is leading, and thereby confer informal authority on them, but they would not generally experience the emergence of that appreciation or trust by the phrase: "I've become a follower."

This puts the struggle to reform public services to produce radically better social outcomes for citizens in an important new light. It may mean that policies for "leadership" must go beyond conferring extra authority or heaping greater expectation on those who occupy positions of public authority. It places a premium instead on mobilizing a more responsible citizenship, which includes the "embracing" of people actively opposed to the direction and manifestations of change. Perhaps most important, it means that public deliberation and public debate about the normative value of the goals toward which leadership energy is directed take on crucial importance.

If leadership is different from the capacity to gain formal or informal authority, and therefore different from the ability to gain a "following" attracting influence and accruing power -what can anchor our understanding of it?

Leadership takes place in the context of problems and challenges. Indeed, it makes little sense to describe leadership when everything and everyone in an organization is humming along just fine, even when processes of influence and authority will be virtually ubiquitous in coordinating routine activity. Leadership becomes necessary to businesses and communities when people have to change their ways rather than continue to operate according to current structures, procedures and processes. Beyond technical problems, for which authoritative and managerial expertise will suffice, adaptive challenges demand leadership that can engage people in facing challenging realities and then changing at least some of their priorities, attitudes and behavior in order to thrive in a changing world.

Mobilizing people to meet adaptive challenges, then, is at the heart of leadership practice. In the short term, leadership is an activity that mobilizes people to meet an immediate challenge. In the medium and long term, leadership generates new cultural norms that enable people to meet an ongoing stream of adaptive challenges in a world that will likely pose an ongoing set of adaptive realities and pressures. Thus, with a longer view, leadership develops an organization or community's adaptive capacity or adaptability. This investment in adaptability should be part of the social vision offered by political leadership, as well as part of the organizational strategies that constitute the reform process. In this short article, we suggest seven different ways to describe and understand adaptive work.

THE ADAPTIVE CHALLENGE

First, an adaptive challenge is a problem situation for which solutions lie outside the current way of operating. We can distinguish technical problems, which are amenable to current expertise, from adaptive challenges, which are not. Although every problem can be understood as a gap between aspirations and reality, technical problems present a gap between aspirations and reality that can be closed through applying existing know-how. For example, a patient comes to his doctor with an infection, and the doctor uses her knowledge to diagnose the illness and prescribe a cure.

In contrast, an adaptive challenge is created by a gap between a desired state and reality that cannot be closed using existing approaches alone. Progress in the situation requires more than the application of current expertise, authoritative decision-making, standard operating procedures or culturally informed behaviors. For example, a patient with heart disease may need to change his way of life: diet, exercise, smoking and the imbalances that cause unhealthy

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stress. To make those changes, the patient will have to take responsibility for his health and learn his way to a new set of priorities and habits. This distinction is summarized in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1



THE DEMAND FOR LEARNING

Second, adaptive challenges demand learning. An adaptive challenge exists when the people themselves are the problem and when progress requires a retooling, in a sense, of their own ways of thinking and operating. The gap between aspirations and reality closes when they learn new ways. Thus, a consulting firm may offer a brilliant diagnostic analysis and set of recommendations, but nothing will be solved until that analysis and those recommendations are lived in the new way that people operate. Until then, the consultant has no solutions, only proposals.

SHIFT RESPONSIBILITY TO THE STAKEHOLDERS

Third, adaptive challenges require a shift in responsibility from the shoulders of the authority figures and the authority structure to the stakeholders themselves. In contrast to expert problem-solving, adaptive work requires a different form of deliberation and a different way of taking responsibility. In doing adaptive work, responsibility needs to be felt in a far more widespread fashion. At best, an organization would have its members know that there are many technical problems for which looking to authority for answers is appropriate and efficient, but that for the adaptive set of challenges looking to authority for answers becomes self-defeating.

When people make the classic error of treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical, they wait for the person in authority to know what to do.[2] He or she then makes a best guess, probably just a guess, while the many sit back and wait to see whether the guess pans out. And frequently enough, when it does not, people get rid of that executive and go find another one, all the while operating under the illusion that "if only we had the right 'leader,' our problems would be solved." Progress is impeded by inappropriate dependency, and thus a major task of leadership is the development of responsibility-taking by stakeholders themselves.

DISTINGUISH BETWEEN THE ESSENTIAL AND THE EXPENDABLE

Fourth, an adaptive challenge requires people to distinguish between what is precious and essential and what is expendable within their culture. In cultural adaptation, the job is to take the best from history, leave behind that which is no longer serviceable, and through innovation learn ways to thrive in the new environment.

Therefore, adaptive work is inherently conservative as well as progressive. The point of innovation is to conserve what is best from history as the community moves into the future. As in biology, a successful adaptation takes the best from its past set of competencies and loses the DNA that is no longer useful. Thus, unlike many current conceptions of culturally "transforming" processes, many of which are ahistorical – as if one begins all anew – adaptive work, profound as it may be in terms of change, must honor ancestry and history at the same time that it challenges them.

Adaptive work generates resistance in people because adaptation requires us to let go of certain elements of our past ways of working or living,

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which means to experience loss: loss of competence, loss of reporting relationships, loss of jobs, loss of traditions or loss of loyalty to the people who taught us the lessons of our heritage. Thus, an adaptive challenge generates a situation that forces us to make tough trade-offs. The source of resistance that people have to change is not resistance to change *per se*; it is resistance to loss. People love change when they know it is beneficial. Nobody gives the lottery ticket back when they win. Leadership must contend, then, with the various forms of feared and real losses that accompany adaptive work).

Anchored to the tasks of mobilizing people to thrive in new and challenging contexts, leadership is not simply about change; more profoundly leadership is about identifying that which is worth conserving. It is the conserving of the precious dimensions of our past that make the pains of change worth sustaining.

EXPERIMENT

Fifth, adaptive work demands experimentation. In biology, the adaptability of a species depends on the multiplicity of experiments that are being run constantly within its gene pool, increasing the odds that in that distributed intelligence, some diverse members of the species will have the means to succeed in a new context. Similarly, in cultural adaptation, an organization or community needs to be running multiple experiments and learning fast from these experiments in order to see "which horses to ride into the future."

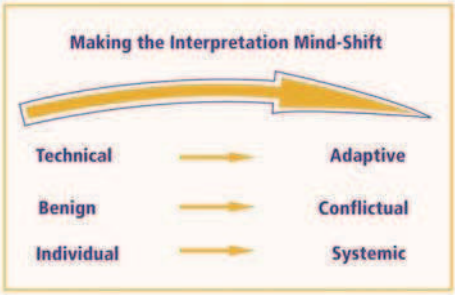
Appropriate and efficient problem-solving depends on authoritative experts for knowledge and decisive action. In contrast, dealing with adaptive challenges requires a comfort with not knowing where to go or how to move next.

In mobilizing adaptive work from an authority position, leadership takes the form of protecting elements of deviance and creativity in the organization in spite of the inefficiencies associated with those elements. If creative or outspoken people generate conflict, then so be it. Conflict becomes an engine of innovation, rather than solely a source of dangerous inefficiency. Managing the dynamic tension between creativity and efficiency becomes an ongoing part of leadership practice for which there exists no equilibrium point at which this tension disappears. Leadership becomes an improvisation, however frustrating it may be not to know the answers.

THE TIME FRAME OF ADAPTIVE WORK

Sixth, the time frame of adaptive work is markedly different from that of technical work. It takes time for people to learn new ways to sift through what is precious from what is expendable, and to innovate in ways that enable people to carry forward into the future that which they continue to hold precious from the past. Moses took 40 years to bring the children of Israel to the Promised Land, not because it was such a long walk from Egypt, but because it took that much time for the people to leave behind the dependent mentality of slavery and generate the capacity for self-government guided by faith in something ineffable. Figure 2 depicts this difference in time frame.

FIGURE 2



SOURCE: CAMBRIDGE LEADERSHIP ASSOCIATES

Because it is so difficult for people to sustain prolonged periods of disturbance and uncertainty, human beings naturally engage in a variety of efforts to restore equilibrium as quickly as possible, even

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if it means avoiding adaptive work and begging off the tough issues. Most forms of adaptive failure are a product of our difficulty in containing prolonged periods of experimentation, and the difficult conversations that accompany them.

Work avoidance is simply the natural effort to restore a more familiar order, to restore equilibrium. Although many different forms of work avoidance operate across cultures and peoples, it appears that there are two common pathways: the displacement of responsibility and the diversion of attention. Both pathways work terribly well in the short term, even if they leave people more exposed and vulnerable in the medium and long term. Some common forms of displacing responsibility include scapegoating, blaming the persistence of problems on authority, externalizing the enemy or killing the messenger. Diverting attention can take the form of fake remedies, like the Golden Calf; an effort to define problems to fit one's competence; repeated structural adjustments; the faulty use of consultants, committees and task forces; sterile conflicts and proxy fights (let's watch the gladiator fight!'); or outright denial.

ADAPTIVE WORK IS A NORMATIVE CONCEPT

Finally, adaptive work is a normative concept. The concept of adaptation arises from scientific efforts to understand biological evolution.[4] Applied to the change of cultures and societies, the concept becomes a useful, if inexact, metaphor.[5] For example, species evolve whereas cultures learn. Evolution is generally understood by scientists as a matter of chance, whereas societies will often consciously deliberate, plan and intentionally experiment. Close to our normative concern, biological evolution conforms to laws of survival. Societies, on the other hand, generate purposes beyond survival. The concept of adaptation applied to culture raises the question: adapt to what, for what purpose?

In biology, the 'objective function' of adaptive work is straightforward: to thrive in new environments. Survival of the self and of one's gene-carrying kin defines the direction in which animals adapt. A situation becomes an adaptive challenge because it threatens the capacity of a species to pass on its genetic heritage. Thus, when a species multiplies its own kind and succeeds in passing on its genes, it is said to be 'thriving' in its environment.

Thriving is more than coping. There is nothing trivial in biology about adaptation. Some adaptive leaps transform the capacity of a species by sparking an ongoing and profound process of adaptive change that leads to a vastly expanded range of living.

In human societies, 'thriving' takes on a host of values not restricted to survival of one's own kind. At times, human beings will even trade off their own survival for values like liberty, justice and faith. Thus, adaptive work in cultures involves the clarification of values and the assessment of realities that challenge the realization of those values.

Because most organizations and communities honor a mix of values, the competition within this mix largely explains why adaptive work so often involves conflict. People with competing values engage one another as they confront a shared situation from their own points of view. At its extreme, and in the absence of better methods of social change, the conflict over values can be violent. The American Civil War changed the meaning of union and individual freedom. In 1857, ensuring domestic tranquility meant returning escaped slaves to their owners; in 1957, it meant using federal troops to integrate Central High School in Little Rock.

Some realities threaten not only a set of values beyond survival, but also the very existence of a society if these realities are not discovered and met early on by the value-clarifying and reality-testing functions of that society. In the view of many environmentalists, for example, our focus on the production of wealth rather than on coexistence with nature has led us to neglect fragile factors in our ecosystem. These factors

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may become relevant to us when finally they begin to challenge our central values of health and survival, but by then we may have paid a high price in damage already done, and the costs of and odds against adaptive adjustment may have increased enormously.

CONCLUSION

Adaptive work, then, requires us to deliberate on the values by which we seek to thrive, and demands diagnostic enquiry into the realities we face that threaten the realization of those values. Beyond legitimizing a convenient set of assumptions about reality, beyond denying or avoiding the internal contradictions in some of the values we hold precious, and beyond coping, adaptive work involves proactively seeking to clarify aspirations or develop new ones, and then involves the very hard work of innovation, experimentation and cultural change to realize a closer approximation of those aspirations by which we would define "thriving."

This constitutes a challenge for our systems of democracy, as well as those of governance and public service delivery. The forms of thriving that public services should support do not remain static. The ways in which they can or should be supported must be tested by public deliberation and by organizational experimentation. Yet citizens are generally ill-prepared for legislation or policy framed as 'experimentation.' All too often citizens crave solutions, not trial efforts or pilot projects, and therefore put a great deal of pressure on politicians and public servants to overstate the promise of new policies and programmatic instruments. When those promises then fall short, trust in government erodes further.

Thus a central task of democratic leadership is to educate citizens in the difference between technical and adaptive work so that they are prepared to entrust public officials who tell them the truth rather than pander when no easy answers are readily at hand.

The normative tests of adaptive work, then, involve an appraisal of the processes by which orienting values are clarified in an organization or community, and the quality of reality testing by which a more accurate rather than convenient diagnosis is achieved. By these tests, for example, serving up fake remedies for our collective troubles by scapegoating and externalizing the enemy, as was done in extreme form in Nazi Germany, might generate throngs of misled supporters who readily grant to charlatans extraordinary authority in the short run, but it would not constitute adaptive work. Nor would political efforts to gain influence and authority by pandering to people's longing for easy answers constitute leadership. Indeed, misleading people is likely over time to produce adaptive failure.

NOTES:

[1] RA Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), p 76. 2
[2] Heifetz and D Laurie, 'The Work of Leadership', *Harvard Business Review* (January 1997, republished December 2001).
[3] Heifetz and M Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press, 2002, ch 1.
[4] See E. Mayr, *Toward a New Philosophy of Biology: Observations of an Evolutionist* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1988) pp 127-47.
[5] RD Masters, *The Nature of Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989 J, ch 3.
[6] Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, pp 30-2.